

Sorting a Polyphony of Perception: Describing Discourse Surrounding *Ajq'ijab* in a  
Highland Guatemalan Town

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this project is to examine the discourses surrounding *Ajq'ijab* (Mayan priest/shamans) in the highland Guatemalan town of San Andrés Xecul in order to gain insight into how *Ajq'ijab* are understood in that town. While there has been substantial research on the *Ajq'ijab* concerning their education, methods of practice, and worldview, there is space for further understanding of how they are positioned within the religious discourses of their communities. This project seeks to chart that space by describing components of the religious discourse of San Andrés Xecul that have surfaced through a multitude of varied perceptions held by its participants. Furthermore, in its methodology and presentation it hopes to contribute to the movement in anthropology emphasizing maintenance of individual voices despite the difficulties representing this polyphony can present.

## **Introduction**

San Andrés Xecul is a town both visually and sonically stunning. As you ride in on your *camioneta*, a pick-up truck with steel guard-rails attached to the sides onto which you gratefully cling, you are heading for a town of slightly more than four-thousand nestled into the mountains and surrounded by moats of corn fields. The first thing you hear is the clang of a church bell, which draws your eyes to the multicolored dome of the Catholic church. It spikes above all other buildings and sits firmly at the center of the town. But you see black scorches up in the mountains too: all around are ceremonial sites for the *Ajq'ijab* (Mayan priest/shamans), altars where *copal* is burned and offerings are given to *Ajaw* (God). You can't hear them, but they are impossible to ignore. Presently the megaphone of an Evangelical church crackles and you are blasted with the afternoon sermon.

What is an *Ajq'ij*? In literal K'iche, the word *Ajq'ij* means “‘of the days’ or ‘in charge of the days’” (Molesky-Poz 2006: 133). An *Ajq'ij* is a type of shaman who uses an intimate knowledge of the Mayan *Chol Q'ij*, or ritual calendar of 260 days (twenty day names cycled through thirteen numbers), to make meaning. That meaning takes many forms—dream interpretation, reading the fire and *tz'ite'* beans, movements of the body, to name a few—but always in the context of responsibility, of servitude: “...every *Ajq'ij* I have spoken with indicates an awareness of his/her capacities and commitment to the needs of his/her family and community or, on a wider level, to national or global needs” (Molesky-Poz 2006: 84). At least, that is one perspective of what an *Ajq'ij* is. The fundamental premise of this study at its outset was the existence of varied perspectives, and this premise proved sound.

In San Andrés Xecul I encountered a multiplicity of perceptions in conflict with each other. This is not to say there is no pattern to these perceptions; on the contrary, this study affirmed that there is such a pattern. Within the whole of religious discourse in San Andrés I found that the perceptions of community members support two distinct discourses surrounding *Ajq'ijab*. One of these discourses exerts a force that resists the power of the historical practice of *Ajq'ijab* and its associated “webs of significance,” to borrow Geertz’s definition of culture (Geertz 1973: 5). The force of this discourse presses to silence *Ajq'ijab* and diminish their presence in the community mainly through avoidance and alternativity and secondarily through direct renunciation. Although direct renunciation is a part of this discourse, focusing on it would distort the truth of the matter: the violence of this discourse is not direct or loud but subtle and persistent. Salient components of this discourse that I will present in this paper include the concepts of idolatry, *brujo* (witch), lies/ignorance, solidarity, and history. Although it is not the case that this discourse is purely negative, as the word silencing implies, I

will use the label “silencing discourse” to reference it. The other discourse I will describe exerts a force that resists the power of this silencing force. In a community whose religious composition is steadily changing, the force of this discourse presses to sustain the historical practice of *Ajq’ijab* and its associated webs of significance by asserting their presence within the community. Salient components of this discourse I will discuss include the concepts of ritual leaders/spiritual guides, *brujo*, meaning-makers, inclusivity, and history. Again, while it is a sacrifice of accuracy to use one word to refer to an entire discourse, to avoid confusion I will refer to this discourse as the “sustaining discourse.” With a careful and piece-wise consideration of how these two discourses are constructed, what forces they exert, and how they are shared by the community, this paper will illuminate the plain yet complicated truth that the understanding of *Ajq’ijab* is a point of conflict for the community of San Andrés Xecul as that community is constructed by its religious discourse.

## **Methodology**

I conducted my research within the *municipio* (town) of San Andrés Xecul over the course of three weeks: from February 10, 2008 to March 3, 2008. Although there are numerous *aldeas* (villages) surrounding the *municipio* that offered possible research sites it was in the interest of the project to limit the area of research to account for the limited time available. It is my belief that this decision led to a more complete understanding of a more limited topic.

Additional to this spatial limit, I imposed the following limits on my area of research to effect a capacity for both complete and meaningful discussion: First, I considered perceptions of *Ajq’ijab* only with respect to religious affiliation (not economic status, ethnicity, etc.). Second, I only gathered opinions from three of the

Evangelical churches, while there are four or five different Evangelical churches in San Andrés (this figure was disputed). Although distinct in many respects, the information I gathered pertaining to my project was similar enough between these three churches to encourage a different use of my time than seeking out the remaining churches.

My methods of research included formal interviews, informal interviews, participant observation, and census data retrieval. Of my formally interviewed subjects, five are *Ajq'ijab*, nine are Catholic (this includes some *Ajq'ijab*), seven are Evangelical, and three are Evangelical pastors. To protect my subjects I will use pseudonyms when referring to my interviewees below. The religious affiliations of those informally interviewed vary from *Ajq'ij* and Catholic to Evangelical to non-Mayan-religion-practicing Catholic. My participant observation encompassed my entire experience in San Andrés<sup>i</sup>. My final method of research was census data retrieval. I retrieved population and religious affiliation figures from two different offices of the local government.

As no information can be conducted in anthropological research without being filtered through some theoretical lens, be it implicitly or explicitly in the mind of the researcher, I would like to attempt first to examine my implicit assumptions and then to articulate the explicit theoretical-methodological framework with which I am operating. I examine my implicit assumptions with the assumption that I won't uncover them all. My most basic assumption before my research began was that Evangelicals would disapprove of *Ajq'ijab*, thinking them witches or sinners, and Catholics would be more tolerant. Second, I assumed that the role of *Ajq'ijab* is multi-faceted and that I might see the roles of therapist, healer, and teacher, among others. Finally, I assumed that *Ajq'ijab* are a foundation for community for those who follow them.

I also operated with a more structured theoretical framework imparted to me by the work of Lila Abu-Lughod. The extreme variety of my initial findings made me wary of extracting from them generalizations that would distort their variety, perpetuating the repression of otherness, for the sake of academic accessibility. I found solace in Abu-Lughod's "Writing Against Culture (1991)," which describes methods for writing ethnographies so as to "shift away from culture" (Abu-Lughod 1991: 147). I employ two of these methods—focusing on discourse and practice and writing ethnographies of the particular (my technique is not the full-blown-particular ethnography that Abu-Lughod advocates, but I employ as much of this technique as this project makes possible)—in an attempt to encourage this shift away from culture and give a more truthful account of the community I studied. These methods are particularly useful in this case because the overlap between and subtlety of the perceptions of Evangelicals, Catholics, and those practicing Mayan religion precludes their strict generalization.

### **Limitations**

Abu-Lughod identifies as a third method for shifting away from culture including more of the connections between the ethnographer and the community he or she studies (1991: 148). Regrettably, my lack of space to adequately incorporate this method is a notable limitation of this study. Were I to include more of how *I* participated in the discourses I examined and how my social and political position is tied into my subjects' reality, this project would benefit from an even more rounded and complete interpretation of the polyphony of perception. This said, I will seek to incorporate how my position affected what I heard. For one, being an outsider certainly made some subjects hesitant to talk about certain issues, and I suspect that were I to

establish more rapport and spend more time in the community I would hear a different discourse, particularly with respect to the concept of *brujo*, for instance<sup>ii</sup>. On the other hand, being an insider of the community with a particular stance more internal to the discourse would have determined what I heard as well.

Time, in general, was a limitation. The project would've benefited from several follow up interviews that weren't possible, and the perspective of the Catholic priest was unavailable because of his schedule and the termination of my research. Mentioned above but worthy of further mention is the fact that I only considered perceptions according to religious affiliation. Specifically, I did not seek out the inclusion of the Pan-Maya discourse. Interestingly, I didn't encounter anyone by accident who spoke of this movement either, which I would have expected to had it been present. While I can't comment definitively on the meaning of this, I might posit in light of it that the Pan-Maya movement is relatively absent from the religious discourse in San Andrés Xecul. Without having thoroughly researched this point, however, it remains pure speculation. Perhaps what is part of the Pan-Maya discourse simply did not occur to me as such for my lack of looking for it.

### **Discussion of Research Findings**

Before describing the discourses I encountered, it would be prudent to give a brief history of recent religious movements in Guatemala. This will provide some perspective in which to set the scene of San Andrés Xecul. In her book *Contemporary Mayan Spirituality*, Jean Molesky-Poz gives a succinct description:

(The highlands of Guatemala and southern Mexico), with legacies of traditional Maya beliefs and practices for tens of thousands of years, have been the objects of many religious projects in the past five centuries: the long tyrannical shadow which passed from the north in Pedro de Alvarado's invasion in 1524; the imposition of Spanish Catholicism during the colonial period; the introduction of Protestantism

during the anticlerical liberal years of 1870-1926; projects of Catholic Action in the 1950s; and the more recent U.S.-exported missions, which have ushered in an expansive growth of evangelical Protestantism since the 1970s (2006: 1).

In addition to these movements, Maya communities have suffered direct persecution of the army and (less so) guerilla movements. During the violence of the 1970s,

...many of the new young Maya leaders disappeared from their communities, their bodies later found bearing marks of torture...in some areas of the highlands an entire generation of young Maya leaders lost their lives...(Montejo 2005: 116).

A leader in the Pan-Maya movement, Montejo suggests that this violence provoked a resurging response that in part comprises the Pan-Maya movement today. Thus, the complicated history of Maya communities like San Andrés Xecul, with its varying players and forces, suggests the presence of conflicting discourses, which I indeed found.

Little ethnography has been conducted in the town of San Andrés, so there little history specifically pertaining to it has been written. I heard the names of two other foreigners who had lived in the town in the last ten years but could not locate anything they might have published. One paper of relevance written two years ago by Seth Procter, however, provides an important insight. In his assessment of the religious community of San Andrés, he claims that “About 80% of the town is Catholic, which is synonymous with *Costumbrista* (practitioner of Mayan religion). The other 20% is Evangelical” (Procter n.d.: 2). Assuming Procter’s data is reliable, in a very short time the Evangelical population has increased significantly: the most recent census data, from 2005<sup>iii</sup>, shows the town to be 31% Evangelical and 69% Catholic (Census Data from *La Unidad Técnica Municipal* of San Andrés Xecul). My research showed another difference: while all the people practicing *Costumbre* (Mayan religion) did profess Catholicism as well, a great deal of Catholics renounced the practice of Mayan

religion. In fact, with regard to perceptions of *Ajq'ijab*, non-Mayan-religion-practicing Catholics shared much more with Evangelicals than with other Catholics. The discourses I describe are not meant as strict categorizations of perceptions had by *Costumbristas* versus those had by Evangelicals and non-Maya-religion-practicing Catholics; indeed, all three of these groups contribute to both discourses, and it is a methodological goal of this paper to present this (in the fashion of Abu-Lughod). But it would be block-headed and deceiving not to point out the obvious trends in the use of these discourses: by far Evangelicals and non-Maya-religion-practicing Catholics use that discourse which silences and diminishes the presence of *Ajq'ijab* in the community, whereas *Ajq'ijab* and others who practice Mayan religion use that discourse which sustains their presence.

In order to best compare the two discourses in question, I will present their components side by side, alternating between discourses rather than describing one first and the other second. In order to facilitate this, I have paired the components into loose complementarities. Some pairs are more obviously complementary than others, and this is simply because some points of the discourses intersect more closely than others. The complementarities I will discuss are idolatry and ritual leaders/spiritual guides; contrasting uses of *brujo*; lies/ignorance and meaning-makers; solidarity and inclusivity; and the concept of history.

### **Idolatry and Ritual Leaders/Spiritual Guides**

Idolatry is a common term used by nearly all of the Evangelicals and non-Mayan-religion-practicing Catholics. Those who didn't use the term in the interviews universally referred to the same concept: *Ajq'ijab* and those who follow them worship many gods, the wrong gods, or both God and the Devil. As Maria and Josepha, two

Evangelical women, put it, “*Sacerdotes* (priests) Mayas are idolatrous. They believe in many gods—the sun, moon, air, and rocks” (Int. Feb. 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008). Doña Maria, the wife of the Cofrade of San Andrés and Catholic who didn’t practice Mayan religion told me that *Ajq’ijab* “are idolatrous because they think Ximon (San Simon, patron saint to whom *Ajq’ijab* pray) is God, but he isn’t” (Int. Feb. 19<sup>th</sup>, 2008). Don Pedro, a Catholic, told me “there are two functions of *sacerdotes* mayas: pray to God and pray to the Devil” (Int. Feb. 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008). The latter expression of idolatry especially accompanies the notion that *Ajq’ijab* are ineffective: because they pray to the Devil their prayers aren’t answered. This concept has a two fold effect on this discourse. First, it describes an explicit doctrine for rejection and avoidance. Because idolatry is shirking God’s law, those who follow God cannot be any part of idolatry. Second, it invites a contrast that provides an alternative to idolatry. Don Juan, who converted to Evangelism fifteen to sixteen years ago, succinctly expresses this alternative: “The *sacerdotes* mayas believe in two gods—on of the earth and one of the sky. They follow two paths. But there’s only one God—it’s better just to follow one” (Int. Feb. 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008).

One of the *Ajq’ijab* who Don Juan went to before his conversion is agreed that *Ajq’ijab* pray to two gods—one of the earth and one of the sky. But throughout my conversation with him he referred to the one God who gave us our destinies, who gave him his gift as an *Ajq’ij* as well. Other *Ajq’ijab* with whom I talked and observed prayed to the cardinal directions, *San Simón*, and other deities, but they always emphasized that *Ajaw* (God) comes first. Don Eusebio, in particular, always reminded me that “praying daily is the most important thing. Monday through Sunday, because everything depends on God” (Int. Feb. 20<sup>th</sup> 2008). In the sustaining discourse of *Ajq’ijab*, their prayers are not idolatrous, they are essential for giving thanks and asking

help of *Ajaw*. There is no perceived idolatry in worshipping the day names, *San Simón*, or the cardinal directions because *Ajaw*, and only *Ajaw*, is the ruler of all.

But the sustaining discourse is not particularly occupied with answering this charge of idolatry. Instead, it forms a positive conception of *Ajq'ijab* as spiritual guides and ritual leaders. As María Carmen Tuy expresses in Molesky-Poz's work,

The *Ajq'ij* has a responsibility before the community and family. The community has a confidence in an *Ajq'ij* to cure, to give advice, to orient.... We ask the Creator and Former for help so we don't confuse people in the consultations, so they can walk on this great path (2006: 84).

I had the opportunity to observe the practice of this guiding and leading on several occasions. Once Doña Rafaela, an *Ajq'ij*, read my cross, or specific configuration of day names connected to my birth date, and instructed me that my destiny would keep me from being married. She guided me through this understanding by explaining that the day *Tijax*, which forms the right hand of my cross, both protects me from many unseen enemies and cuts off my potential for long marriage; it defends my destiny (Field Notes Feb. 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2008). In this way *Ajq'ijab* guide followers to their destinies and help them interpret who they are. Additionally, this spiritual guidance is followed by leadership in ritual. Doña Rafaela offered to lead me in a ceremony to ask *Ajaw* for the opportunity for a marriage. Another example of such spiritual guidance and ritual leadership is how Don Eusebio helped a woman whose infant had recently died.

This baby died of an evil shadow. I had to do prayers for nine days so that the spirit of the baby arrived well in heaven. The baby had not been baptized. That's why I had to do nine days of prayers: to ask *Ajaw* to receive it. Also, I did a ceremony to console her so that she wouldn't cry. I asked *Ajaw* to console her and give her *animo* (strength, life). She had fear, she was afraid and because of this he didn't have *animo*. But after the ceremony she had strength (Int. Feb. 20<sup>th</sup> 2008).

For their followers, *Ajq'ijab* are understood and seen as leaders, and this carries a discursive force. Specifically, the practice of spiritual guiding and ritual leading establishes and sustains the presence of *Ajq'ijab* in the community.

### **Uses of “Brujo”**

In the silencing discourse, the word *brujo* is used as a blanket reference for all *Ajq'ijab*. *Brujeria* can accomplish both positive and negative ends, but regardless of these ends it is still a sin against God. Don Louis articulates this point: “To God, both good and bad *Sacerdotes* Mayas are bad. He doesn't like either one. It's like the difference between a thief and a kidnapper. Both are sinners. *Brujo* is to say *Sacerdote* Maya” (Int. Feb. 26<sup>th</sup> 2008). Although there are good and bad *Ajq'ijab*, all are *brujos* and sinners. Some of the functions of *brujos* as described by my subjects include sacrificing children, causing sicknesses and accidents, and killing enemies with spiritual attacks. The use of this word is generalizing and serves to compartmentalize *Ajq'ijab* into a category that refuses them any legitimate spiritual authority. Despite the expressed acknowledgement of positive functions of *brujos*, the word itself negates any meaning this acknowledgement might have because of how, as a concept, *brujeria* is understood. In this way *brujo* is used by this discourse to diminish the presence of *Ajq'ijab* in the community.

In contrast, the sustaining discourse uses the word *brujo* to identify specific *Ajq'ijab*. A *brujo* is something entirely distinct from an *Ajq'ij*. For Doña Rafaela, he is “a person who gives evil to others....They prevent people from getting work....But *Ajq'ijab* protect against *ajitz (brujos)*” (Int. Feb. 22<sup>nd</sup> 2008). She notes that an *Ajq'ij* exists to protect against *brujos*, and she was not alone in this observation. In fact, all the *Ajq'ijab* I talked with noted this as well. In terms of function, both discourses are in

agreement about what a *brujo* does. Who constitutes a *brujo*, however, is a point of contention between the two. In fact, even within the sustaining discourse there is very little consensus about who really is a *brujo*. In his article “Nagual, Witch, and Sorcerer in a Quiché Village” Benson Saler states that “a lack of proper respect for industry” is likely to bring charges of being a *brujo*. In my experience, the accusation of witchcraft was more often accompanied by accusations of envy. An *Ajq’ij* who was envious of one’s spouse or partner would be accused of breaking up the relationship or bringing ill on a new partner. In one story related to me, the spouse of a man was rendered unconscious for fifteen days as the result of an envious “*bruja*” (Field Notes Feb. 26<sup>th</sup> 2008). And while one subject identified the mayor as being a *brujo* and very dangerous, another subject disagreed completely and cited the fact that the former’s brother had recently lost the election. The point here is that the sustaining discourse uses *brujo* in differentiating way that expands the communal presence of *Ajq’ijab* and resists their relegation to a role of deviance. Though accusations are very subjective, this discourse understands *Ajq’ijab* and *brujos* are different.

It should be noted here that a number of subjects across all three religious categories were hesitant to talk about *brujos*. Some of them agreed that *brujos* exist but denied them existing in San Andrés; some of them simply admitted only to hearing rumors. That I observed one subject who had given me ample information about *brujos* and even made an accusation turn around and say to a stranger (who was Evangelical) that she didn’t think *brujos* existed here suggests that this level of silence can be attributed to my social-political status as a researcher (Field Notes Feb. 28<sup>th</sup> 2008). But even if this is the case, this quietude represents another aspect of the silencing discourse in which all religious categories—Evangelical, Catholic non-Costumbristas, and practitioners of Mayan religion alike—are participating. That is, the identity of

*Ajq'ijab* as protectors against brujos is being silenced (proportional to exteriority to kinship) as a result of an unwillingness to discuss the existence of such negative agents.

### **Lies/Ignorance and Meaning-Makers**

Because the section “lies/ignorance” considers a reaction to *Ajq'ijab*'s forms of meaning-making, I will discuss it following the “meaning-making” component of the sustaining discourse. A primary element of any discourse that sustains a practice and its webs of significance is the assertion of that practice, of that significance. This is meaning-making for *Ajq'ijab*; by organizing the world in their particular way and practicing that organization, *Ajq'ijab* construct a discourse that sustains their way of life. There are many distinct forms of meaning-making for an *Ajq'ij*, some of which have already been mentioned: dream interpretation, reading the fire and *tz'ite'* beans, movements of the body (or lightning in the blood), interpreting a person's day sign, or interpreting other signals during ceremonies. I will focus only on those I directly observed in my field research. Broadly, these include interpreting one's *destina* (destiny<sup>iv</sup>) and communicating with *Ajaw*.

My *destina* was read by two different *Ajq'ijab*. The first time, the *Ajq'ij* used a book to locate my birthday on the *Chol Q'ij* (sacred Mayan calendar). From my birthday, she counted forward and backward four separate times for a total of five days. These days made my “cross,” my character and destiny. Her understanding of the subtle meanings of the days allowed her to see the meaning of this cross. Molesky-Poz explains that “[c]ontemporary *Ajq'ijab* interpret the lexicon of the calendar as a psychological schema, which can also be understood as a literary text, a referential field, or a patterning of elements” (2006: 140). The second time, the *Ajq'ij* first looked at my palm. After a moment, he asked me if I ever experience ticks in my muscles. I said

yes, and he concluded that I have the calling to be an *Ajq'ij*. This was a sign that I had a *don* (gift). Then he looked up my day sign and interpreted some of the difficulties and successes I would have in my life. In this way *Ajq'ijab* “illuminate the meaning of one’s day, that is, one’s destiny, one’s capacity and potentials according to the sacred calendar” (Molesky-Poz 2006: 134).

Another *Ajq'ij* performed a ceremony with me and, in this way, I was able to observe other methods of meaning-making. First, by spreading and grouping into fours beans of the *tz'ite* tree, holding a specific question in his mind, he asked the guidance of *Ajaw*. Then, by assigning each group a day of the calendar as he counted along, noting which days spoke to him either by inciting movements within his body or merely by their positioning on the table, he interpreted the answer of *Ajaw*: the ceremony was to be conducted at the site of *Chul Q'oy*<sup>v</sup>. During the ceremony, the *Ajq'ij* demonstrated three overt methods of meaning-making. First, the explosion or creaking sound of eggs he had placed in the fire were signals if *Ajaw* had accepted our offering (the first positive, the second negative). Second, he read the movements of the fire: counter-clockwise spiraling meant we should expect a good result from the ceremony, clockwise indicated a problem of some sort (in this ceremony one such problem was that a fellow student of mine *llegó mal*, or “had worsened”). Third, when the black candle, which symbolizes obscurity, burned down much faster than the other candles, it meant that the *mal pensamiento* (bad thoughts) had left us (Field Notes Feb. 13 2008). These ways of making meaning preserve a distinct practice and distinct webs of significance by entering this knowledge into the community’s understanding of the world.

Many of my subjects, when questioned about their opinions of ceremonies divination simply label them lies. Don Mario said simply, “[divination] is a lie. It’s not the truth” (Int. Feb. 23th 2008). This stance rejects of the meaning making capacities

that integrally define an *Ajq'ij*. As such it avoids entirely the body of knowledge that creates the identity of an *Ajq'ij*, severing participation in the sustaining discourse and contributing to a movement of silencing. Here the label “silencing” shows its misleading face: a characteristic of this discourse is this pure avoidance, which I contend diminishes the communal presence; I am not arguing that the accusation of lying directly silences these practices for their practitioners. It does however, set an example of rejection that contributes to resisting the practice of Mayan spirituality.

There is another, related form of avoidance that accomplishes the same end more intentionally. That is the will to ignore these practices, to pretend to not see, know, or think about them. It is a will to ignorance. Two examples will serve to demonstrate this point. It has been explained above that all the *Costumbristas* practice Catholicism. Many of them attend church only occasionally, but about two thirds of my subjects were still of the opinion that about half of Catholics practiced Mayan religion. The secretary of the Catholic church, when asked how many people practice Mayan religion, told me flat out zero. This lie points to an obvious denial of the presence of *Costumbristas*<sup>vi</sup>. The second example comes from a subject who claimed to not know any *Ajq'ijab*, how they work, or what they do. His tone was severe and insistent. What made this answer hard to believe was the fact that a mere fifty meters away from his house, in plain sight across some rows of corn fields, was a conspicuous mound of earth with an altar on top (Field Notes Feb. 27<sup>th</sup> 2008). His house was directly on the route to a common ceremonial sight for petitioning for monetary success. Whether he knew *Ajq'ijab* and lied, I can't say, but it undoubtedly requires an effort to avoid such at-your-doorstep knowledge.

## Solidarity and Inclusivity

One of the main characteristics of the silencing discourse, as demonstrated in previous sections, is a rejection of the sustaining discourse for its idolatry, sin, and deception. This rejection is most explicit in the particular nature in which the Evangelical and Catholic churches preach against Mayan religion. Though it is direct renunciation, it is decisively absent of loud hostility. Instead of the kind of fighting against Mayan religion that Robert Carlsen describes in his book about Santiago Atitlán, formalized rejection from the churches in San Andrés preaches solidarity (1997). For example, as Carlsen narrates, “Sitting there in my room listening to the hum and the chorus of Hallelujahs, I eventually realized that this was in fact a kind of war cry directed not only at other Atitectos, but also at Atiteco culture itself” (1997: 16). Contrastingly, my subjects describe a tolerance for the existence of Mayan religion but a personal desire to be free of it. Maria and Josepha describe what their pastor says about Mayan religion:

Don't be critical; don't say bad things. All he wants is for us to renounce the wicked. He says don't practice Mayan things, Mayan ways. Renounce them. But we should love all as brothers (Int. Feb 18<sup>th</sup> 2008).

Despite this tolerance, this lack of hostility, the Evangelicals are certainly in spoken opposition to ways of the *Ajq'ijab*. The numerous statements similar to the one above show that a discourse is proliferating that turns its back on traditional Mayan religion.

It is my strong contention that this turning-its-back on Mayan religion is a more powerful form of subversion than open hostility. In the Catholic church, a peace is kept between *Costumbristas* and non-*Costumbristas* by avoiding the issue. While groups such as the *Grupo Renovación Carismática Católica*, *Defensores de la Fe*, and *Movimiento de Cursillo de Cristiandad* (to name a few<sup>vii</sup>), openly preach against *San Simón* and *brujería*, this preaching occurs outside the bounds of Mass and general

Catholic gatherings. As my encounter with the Catholic secretary mentioned above implies, the issue is simply pushed under the rug. While this does allow *Costumbristas* to remain a part of the church, I believe open hostility would bolster the strength of *Costumbristas'* voices by inciting a self-aware resurgence in the spirit of the Pan-Maya movement; moreover, it would acknowledge the substantial presence of those voices that already exist but are not voiced in open resistance (the fact that this possible situation is only potentiality a central reason for my choice of “sustaining” as a label). Although in Carlsen’s case of Santiago Atitlán he found simply a diminishing presence in light of this hostility, his research was conducted during years of violence and rebellion, having been published the year of the Guatemala peace accords (1997). In his epilogue he supports my contention:

Where the Atitecos have succeeded it has been through reliance on community. It is heartening that most of Guatemala’s other Mayan towns have their own legacy of community upon which to build. Those legacies should remind us of the error in underestimating the flowering of the dead (1997: 170).

Carlsen’s statement is as true as ever in San Andrés, where the sense of community is palpable.

Two exceptions exist to my description of the silencing discourse’s use of solidarity. The first is strongly related to the sense of community just identified. One Evangelical pastor told me, in addition to the very similar rhetoric of Maria and Josepha, “I live in an area where there aren’t many Evangelicals. Often times I get invited to *fiestas* [parties] for other religions, and I go. Some people don’t” (Int. Feb. 20<sup>th</sup> 2008). This stands in contention to a strict solidarity, though he certainly didn’t admit to participating in rituals. He qualified this statement by mentioning that not many Evangelicals would do that. The other exception is another Evangelical pastor’s admission that some of his flock still use *Ajq’ijab*, for the reason that “they haven’t fully

accepted God yet. They're still unsure about *creente*<sup>viii</sup> (Evangelism)" (Int. Feb 27<sup>th</sup> 2008). These exceptions are important for portraying the layered reality that actually exists in San Andrés. Not every Evangelical is contributing one hundred percent of their life to the silencing discourse—rather, I am speaking in trends and about forces that, though constructed by individual thoughts and actions, are defined by transcendence of those individuals' thoughts and actions. Here I tread the line between Abu-Lughod's ethnography of the particular and a utilizable (though careful) measure of generalization.

In contrast to solidarity, the sustaining discourse contains the complementary component of inclusivity. Rather than separating and isolating itself from its complementary discourse, the sustaining discourse attempts to include the entire community. Two salient examples from my field work depict this. The first is the overwhelming presence of rhetoric from every religious group I encountered of acceptance. Catholics considered themselves one united church, despite the factions within it; Evangelicals were welcoming and remained so when I admitted to not sharing their faith; and Ajq'ijab consistently reinforced that everyone is a brother—*Carismatecas*, Evangelicals, foreigners like me, everyone. There are a great deal of subjects, then, who contribute to both solidarity and inclusivity.

The second example is the testimony of *Ajq'ijab* that they often do work for Evangelicals and non-Mayan-religion-practicing Catholics. Procter's assessment concurs: "...I spoke with a *cofrade* and a *sacerdote* who claimed to have their services solicited by Evangelicals. Other Catholics claim the Evangelicals practice *costumbre* too..." (n.d.: 7). One Ajq'ij I interviewed claimed that he helped a lot of Evangelicals and *Carismatecas*. "They criticize," he said, "but they bring their destiny. They say they are Evangelical but they drink, and their religion doesn't work" (Int. Feb. 28<sup>th</sup>

2008). Thus, the rhetoric of tolerance and the practice of servicing people of all faiths contribute to an inclusivity. This inclusivity is an important component of the sustaining discourse for its maintenance of widespread dialogue and practice. In such an inclusive atmosphere the historical practices of the *Ajq'ijab* are not left behind.

### **Concept of History**

“Before Evangelism we were all lost. We gave away our money [for ceremonies]...we drank a lot; but God doesn't want that, God doesn't love that” (Int. Feb. 27<sup>th</sup> 2008). This quote by an Evangelical pastor demonstrates the attitude toward history in the silencing discourse that sees Mayan religion as an ignorant way of the past, at best useful to “remember the culture of our ancestors” (Int. Feb. 21 2008). Side by side with this attitude are new practices that replace the work of *Ajq'ijab* and render them irrelevant. This discourse treats *Ajq'ijab* as history, ignoring their existence as a cultural force living that history *now*. In this way that living culture, those practices and webs of significances, can be crystallized and ultimately discarded. In its wake would be the teachings of the Bible and the groups like the *Carismatecas*, who gather to pray for reasons strikingly reminiscent of the *Ajq'ij* niche. Don Pedro explains, “If there are special problems or occasions like a sickness or birthday we might get together....We ask God for help and pray to thank him” (Int. Feb. 27<sup>th</sup> 2008). By labeling as antiquity a living presence and eliminating the evidence that it exists by satisfying the need for it, this discourse slowly covers the grave of the *Ajq'ijab*.

From reading the now flourishing literature of the Pan-Maya movement, works like Montejo's *Maya Intellectual Renaissance* (2005) and Molesky-Poz's *Contemporary Maya Spirituality* (2006), I expected to find an equal counterpoint to this

crystallizing component of the silencing discourse in San Andrés. Surprisingly, there was very little mention that

Our [mayans'] distinctive way of life has been inherited from our ancestors, and new generations of Maya have the responsibility to nourish and maintain it with whatever transformations are necessary for our survival in this highly technological and globalizing world (Montejo 2005: 139).

True, in the ceremony in which I participated we acknowledged our ancestors, and the cofrade of *San Simón*, when I was speaking with him one day, narrated a history of the world: it was dark in the beginning. *San Simón*, one of the first *Ajq'ijab*, asked *Ajaw* for sun. There were natural disasters, but they ended after *San Andrés* and *San Simón* prayed for the communities. Now the *Ajq'ijab* pray for their communities—for protection, strength, valor (Field Notes Feb. 15<sup>th</sup> 2008). Two of the other *Ajq'ijab* with whom I spoke, however, asserted that their knowledge was not gained from history. They had learned their skills directly from God.

It isn't that the sustaining discourse's lack of historical awareness (or expression thereof<sup>ix</sup>) entails its inevitable usurpation by its competing discourse, that it's doomed to diminish without overtly owning its history and declaring it alive...but it might. As an outsider in the town, my observation is only worth so much, but what I observed was a sustaining discourse much preoccupied with asserting its life, rather than its past. The step that Montejo would recommend is the incorporation of a rich history into this proud assertion of living presence; certainly, that would dramatically strengthen the force of the discourse.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has described two conflicting discourses in the highland Maya town of San Andrés Xecul to the end of accounting for the multiplicity of conflicting

perceptions surrounding *Ajq'ijab*. By providing five sets of complementary components of these discourses—idolatry and ritual leaders/spiritual guides; contrasting uses of *brujo*; lies/ignorance and meaning-makers; solidarity and inclusivity; and the concept of history—it has been shown how these two discourses are constructed, what forces they exert, and how they are shared by the community. One discourse diminishes the presence of *Ajq'ijab*, their practices, and their webs of significance through avoidance and replacement, moving toward an effective silence. The other sustains that presence through affirming the unique role of the *Ajq'ij* and his way of making sense of the world. Perhaps now it is appropriate to stop and reassess: why has it been necessary to understand the polyphony of perception in San Andrés in this way?

It is ingenuine and irresponsible to reduce the multiplicity and particularity of a society to any neat and clean formula; but some generalization is inherently necessary to communicate academically, and furthermore, generalization is an unavoidable aspect of all communication. Therefore, those engaged in academic discourse have a responsibility not to demonize generalization, but to be aware of the damages it can cause. Lila Abu-Lughod warns us to be aware of two dangers: “The first is that, as part of a professional discourse of “objectivity” and expertise, it is inevitably a language of power....The second problem...derives...from the effects of homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness it tends to produce..” (Abu-Lughod 1991). To avoid these dangers as much as possible given the limitations of this work and the scope of my research, I employed the notion of discourse and attempted to genuinely present the individual voices I heard. This notion allowed me to present a compelling picture of the varied perceptions of *Ajq'ijab* and give a meaningful explanation for that picture. More importantly, it allowed to do this while aware of my position of power (even if I would have liked to include more of the significance of this in my presentation) and without

sacrificing the heterogeneity, incoherence, and timeful reality of the community I studied.

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<sup>i</sup> Especially important participant observation consisted of two ceremonies given by Don Celso Delfino, two readings of *Tz'ite* beans, two readings of my *nawal* (significance of my birthday), and a Catholic procession on behalf of the Virgen Mary.

<sup>ii</sup> Dewalt and Dewalt brought this to my attention in their book *Participant Observation* (2002)

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<sup>iii</sup> I assume here that Procter's statistics reflect a similar lag—if his research took place two years ago, I would expect his data to accordingly be from, at the latest, 2003.

<sup>iv</sup> The concept implied by *destina* was not strictly inevitable—it was a strong pull to a certain course that God had planned for you. Much of the work of Ajq'ijab do, however, involves taming or controlling this nature or asking God for the ability to go beyond it.

<sup>v</sup> A more thorough account of tz'ite bean readings is given in Tedlock 1982: Pp. 153-171

<sup>vi</sup> Even if she didn't really think this and said this because of my position as an outsider, it still reflects a will to ignorance because she doesn't want *me* to know the real situation.

<sup>vii</sup> Other groups I encountered were *La Misionaria de la Palabra*, *Catequistas*, *Grupo de la Familia de Cristiandad*, *Madres Cristianas*, *Los Loros*, none of which openly believe in Mayan religion. In fact, no group as such was identified as believing in Mayan religion (no open group within the Catholic church)

<sup>viii</sup> *Creente* is as near a spelling I can provide. Though I'm unsure about its exact translation, I include it here for fidelity's sake and because it was clearly used to mean Evangelism

<sup>ix</sup> It could be that my research methods, specifically a lack of questioning regarding history, are responsible for this relative silence on the issue of history. I am prepared to accept that flaw; however, I still find it meaningful that such extremely little information was offered on the topic.