

Putting Words into Action:

Social Conflicts of a Communal Contemporary Maya Organization



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Encounters, Impressions, Discoveries, and Insights

"Now the women are rising up. And when the women rise up from a nation, they are the strongest voice that can be heard and it's a voice that cannot be silenced" –Unknown

San Andrés Xecul, Totonicapán, Guatemala, C.A.:

The first of February we arrive in San Andrés Xecul were the women of the cultural organization Poder y Fuerza and each of host mothers await us outside of the *Centro Comercial* located directly in front of the famous mustard colored church. They come running up to the van, having expected us since 8:30 that same morning, peering inside as if they were ten years old and visiting their favorite animal at the zoo. Smiles from ear to ear, hardly blinking eyes, "¡Buenos días!" and "¡Bienvenidos!" they chatter between giggles. They directed our driver Fidel to the house of Doña Juanita, who is the vice president of the cultural organization Poder y Fuerza. At the house this group of women had prepared a welcoming party with decorations, *chuchitos* (a traditional Guatemalan food: *tamalitos con carne y salsa adentro*), and tea made from boiling *maíz*, to serve as an introduction to the *pueblo*, the organization, and our host families.

The women all were wearing traditional *traje*, the youngest was thirty years old and the oldest was over eighty and every single one of them were very eager to speak to us, ask us questions, to express their emotions about this home stay. Doña Romelia said that she was an excellent cook, especially traditional dishes *Guatemaltecos*, and that she had just finished painting and furnishing a bedroom in her house for the student who would stay with her. Doña Mercedes said that she doesn't consider herself as a great cook, but that she would like to learn with the student that gets placed with her and her family. Also that her house is very small, but she hopes that the student will appreciate that everything she will offer *es de todo corazón*. It was interesting to see the dynamics of all the women together and what they were trying to convey to us. Their

excitement was obvious, but there seemed to be some competition between them. One woman found it necessary to say she is a very excellent cook. I was surprised by her remark because it gave me the impression that she was trying to make herself sound more qualified. Later in the month I would learn that the other women didn't appreciate Doña Romelia's comment at the celebration, because it was implying that all the other women there didn't know how to cook. Nevertheless, both women were trying to convey a memorable experience to be enjoyed.

Our students were given a chance to introduce ourselves, and inform them about what we were planning to study during our time there. The women were very excited and from learning about our topics and interests were able to help us in getting information. However, getting them to understand the nature of each of the students' project titles was a challenge. All of the women, not including the Asesora General of Poder y Fuerza, have very minimal educational backgrounds, hence the difficulty in articulating in terms they would understand. In spite of the challenge, they would direct us where to find information about our topic and give names of people who would be excellent resources of information as well as potential interviewees. As the welcoming celebration was wrapping up each of the host mothers chose a student and our month-long journey would begin.

The most personally challenging overall experience with my host family was having a relationship with my host mother, Doña Mercedes. But after all the times of feeling frustrated, annoyed and claustrophobic, this misunderstanding made me realize what an timid and innocent culture *gente indigena* have represented. Scholars have had difficulty explaining how the entire Maya civilization was conquered so quickly, but it's no wonder when you see even today, *gente indigena* as a very timid culture who live in fear of what they don't know. The immediate collapse

of the Mayas between the very short years of 830 BC to 930 BC continues to be a mystery (Carrasco 1990: 38). Further, to dominate a diffident person may come easy for a stronger, more powerful person, and if taken into consideration in a larger, historical context, the evidence holds true for the Maya civilization. Exploring Xecul was a process. Doña Mercedes would ask where I had gone, what I had done, with whom, and it was great, normal dinner conversation, but she would always ask "¿Pero, no te da miedo? ¿No? A mí, sí." She never leaves her house. She explains why for the following reasons: she's not from Xecul and doesn't know the people here, because her husband doesn't let her, she has to clean the house, and because she has to make sure there's breakfast, lunch and dinner for her nenas and husband.

Abstract

"It is evident ... that a conflict is always concerned with a distribution of power. Indeed, an exertion of power is prerequisite to the retention of a share in the determination of future relations- as well as for the acquiring or retaining of other benefits perceived as the 'reasons' for conflict."

- North, Koch, and Zinnes, 1960

Social conflicts are necessary in determining the interpersonal dynamics and social structures of a group or society. They usually occur in any or all societies or associations, and according to Coser "types of conflict and types of social structures are not independent variables (Coser, 1956)." As indicated by R.J. Rummel, "social conflict is then the confrontation of social powers" which implies that it "is exclusively an aspect of social power...and not limited to hostile or antagonistic opposition (Rummel, 1976)." When examining an indigenous woman's organization in a highland Maya town, one is able to observe that the social conflicts are wholly dependent on the top-down, authoritative role of a non-traditional, educated, female community member. Coser is right to say that each conflict situation differs from the next due to very certain social structure, but for my

investigation his conclusions are too vague. I do however agree with his statement on the possible positive outcome of conflict, such as re-establishing unity. Social conflict in the case of this particular organization is an example of authoritative power, the dominating control of a group that has no means or intentions of challenging due to gender roles. This ethnography will analyze how the social conflicts challenge the ideological role of indigenous women and what the change in their traditional role means for their culture.

Methods

Organization meetings:

The collaboration of the organization with the study abroad program allowed for us students in San Andrés Xecul to have a group of women as resources to information regarding their topics as well as the *pueblo* itself. The students arrived on Wednesday February 1, 2006, 10:30 a.m., at the house of Doña Juana Modesta Can where the women of the organization had prearranged a welcoming celebration to introduce themselves, our host families, and the town. Every opportunity to participate in a reunion of the women, the committee, organization, a member or non-member served as a learning experience in understanding how their social group was structured. Every social encounter, formal or informal, increased my interest in the social stratification of the cultural organization. Every moment spent with the Asesora General, in individual or communal settings, proved to reveal what the importance of the reunion and her position was.

The organization of Poder y Fuerza during our welcoming celebration included committee and non-committee members, excluding the Asesora General who was also our contact person for San Andrés Xecul and only came to visit Xecul on the weekends. From observing other meetings, it was clear how the dynamics of the group and the persona of the women had changed. When the

Asesora General, who is also the most dominating, confident and driven, was not present at a meeting the women were liberated. They spoke even if they were not spoken to and the atmosphere between the majorities of the women grew more competitive. This was not the case for the reunions when the Asesora General was present.

Impromptu conversations with non-members of the organization commented unfavorably towards the organization. Community members who were non-members of the organization believed the organization to be a waste of time. Although they were not affiliated with the organization, they strongly felt that the women would be better off working in the home and staying out of the streets. On the one hand, the community members who agreed with these unfavorable comments towards the organization were male, former members, or related to a current member, which says a lot. This suggests that 1) they are very conservative and traditional, and oppose a contemporary group that would change, specifically the labor and domestic role that women have had for hundreds of years. 2) Although the organization has big plans to develop the *municipio* by, for example, building a hotel to attract tourists and bring money into their economy. To work towards becoming an NGO, and construct another building to use as an office, library and meeting space. All of these aspirations in reality have only served to empower and bring up the self-confidence of the women. The conclusions made from the interviews conducted, from informal and formal reunions, their goals have not been accomplished. On the other hand, although for an organization that is still in its beginning stages with very little monies available to them, and pretty ambitious goals, the hidden agenda of the organization can be just that: an organization formed to motivate an oppressed culture group (O.M. 1)*.

The techniques the women used to inform the students about their attendance to a committee reunion were rather unsystematic. As far as I knew, the host mothers of the four students had been informed about the committee reunion a day in advance. After having gotten together with other students earlier that week, we discussed and questioned the location, time and purpose of the meeting. No one knew. The next day a student has been informed that it would be at her host mother's house, at three o'clock in the afternoon. On Thursday February 9, 2006 my host mother had informed me about the meeting. She told me that they were walking to each of the student's home stays, for reasons unknown to my host mother. Having already discussed with the other students and confirmed the time and location, I didn't believe that the committee members of Poder y Fuerza would walk from house to house. At three that afternoon we all arrived to Doña Romelia's house.

Unfortunately, the structure and function of the meeting went quite unsystematically as well. One hour had passed at Doña Romelia's house and the women on the committee of Poder y Fuerza had finally arrived. Present at the gathering were nine women, five children, the hostesses, and we four students. As we all made our way into the larger room with chairs available for us, the chaos and difficulty in communicating with each other had began. The women sat on a bench along the wall, while my colleagues, myself and the designated speaker sat in plastic chairs across from them. Although very cheerful and excited to talk to us nine days into the program, the meeting was unbeneficial for the students and disorganized for the committee. The Asesora General of Poder y Fuerza had told them to do so, to meet with each student, in order to make sure we were being treated well with our host families and in their houses, how we felt in our host houses and in San Andrés Xecul. Each woman got up from her seat, introduced herself "Buenas

tardes. Yo soy Doña Ana Paxtor,” “Me llamo Doña Matilde,” walked up to each of us students, shook our hands, asked us “¿Como te sientes en tu casa? ”¿Cómo te sientes en San Andrés Xecul?” Our answers of “Todo está muy bien y me siento bien aquí en Xecul” were appreciated by receiving a hug or pat on the shoulder. Their attempts to be a part of our experience in their home village could have been more purposeful for the student, however this particular experience intrigued my thoughts and initial impressions of the social structure and social conflicts of Poder y Fuerza.

After their job was done, it was our turn to ask them questions. The invitation was on their part. The women were curious to see if we were interested in learning more about the organization and what they actually do. The “chaos,” or in reality my cross-cultural misunderstanding experience, occurred when we decided to take advantage of the fact that all the women were together, and we could then ask permission to and set up interviews times and dates. Maybe we did not make ourselves clear enough, or the women did not understand that the interviews would be conducted one-on-one and that we needed time to prepare questions, but we spent the next hour discussing just that. Trying to make each other understand what we were each trying to say. Both groups left the reunion without having solved anything. This particular meeting is another example of how the dynamics and persona of the committee members are completely different when their usual and official leader, the Asesora General, is not present (O.M. 2).

The differences in how the women’s demeanor had changed were more evident in the first meeting with the Asesora General of Poder y Fuerza on Saturday the 11th of February. The purpose of the meeting was to finally meet Doña María Lorenza Chuc Paxtor, also the contact person for San Andrés Xecul. Her agenda consisted of informing us more about the organization considering we

were still in the dark about its objective. Statistics, numbers, names of members, accomplishments, obstacles, challenges, the mission of the organization was shared. We learned knew K'iche' words, a little history about Xecul, and the educational and labor background of the Asesora General was narrated. While us foreigners engaged in conversation, most of the members sat patiently and quietly. It was not until the subject was changed from a "just the facts" to a more communal and controversial topic that the room suddenly burst with many, many voices and opinions.

As mentioned, the social dynamics had transformed from meeting to meeting depending on one particular woman. The Asesora General represents a powerful, educated, organized and dominant female in charge of a mostly traditional, submissive, indigenous setting. The "just the facts" hour was declaimed by the Asesora General, Doña Lenche as they called her. She symbolizes the contemporary Maya woman, one in which has broken the mold of 'what has always been' or the 'default role that they have theoretically played,' which was the domestic role-not political or social. Outspoken, intelligent, confident, these are the characteristics that describe the Asesora General. They also describe the characteristics she wants the rest of the women in her community to convey through the organization (O.M. 3).

The final reunion where the organization arranged a farewell celebration for us was yet another demonstration of the interpersonal dynamics and social structure. The organization had prepared different cultural performances and speeches as a way of helping us obtain a deeper understand of not just their town and organization, but more importantly their culture. The Asesora General's speech consisted of a thorough update and deeper clarification of the organization. Her ambition had been very clear to me from previous meeting and reunions. On this particular Saturday her

ambition took a clearer form. She is very ambitious in the sense that she has many and high expectations for an organization with limited resources. Ambitious in the sense that if other community members show no interest or appreciation for Poder y Fuerza, she will with no trouble criticize their apathy.

The only women not present, and who were specifically not invited to the celebration were the ones she was criticizing. Although the consensus of the organization as a whole or the committee as a whole was not expressed or defined, the Asesora General used her status in the organization to say what was on her mind. No other Poder y Fuerza member spoke, challenged, or agreed with those statements. They were performing ceremonies, cooking, and serving as she had asked them to. The interpersonal dynamics of this definite group of women are an example of a top-down social structure where Asesora General self-designated herself to create a model overview of the organization with limited information and details available to the rest (O.M. 4).

Interviews:

Interviews were conducted on a one-on-one setting to get a more in depth perceptive on the organization as a whole and as part of the community. I interview a former/founding member, a committee member and the Asesora General of Poder y Fuerza. Their names in order of interview date and mentioned above goes as follows: Doña María Rita Tistoj, Doña Mercedes Elizabeth Herrera Tux, and Doña María Lorenza Chuc Paxtor.

The interview with Doña Rita was conducted at the same time and location as the interview with Doña Mercedes due to the minimal Spanish and difficulty in understanding my questions Doña Rita had. These interview supported my interpretation of the strong and dominant personality of The Asesora General, and the real purpose of the organization as opposed to what

has been said about it. Their opinions and perspective on the organization, its accomplishments, goals and obstacles were only partially in accordance with the information I had already obtained. The only parallel facts given were about *capital*, about funds and how they are unable to really achieve anything because they do not have enough monies. The methods to get funds for the organization that the two women knew about was how “La Asesora General *solicita a diplomáticos y otras organizaciones.*” When I asked for the names of the diplomats and other organizations, both women, the committee member and former/founding member were not able to give names. When I asked why, they answered because they were not able to read the documents The Asesora General showed them. Different people with different statuses and connections to the organization gave differing data. It was difficult to find corresponding details about the organization. Thus, it became clear to me to study the social conflicts within the organization because my observations during the reunions and meetings made me more concerned about how this affected the women and the community.

Introduction

The social conflicts of this cultural organization arise from the authoritative power of The Asesora General. She is able to control the organization because she is educated. She went to Instituto Jesucristo in Quetzaltenango. She got a job after graduating and said that “*alguien vio algo en mi.*” She was awarded a scholarship and went to a technical school where she learned about computers. She does not fit the ideological profile of an indigenous woman in rural Guatemala. According to an article in the 1998 publication of *In Focus* the reason there are not many women leaders is because of “the long history of political repression, conservative society, structural constraints engendered by discrimination, as well as lack of education, which undermines

women's preparedness to take on leadership positions.” All *miembros del comité, intergrantes*, and *asociados* did not have those opportunities and still live with those historical restrictions, and now with an authoritative leader who takes advantage of their limitations for her own benefit. Before I go into detail about the social conflicts, allow me to confirm what has been said about the organization and how they have not put those words into actions.

According to the 1995 documentation of the *Grupo Cultural: Poder y Fuerza*, this group is a coalition of women in the municipal of San Andrés Xecul who come together to practice and encourage cultural values, become recognized outside their community, and show their support for the *Derechos Humanos*. To achieve the aforementioned objectives, the group of women have completed activities such as sharing and learning poems, songs and regional dances, performed dances and dramatizations, such as the *Lagrimas de Ixkik* from the *Popol Vuh*. They also prepare traditional foods, and have discussions. At the discussions they carry out a multiethnic character and preserve the practice of their native, Maya language of K'iche'. To show their support of the *Derechos Humanos*, the women strive for a true *pacífica* coexistence within a unified nation.

Today, one can see that it has undergone some changes. First, the name changed to *Organización Cultural: Poder y Fuerza*. The reason being, according the *Asesora General* of the organization, is that today they have changed from a group of women solely involved for the preservation of their native culture, to a group of women interested in larger, communal, political, economic and still cultural issues. The principle objective of the organization is to open educational and research programs in their home town to give the younger generations the opportunity to learn to read and write. The institution would also instruct all generations about their culture by teaching K'iche'. The organization also has two subgroups: *Poder y Fuerza:*

Consejo de Ansianos, and *Poder y Fuerza: Junta Directiva de las Señoritas*. The Consejo de Ansianos educate the peoples about the organization, and protect the women and children whose rights have been violated**. The Junta Directiva de las Señoritas organize projects that the Consejo de Ansianos tells them to, and fulfill the activities created in the 1995 document.

Body

There occurs a conflict is when there is another power that confronts the other. In a more general sense, social conflict describes the nature of conflict, the factors which escalate conflict and strategies, which may be used to de-escalate and settle conflict (Pruitt: 1986). The nature of the social conflict in *Poder y Fuerza* is that authoritative power of the Asesora General, as I have described in the methods section where when she is present, the other women become completely submissive. The factors that escalate conflict happen outside of the conference setting and outside of the presence of the Asesora General. Examples of this include informal conversations, and gossip among friends and family. A second example is their subtle competition between certain women when the Asesora is not present at a formal reunion. In order to settle the conflict, there needs to be unity between members and non-members. There needs be to no hostile feelings or criticism between the Asesora and non-members because they opposing opinions about a particular activity. Through these examples of social conflicts we have determined that they do have an effect on the internal dynamics of the group. Changes of persona, effects on relationships, and the leader taking action because of rumors.

The interpersonal dynamics and social structure of the cultural organization *Poder y Fuerza* have been influenced by an educated, contemporary, and dominating female with a leadership position who leads with a top-down, authoritative structure. In Rummel's *Understanding Conflict*

and War: Vol. 2: The Conflict Helix, states that social conflict does not have to be aggressive. That there is such a thing as a social conflict of authoritative powers where persons adjudicate, appeal, or document issues or situations that results in a conflict. However, in this case there is only one authoritative, social power: that of the dominant leader The Asesora General. Her authoritative power is the ambition and educational level she has, and the status she has created for herself. Her position gave her the advantage of utilizing the top-down strategy of processing information as opposed to the bottom-up strategy. In a top-down structure, each new part of the organization is designed with more and more detail (A Wikimedia Project, 2006). This means that it started off with very little detail available which gives the members less control and knowledge of the organization, and much less their involvement. A bottom-up structure would have started with a stronger foundation that included the involvement, opinions and worked together and equally; it would have included the group of women first.

The social conflict theory, which is a Marxist-based theory, claims that the methods of conflict involve exploitation “through brute force and economics.” This theory is the first of the works cited to not explicitly say there must be two opposing powers in conflict. The social conflict with *Poder y Fuerza* did not involve brute force, however it did, to an extent involve economics. The Asesora General was able to go to a university, was a recipient of a scholarship to continue her studies, works and lives in Quiche from Monday through Friday (Paxtor, Organization meeting Feb. 11th 2006). While every other woman involved to any degree with the organization were not able to be as educationally successful as her. Education is a symbol of power, of wealth. If she has a job, if she is able to travel to and from Quiche and San Andrés Xecul every weekend, she must have a better means of monies available to her than the others. The Asesora General uses her job,

contacts, and monies to attract the women of her community to be a part of the organization. Her title or position gives her moral and more authority.

Conclusion

The women's involvement in the organization challenges the traditional role of an indigenous woman. The mission of the organization is to preserve culture. The historical culture of indigenous women has been to work in the home, to speak their native language of K'iche', yet the organization encourages women to become more involved in society, and in the 1995 document it states that they utilize K'iche' during the organization's conferences. Do they speak their native language outside of the conferences? Only the women who have always spoke K'iche' and know less Spanish speak it outside of the conferences.

Change is gradual. It is very possible for the women to adapt to the ways the Asesora General has taught and lived, but only if there is unity among them where they can compromise and share their abilities. In order to preserve culture, one must loose part of it. This is the challenge that the women face today. From the observations made at the reunions and organizations, from informal and formal conversations, the women are a very timid culture, a very submissive and quite group of women. Besides, because they are a submissive group of women, most would and do not want confrontations or disputes. They try to avoid it at all costs. But different parts of their culture are slowly being lost and other parts are being especially preserved. The making and wearing of the traditional *traje*, for example is still used today.

*O.M.# = Organization Meetings 1-4

** No accounts of violated women were given nor evidence that the organization acted upon those situations

Appendix
1995 Document of Grupo Cultural: Poder y Fuerza

JUPUQ B'ANIKIL: CHUQ'AB' Q'ATBA' ALTZIJ
GRUPO CULTURAL: PODER Y FUERZA

El presente grupo fue fundado el día miércoles 5 de julio del año de 1,995. A las 14:00 Pm (dos de la tarde), en al 2ª Calle 3-06 Zona 2, San Andrés Xecul, Totonicapán. Guatemala C.A.

El objetivo primordial del grupo es conservar y fortalecer los valores culturales, concienciar a los pueblos hermanos y por ultimo demostrar una acción en pro de desarrollo humano futuras generaciones.

Su finalidad es alcanzar: la concordia, la armonía, la comprensión y sobre todo la socialización. El grupo contiene diversas actividades y temas importantes que a continuación mencionan: dentro de las actividades podemos enumerar las siguientes.

1. Poemas, cantos, y bailes regionales.
2. Danzas, comedias, dramatizaciones y charlas

Dentro de las temas y conferencias encontramos: Los acuerdos de paz, los derechos humanos y derechos cívicos, etc.

El grupo tiene y cumple un carácter multiétnico y mantiene siempre dentro de sus actividades el idioma K'iche'.

Por el respeto a los derechos humanos estamos presentes desde la procedencia en nuestra sangre que es origen de maíz y mestizaje. Abrimos nuestros corazones para el encuentro que nos ofrece nuestro pueblo milenario; Nuestra meta es alcanzar la verdadera convivencia pacifica dentro de la unidad nacional.

Queridos hermanos, amigos, jóvenes, señoritas, niños y niñas de diferentes culturales y naciones, los invitamos a que se organices para atender acciones de desarrollo humano por una mañana mejor. Nuestra querida patria Guatemala requiere de lideres positivos que corresponde a las generaciones vivas, as así como se organiza una sociedad abierta con espíritu innovador y no con lideres negativos que genera una situación de divisionismo, impiden la posibilidad de la convivencia sobre bases democráticas; es por ello que todos se levanten que nadie se quede a tras de los demás (POP WUJ)

Atentamente,
María Lorenza Chuc Paxtor
Asesora General del Grupo
CHU'QAB' Q'ATB' ALTZIJ = PODER Y FUERZA
2ª Calle 3-06 Zona 2 San Andrés Xecul, Totonicapán

San Andrés Xecul 27 de septiembre del año 1,996

Works Cited

Organization Meetings

- (O.M. 1) Wednesday February 1, 2006, 10:30 a.m., at the house of Doña Juana Modesta Can: Welcoming celebration, introduction to Organización Cultural: Poder Y Fuerza, introduction to host families
- (O.M. 2) Thursday February 9, 2006, 3:00 p.m., at the house of Doña Romelia: Committee reunion and student check up
- (O.M. 3) Saturday February 11, 2006, 3:00 p.m., at the house of Doña Juana Modesta Can: Organization meeting, meet contact person
- (O.M. 4) Saturday February 26, 2006, 2:00 p.m., at the house of Doña Juanita: Farewell party for students, organization update, and cultural performances and speeches

Interviews

- Friday February 24, 2006, 10:30 a.m., at the house of Doña Mercedes Elizabeth Herrera Tux: Held two interviews. Interviewees were Doña Mercedes Elizabeth Herrera Tux and Doña Rita
- Sunday February 27, 2006, 11:30 a.m., at the house of Doña Juanita: Held an interview. Interviewee was Doña María Lorenza Chuc Paxtor

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