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# Meaningful Relationships: Collaborative Anthropology and Mentors from the Field

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## Meaningful Relationships: Collaborative Anthropology and Mentors from the Field

During my Summer 2014 fieldwork in the Guatemalan town of San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala, I interviewed my longtime colleague in ethnographic research, Sebastian Si Pop, about how we met. To our surprise, we discovered that we had vastly different memories of our first meeting, which had taken place nearly nine years before. As we drove one morning from Chamelco's urban center to the rural village of Chamil, I shared with Sebastian my memory of our first encounter, early in the summer of 2005. I recalled seeing him for the first time in a small shrine dedicated to the Virgin of Concepcion in the corner of Chamelco's municipal market during a celebration dedicated to the saint. His wife, Doña Aura, a market woman, was helping the other marketers to prepare for a procession that would highlight the Virgin. Sebastian had accompanied her to the festivities. Through the thick cloud of smoke from copal incense that filled the shrine as the women adorned the saint, Sebastian looked at me with confusion as he tried to figure out why I, a *gringa* visitor to the town, was dressed in Q'eqchi'-Maya women's traje, 'indigenous dress', and assisting women with their preparations for a ritual event. Aura presented me to her husband, though we did not engage in a deeper conversation.

Sebastian, however, relates that we met in a completely different fashion, at a different time, and on a different day. In fact, he doesn't remember attending the celebrating for the Virgin at all. Instead, he recalls that I met him in 2005 in his office on the second floor of the Palacio de Gobernación, "Government Palace," in Cobán, when he served as the President of the Q'eqchi' branch of the Academia de Lenguas de Guatemala, 'Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala'. He said that I came to ask for his support into my investigations into the story of Aj Pop B'atz', Chamelco's sixteenth-century founder. He was very interested in my work, but said

that he would not work with me unless I would commit to sharing my research and its results with the community. Too many scholars, he said, came to the community to conduct research and left, never to be heard from again. He would gladly support me in my research if I would promise to share its results in written form with the community when completed. I accepted, he recalled, and we got to know each other during Sunday lunches in his home in Chamelco.

As we made our way down the windy mountain roads that led from Chamelco's center to Chamil, Sebastian and I laughed at the great discrepancies in our accounts of first meeting. He was certain that my memory failed me, stating that he rarely attended saints' day events; I was convinced that he was mistaken as I have a vivid image of this first meeting in my mind. While we remained unable to agree on the nature and place of our first meeting, we concurred that for many years, we have collaborated on an ethnohistory project investigating the story of Aj Pop B'atz', the Q'eqchi' leader who protected his community from the sixteenth-century Spanish invasion by welcoming three Dominican friars to Chamelco in peace. Over the years, Sebastian and I have worked together in a number of ways to share our research on Aj Pop B'atz' with the Chamelqueño community. In 2010, we sponsored an ethnohistoric symposium about Aj Pop B'atz' as part of a community-wide celebration dedicated to honoring this historical figure. In 2012, we co-wrote a children's book about Aj Pop B'atz' to offer Chamelqueños a chance to reconnect with their history, lost through decades of state-sponsored violence in Guatemala. My nine years of collaborative research with Sebastian emphasized the value of making anthropological research accessible to the communities with whom we work. The many lessons I learned from Sebastian throughout our years of ethnographic fieldwork changed me and altered the course of my academic career.

As anthropologists, we learn many things from the people who shape our lives in unexpected ways. Among the most important relationships we forge are those with the people who become our mentors, changing our outlooks, guiding our research, and transforming our academic selves. While we often identify as anthropological mentors those professors or colleagues that shape our development as scholars, my most influential mentor came from outside the boundaries of the ivory tower and instead from my long-term fieldwork in San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala. In this article, I explore my collaboration with Sebastian and our work on a collaborative ethnohistory project in Chamelco. In doing so, I examine the role that indigenous colleagues play in mentoring anthropologists. I argue that anthropologists develop the most meaningful relationships of their academic careers with the people that they meet in the field. These colleagues and friends often go underappreciated and unacknowledged in our resulting scholarship, even when they play crucial roles in our lives.

### **Continuity and Change in San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala**

Situated in the mountains in the highlands of Alta Verapaz, Guatemala, the *municipio* of San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala is home to more than 50,000 residents, 98% of whom identify as Q'eqchi'-Maya. Chamelco has been the Q'eqchi' homeland since the Pre-Columbian era (Las Casas 1927; Remesal 1966; Tovilla 1960; Viana et al. 1962; Ximenez 1930). Although Spanish explorers and clergymen first entered Chamelco in the early sixteenth century, Chamelco remained a semi-autonomous community throughout the colonial era, designated a *pueblo de indios*, 'Indian town', by the Spanish crown. Throughout my ten years of fieldwork in Chamelco, I often heard contemporary residents identify their culture as the most "authentic" and "pure" in the region, stating that this colonial autonomy meant that their ancestors were never enslaved.

Today, Chamelco's urban area, which serves as the seat of the municipality, is home to roughly 1000 residents. The majority of Chamelco's inhabitants, however, live in more than twenty rural villages, '*aldeas*', and 86 hamlets, '*caseríos*', that belong to the municipality, even though scattered throughout the mountains surrounding the urban center. Q'eqchi' is the primary language spoken in daily life: in local centers of commerce, government business, and the home, most Chamelqueños speak Q'eqchi', rather than Spanish. Nevertheless, many Chamelqueños, especially those living in the municipal center, are bilingual in Spanish today. Although schools are required to teach local indigenous languages in accordance with national law (Maxwell 2009, 2011), the majority of classroom instruction takes place in Spanish, and not in Q'eqchi'. While most families living in the community's rural areas make a living through agricultural production, tending *milpas*, fields where they grow corn, squash, and beans (Carter 1969; Wilk 1991; Pacheco 1981; Gómez 1984; Hatse and DeCeuster 2001), others pursue non-agricultural work in the town center, in nearby Cobán, or even in Guatemala City.

Despite a growing number of changes introduced to Chamelco in recent years, Chamelqueños strive to connect with the culture of their ancestors in every-day life. For example, many Chamelqueños perform rituals to ask for the blessings of the *tzuultaq'a*, "mountain spirits" (Schackt 1984; Kahn 2006); have altars dedicated to their ancestors in their homes; and identify Q'eqchi' women's dress as symbols of ancestral practice (Author 2014; Author, under review). The municipal market continues to serve as the town's primary center of commerce, as it has for generations (Author 2010; Author 2014). These practices are among the many ways that Chamelqueños honor their ancestors in daily life.

While cultural continuity is important to many Chamelqueños, Q'eqchi' culture has adapted seamlessly to many new ideas, practices, and technologies introduced to Chamelco

through various channels (Adams 1999, 2001; Author 2014). Others, however, have presented challenges to the community. The construction of major roads connecting Chamelco to other nearby towns, including Cobán and San Pedro Carchá, enable travel and trade. Since 2010, several internet cafés, a national chain supermarket, and a bank have opened in the urban center. I often heard residents express concerns that being connected to the global economy in these ways might lead to irreversible change for younger generations of Chamelqueños.

The spread of Evangelical Christianity in Chamelco has also introduced many changes to the community. Many Evangelical denominations ban congregation members from practicing indigenous rituals; dancing or drinking, key elements of traditional local celebrations; and teach acculturation to a more Western way of life. While the first Evangelical churches in Chamelco were founded in the 1920s (Adams 1999, 2001), the number of Evangelical sects present in the region have grown exponentially, to more than a dozen. Members of some Evangelical churches, like the Iglesia Nazarena, ‘Nazarean church’, successfully blend elements of local Q’eqchi’ practice with Catholic teachings (Adams 1999, 2001). Members of others, like the Asamblea de Dios Nueva Vida, ‘Assembly of God, New Life’ church, do not. Instead, in accordance with church teachings, these parishioners must forgo Q’eqchi’ practice and language in favor of a more Christian lifestyle. The growing divide between Evangelical Chamelqueños and other community members continues to present a significant obstacle to the way that the community interacts with and relates to their indigenous past.

Guatemala’s thirty-six-year civil war presented perhaps the most significant challenge to Chamelqueños’ ability understanding of their history and culture (Adams 2001; Carmack 1988; Lovell 2010; Perera 1995; Schirmer 1998). While some armed conflicts took place in some of Chamelco’s rural areas, as several community members that I interviewed recalled, the town’s

urban center remained relatively unscathed by the violence. Chamelco's indigenous population did, however, experience some indirect effects of the conflict, as the government persecuted people who publicly demonstrated their Mayan identity (Konefal 2010; Lovell 2010; Way 2012). Maya history was eliminated from school curriculum, children no longer learned about the accomplishments of their ancestors in a formal venue, and communities lost the connection that they once had with their indigenous past.

This disconnect with the past not only undermined Maya communities' historical identity, but also disempowered them in the national social hierarchy. As Clendinnen (1987) argues, connecting with the past has long empowered the Maya, arguing the colonial Maya used historical knowledge to resist Spanish domination. Warren (1996, 1998) and others argue that connecting contemporary Maya identity to its historical roots helps empower the Maya today. Chamelco is no different. While many Chamelqueños seek to reconnect with the history they lost during the thirty six years of the Guatemalan civil war, there are few opportunities that allow them to do so.

In San Juan Chamelco, a growing number of Q'eqchi'-Maya men and women participate in Maya resurgence activities to help their communities (Wilson 1991, 1993, 1995). They participate in Maya ritual *mayejak*, 'petition' ceremonies to ask for the blessing of the ancestral mountain spirits, *tzuultaq'a*, during harvest and planting season; plan cultural celebrations, like the celebration of historical figures; lobby for bilingual and intercultural education; and lead important movements within the community. For example, one lifelong resident of Chamelco, Don Andrés Cuz, has led many cultural initiatives, including helping to found the national Academy of Mayan Languages. Today the director of the Universidad Maya, 'Maya University' in Chamelco, Don Andrés has spent his life promoting the use of the Q'eqchi' language in

government and school offices, helping to lead Q'eqchi' ritual ceremonies, and hosting ritual ceremonies in his home. Like Andrés, many Chamelqueños, including Sebastian, have dedicated their lives to fighting for Maya equality. They work to revitalize Q'eqchi' culture, both in their own homes and in their work with cultural organizations.

Among the most important points of cultural continuity for many Chamelqueños is the story of Aj Pop B'atz', Chamelco's sixteenth century founder and culture hero (Author 2010, Author 2013). In the early 1500s, a young Aj Pop B'atz' was chosen by a council of Q'eqchi' elders to lead his community after the former leader was abducted and killed by the Spaniards (Estrada 1979; Author 2010). He was chosen from among other Q'eqchi' men in recognition of strength, wisdom, and military prowess. After preparing his army for the inevitability of Spanish invasion, he realized that his efforts were futile. He decided instead to befriend three Spanish friars and to welcome them to Chamelco in peace. He did so to protect his people from death and enslavement, Chamelqueños state today. He received the three men in his home and accepted Catholic baptism in a nearby river to show his allegiance to them.

Shortly after this act, the three friars invited Aj Pop B'atz' to accompany them to Spain to represent the indigenous population of the New World. He accepted, taking gifts of woven cloth, birds, and animals with him. Once in Spain, met with King Carlos V (Guerrero 2007). Although he was instructed to bow for the monarch, he refused to do so, stating that he too was a king and that one king did not cede his power to another. According to Chamelqueño's version of this historic event, Carlos V was impressed by Aj Pop B'atz's strength and vision, and rewarded him with numerous gifts to take back to Chamelco, including church bells and other Catholic religious objects.



Back in Chamelco, Aj Pop B'atz' assisted the Spaniards in building the town's first Catholic church and in establishing the principal neighborhoods that surround Chamelco's urban center. On August 3, 1555, the Spanish monarch declared Aj Pop B'atz', "Lifelong Governor" of the Verapaz region of Chamelco (Real Cédula de Chamelco). This title granted Aj Pop B'atz' complete authority over the region, meaning that the area did not experience as much Spanish intervention as other parts of the country did. Nevertheless, the Spanish settlers in the region grew concerned about his about his ability to govern as the years passed (AGCA A1.23 4575 No. 2 Folio 240). To escape the Spaniards, Aj Pop B'atz' retreated to a rural community today known as Chamil, where he died in the late 1500s. Today, more than 450 years after his death, Aj Pop B'atz' is a figure who continues to be recognized by many as a symbol of Q'eqchi' identity and the grandfather of all Chamelqueños (Author 2010). While the story of Aj Pop B'atz' has been part of Chamelco's oral tradition for centuries, its prominence has decreased as younger generations fail to learn it as their ancestors did.

During my first visit to Chamelco in 2004, I was struck by Aj Pop B'atz's presence. He was everywhere. Leaving a popular touristic site in one of Chamelco's villages, I spotted a sign identifying the region, "The Land of Juan Matalb'atz'."<sup>1</sup> On the way back to town, I asked the taxi driver to explain the sign's meaning. As we drove on the winding mountain roads that connected the site to Chamelco's urban center, he explained who Aj Pop B'atz' was. Once in the

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<sup>1</sup> For a reason that remains unknown despite our years of research on the subject, the Spaniards changed Aj Pop B'atz's name from its original form (Aj Pop B'atz'), to Juan Matalb'atz', perhaps in accordance with his Catholic baptism and conversion. Sometime between the colonial era and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chamelqueños began to refer to him using this new name and continued to do so until 2010, when we petitioned the municipal government to change the name on the mural bordering his statue. Today, the mural bears his true and historical name and "Aj Pop B'atz'" or "Juan Matalb'atz'" interchangeably.

town center, I noted that a statue of Aj Pop B'atz' stands in front of Chamelco's Catholic church while a mural on the wall below proclaims, "Juan Aj Pop B'atz', cacique de caciques," 'Aj Pop B'atz', king of kings.' In my later fieldwork with Chamelco's marketers (Author 2014), I noted that vendors frequently identified Aj Pop B'atz' as the source of their power and prestige. His constant presence in daily life in Chamelco led me to seek information about him.

### **Friendship in San Juan Chamelco**

I arrived in Chamelco for the first time in February of 2004, when my original dissertation research project was postponed at the last minute due to a funding problem. I had studied the Q'eqchi' language for a month in the nearby city of Cobán the year before, and returned to the region in early 2004 to learn more about the Q'eqchi' way of life. After taking the bus to Chamelco early one morning upon the recommendation of colleagues in the area, I began to develop friendships with some of the women working in the municipal marketplace. I returned to visit them daily and shortly after, moved to Chamelco to embark on a project on Q'eqchi' women marketers. Among my first friends in Chamelco was Aura, a petite woman with a sharp wit who sold clothing in a stall in the back corner of the marketplace. Though I had to return to the US shortly after I met her, our relationship grew during my subsequent trips to Chamelco.

When I returned to Chamelco in 2005, I reconnected with Aura. She was expecting her fourth child, and was experiencing a difficult pregnancy. Sebastian, her husband, was employed as a translator for the Academy of Mayan Languages and travelled often for work, making him unable to go with Aura to her doctors' appointments in Cobán. Since my schedule was flexible, she often asked me to accompany her. Our friendship grew as we watched her first ultrasound of

her developing child, learned that he was to be a boy, and shared meals together during our outings. Eventually, Aura invited me to join her family in their home for lunch one Sunday, a tradition we've kept for nearly all of my years of fieldwork in Chamelco. Years later, she told me that I was the first non-family member to ever share a meal with her family in their home. She didn't know why that she felt comfortable enough to invite me, she said, but she was glad that she did. We became close friends and *comadres*<sup>2</sup> by sharing the ups and downs of our lives. I served as godmother for her daughter's First Holy Communion and quinceañera<sup>3</sup> and together we performed rituals to ensure the health of our family members. We were confidants, colleagues in my research, and almost like sisters.

Through my weekly meals with Aura's family, I got to know Sebastian, who had worked with various community organizations dedicated to the preservation of Mayan language and culture. Born in the rural village of Chitepey, Sebastian was raised by his mother after his father died of dysentery when he was only a few months old. While Sebastian and his five siblings lived in the poorest of conditions, his mother fought for her children to get ahead. She allowed Sebastian to move in with an older brother in Chamelco's urban center so that he could continue his education past the primary level at the Insituto Básico (the equivalent of middle of school) in Chamelco's urban center. After completing his education at the básico school in Chamelco, Sebastian studied to be a teacher at the Instituto Normal Mixto del Norte "Emilio Rosales Ponce"

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<sup>2</sup>In Chamelco, as in many indigenous Latin American communities, godparenthood, *compadrazgo*, is a way to establish social ties. When one serves as a godparent, it not only binds them to their godchild, but also to their godchild's parents (Vogt 1969). Individuals bound to one another through the ritual responsibilities of *compadrazgo* address each other using the honorific terms, *comadre* (for a woman) and *compadre* (for a man).

<sup>3</sup> A *quinceñera*, or a 'fifteenth birthday party', is a rite of passage that marks a girl's transition from childhood to adulthood. Most quinceñeras include a religious celebration followed by a social celebration.

in Cobán. After his graduation from this program, he earned a two-year degree in bilingual education at the Universidad Rafael Landívar in Guatemala City while he worked for NGOs and other community organizations dedicated to the preservation of Maya language and culture. He has since devoted his life to this cause, having served as the president of the Q'eqchi' branch office of the Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala (Guatemalan Academy of Mayan Languages) in Cobán and worked for the Academia's national headquarters in Guatemala City. Sebastian attributes his dedication for this work to his mother, who was extremely passionate about Q'eqchi' culture and history and shared her great knowledge with Sebastian and his siblings.

During our weekly lunches in their home in 2005, Aura, Sebastian, and I would discuss various cultural themes, from ancient Maya history to Maya hieroglyphic writing to the significance of contemporary Q'eqchi' rituals. While we informally discussed my research on Maya market women, Sebastian was reluctant to let me formally interview him, as he felt exploited by past researchers who had worked in the area. He felt that they simply wanted to “get information out” of him, but did not see reciprocal nature of their working relationship and failed to share any research results with the community. He would not support another research project, he said, without assurance that he, and the community, would see the results of the work undertaken. In my 2014 fieldwork in Chamelco, I asked Sebastian to explain why it was so important for anthropologists to share the results of our research with the community. He responded that when anthropologists fail to share their work:

it doesn't help us, it simply doesn't serve any purpose for us. It's more when their attitudes are like, when they the simply have the intention to do studies, like who are they, how are they, like we are objects. And I have always believed that the Maya

communities, just like other indigenous communities around the world, and of Latin America of course, that we are not objects. We are subjects, with rights. And we also deserve respect, just like any other person. And so, I knew, in my case, that it [anthropological research] should not be like that. At least the information, the investigation should be designed to, not to meet other interests, but rather to generate information. For our town, for the children, for the youth...”

Anthropological research should serve a concrete purpose for those who participate in it. Anthropologists who don't follow through on sharing their research are just for an academic degree, or to enhance their careers, he elaborated, and not for the benefit of the people with whom they work. To overlook the purpose of their research and to forgo sharing its results with the community was, in Sebastian's words, to show a lack of respect for the people with whom anthropologists work with in the field.

Over the course of several years, I internalized Sebastian's words and sought ways to share the results of the research I was undertaking in Chamelco with the community. I gave him digital copies of articles and reports I had written in English, content that I had acknowledged the reciprocal nature of fieldwork. Sebastian was unimpressed, however, pointing out that because my articles were in English, they were of little use to him or anyone else. My work needed to be returned to the community in Spanish or Q'eqchi', so that it would be accessible to those who had supported me throughout my time in the field. He was right. Our relationship remained distant since, as a graduate student and new anthropologist, I remained unsure of how to accomplish exactly what he asked.

### **Engaged Fieldwork and the Grupo Aj Pop B'atz'**

Sebastian's words continued to resonate with me as I sought ways to engage the local community in their own languages. In 2007, as I was completing my dissertation, I published a short article written in Spanish about Chamelco's market women in a Guatemalan magazine, *Verde, Verde Verapaz*. Around the same time, I began to read academic literature about the theory and practice of collaborative ethnography, (Lassiter 2005). Collaborative anthropology, as pioneered by Eric Lassiter and others, strives to engage local colleagues in the process of designing and conducting research. Rather than being the objects of anthropological research, these colleagues become co-researchers. In many collaborative projects, anthropologists work with members of the local communities to identify a project of mutual interest, often one that meets a community need. Together, anthropologists and their local counterparts outline a research plan, conduct research, and publish the results of their findings. Participation in collaborative research sometimes empowers indigenous communities by addressing issues of political concern and representing their cultures for a larger audience (Rivera Cusicanqui 1997; Vasco 2002; Rappaport 2008; Author 2010; Butler 2013; Hale and Stephens 2013; Perry and Rappaport 2013). In this sense, collaborative anthropology affords agency to the involved indigenous communities by including their voices in resulting cultural representations, working to overcome the pitfalls of traditional ethnographic research.

My discovery of the growing body of literature on collaborative anthropology coincided with a transformative meeting I had with a prominent Chamelqueño, Oscar Fernández, in late 2005. Oscar was well-known locally not only as the owner of a popular touristic site, but also as a very prolific author, having published numerous pieces in local magazines and newspapers about Q'eqchi' history and tradition. As I interviewed Oscar about the significance of Chamelco's marketers in local culture, the conversation turned to the story of Chamelco's

legendary founder, Aj Pop B'atz', a topic of great interest to Oscar, and one about which he had published a great deal. Oscar lamented the difficulty of investigating the story of Chamelco's great leader, stating that there were few existing, accessible historical records documenting Aj Pop B'atz's existence and that community elders who knew his oral history were reluctant to share it with anyone other than their families.<sup>4</sup> He proposed that we hold a meeting for community elders and activities to gather and discuss their knowledge of this historic figure and develop a plan for collecting more information to fill in the gaps in their knowledge. By pooling our time, resources, and connections, he said, we could work towards developing a more complete picture of Chamelco's great leader. I was instantly interested in Oscar's suggestion, as it seemed like a way to address the concerns expressed by Sebastian and others about the nature and results of anthropological research. It would be research for the community, done with the community. Unfortunately, I had little time left in Chamelco. I returned home in December 2005 without having followed through.

Nevertheless, when a National Science Foundation grant allowed me to return to Chamelco to continue my fieldwork in 2006, I immediately returned to Oscar's home. Oscar invited me and two of his friends, both of whom were interested in researching Chamelco's history, to his home for dinner one evening a few weeks later. During this first meeting, we

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<sup>4</sup> I have many theories about why community members remain reluctant to share the story of Aj Pop B'atz' with most people, especially outsiders. The first theory is that this reluctance stems from the terror and oppression of the Guatemalan Civil War, when Maya culture was forced underground by state-sponsored violence. People who publically demonstrated aspects of their Maya heritage were persecuted. Though the civil war ended in 1996, the fear of speaking publically remains. My second theory is that this reluctance to share their knowledge of Aj Pop B'atz' stems from the Q'eqchi' believe that things that are sacred cannot be shared with anyone or they will lose their sacred value. The Q'eqchi' word "muxuk" refers to this notion. Some Chamelqueños may believe that by telling the story of Aj Pop B'atz' to anyone outside their families, they make it profane.

talked about what we knew and what we'd like to know, what resources we had, and what we could accomplish in the time we had together. Over the next few months, the four of us visited community elders, looked for archival records, and met with local leaders in search of more information. We met biweekly to review what we had accomplished. My collaborators sought to find historical evidence to document Aj Pop B'atz's life and existence, while I interested in his contemporary significance. Though our research interests and approaches did not always align, we did enjoyed working together (Author 2010, 2013, under review).

For 2006-2010, we investigated Aj Pop B'atz' through both oral and written accounts of his life. The membership of our group fluctuated over time, as some members were unable to continue to meet with us due to personal or work-related commitments. A few other community members joined our efforts after learning of our work or offering access to historical materials they possessed. In the fall of 2007, one of my collaborators died suddenly of a heart attack in his home in Chamelco. In 2008, the founding member of our group, Don Oscar Fernandez, also died unexpectedly. The death of these two integral members of our group changed the nature and course of our investigations. Instead of searching for detailed accounts of Aj Pop B'atz's life, we sought ways to share our findings publically and promote the story of Aj Pop B'atz' in the wider community. While I had delivered a short presentation about our work to members of the Q'eqchi' branch of the Academy of Mayan Languages in 2006, we wanted to create a more permanent space for the community to learn about and celebrate their great leader. In August 2009, Don Otto Chaman, one of the original members of the Grupo Aj Pop B'atz', and I met with Chamelco's mayor and city council to propose an annual holiday dedicated to Aj Pop B'atz'. After our brief presentation and ensuing discussion, Chamelco's officials reviewed our



written petition and voted unanimously to declare August 3 of each year, “Aj Pop B’atz” Day.<sup>5</sup>

Though Sebastian did not work with the Grupo Aj Pop B’atz’ during our first few years of collaboration, I often discussed our research plans and progress with him and shared the materials that we found. Periodically, we would work together on the analysis of archival records that my other colleagues and I had located. He helped to guide the course of our work. Our collaboration intensified in 2009 as we strived to find ways to share our research findings with the local community, an endeavor that Sebastian found particularly compelling.

In 2010, we worked together closely to plan the celebration of the inaugural August 3 holiday. I returned to Chamelco in early July with two student research assistants after having received a large grant from my college to support Chamelco’s first public celebration of Aj Pop B’atz’. With less than a month to go before the holiday, we hit the ground running. After meeting and discussing our plans with the municipal government, we set to work organizing a Maya ritual ceremony and an ethnohistoric symposium honoring Aj Pop B’atz’. Sebastian was living in Guatemala City, where he worked as a project manager for an NGO pursuing cultural resurgence work, returning to Chamelco only on the weekends. Each weekend, we worked diligently to plan the symposium, invite guests, and plan ritual ceremonies to accompany the academic ones. We made visits to rural villages, hiked the mountain sides looking for spiritual guides to help lead our rituals, and met with municipal officials about their collaboration. When Sebastian returned to Guatemala City each week, his wife Aura and I planned meals for guests, delivered invitations, and bought all of the necessary materials for the upcoming event. I met with municipal officials, reporters, and other community members to coordinate their

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<sup>5</sup> We identified August 3 as the ideal day for celebrating Aj Pop B’atz’ annually because of its historic significance.

participation in the activity. We worked together in true collaboration to make the first celebration of Aj Pop B'atz' possible.

Our month of intensive collaboration paid off when, on August 3, 2010, more than 200 Chamelqueños, community leaders, teachers, regional officials, and national NGO representatives gathered in Chamelco's municipal room to join in celebrating "Aj Pop B'atz'" day for the first time. Late in the evening of August 2 until the early morning hours of August 3, we hosted an all-night Maya ritual ceremony dedicated to the memory of Chamelco's founder in a small, sacred location on the outskirts of Chamelco's urban center. Sebastian and I had consulted with a group of spiritual leaders throughout the month of July, and had acquired all the materials they needed to prepare a ritual "burning," designed to invoke the spirit of Aj Pop B'atz' and ask for his blessing for the day's activities. On the evening of August 2, these spiritual guides arrived in Chamelco to begin the ceremony, which was attended by small group of Q'eqchi' activists. When the ceremony concluded around dawn on August 3, Sebastian and the activists headed into the urban center to attend the Simposio Aj Pop B'atz', an ethnohistoric symposium in which a panel of experts delivered presentations on the leader's life, history, and contemporary significance. Following the presentations, we served all those in attendance a lunch of traditional Q'eqchi' foods while a children's group played music on the marimba. The day concluded with a public marimba concert performed by a professional group in the town square. Sebastian and I walked through the town center handing out tamales and explaining the day's significance to all those who were present. Though not everything went as planned that day, Sebastian and I were satisfied that we had succeeded in beginning to create a public space for Chamelqueños to talk and learn about Aj Pop B'atz'. My student assistants and I returned home the following day.

I spent the next year corresponding with Sebastian via email about the Aj Pop B'atz' project. We both agreed that we accomplished something with the August 3 holiday celebration, but we had a great deal more work to do, namely sharing the story of Aj Pop B'atz' with Chamelco's children. While we had given a public talk for elementary school students in Chamelco's urban center on August 2, we could not invite them all to the symposium due to space restrictions. Throughout my fieldwork in Chamelco, I heard teachers, school administrators, and students alike remark that Q'eqchi' history remains absent from school curriculum as there are few resources available to teach children about it. Sebastian and I discussed writing the story of Aj Pop B'atz' in a way that would be accessible to children. When my plans for a 2011 field season in Chamelco fell through due to political instability in the region,<sup>6</sup> Sebastian and I sought other ways to achieve this goal. We began to work on the project using Skype and email. In February of 2012, I began to write the story of Aj Pop B'atz' in Spanish for third to sixth grade students. Sebastian and I talked frequently to discuss the content and purpose of the text. We agreed that the story should present the information collected both through oral histories and through historical records. Once I completed a rough version of the story, I sent it to Sebastian for feedback. He suggested we include a list of references at the end of the book so that students and teachers could do additional research on the topic. He also wanted to include a bilingual version of Chamelco's Real Cédula, the 1555 decree where the

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<sup>6</sup> In early 2011, the Guatemalan government implemented a "state of siege" to fight drug trafficking in the department of Alta Verapaz (Arsenault 2011). The government reported that they did so specifically to allow the military to remove the Mexican Zeta cartel from the region. My friends in Chamelco reported, however, that in some cases, the government used the state of siege to target anyone they viewed as a threat to national hegemony. Arsenault (2011) reports that local agrarian activists were among those arrested during this state of siege despite the fact that they had nothing to do with drug trafficking. The political unrest prevalent in this region in 2011 led me to postpone travelling to Chamelco.

Spanish king named Aj Pop B'atz' "Lifelong Governor of the Verapaces," so that students would recognize the historical power of their great leader. After several weeks of emailing back and forth, Sebastian translated the book into Q'eqchi'. I had more than 700 copies of the book printed in Florida, and travelled to Chamelco with 500 of them late June of 2012<sup>7</sup> (Author and Si 2012).

My arrival in Chamelco coincided with the town fair, celebrated each June in honor of Chamelco's patron saint, San Juan Batista. We were invited to present our book formally to the town council and their distinguished guests during the town gala the day after my arrival. We were truly stunned by the community's reaction to the book. Those in attendance sought us out to thank us for our work. As I write elsewhere, I was overwhelmed by the community's reaction to the book (Author, forthcoming).

Following our presentation, several of the gala's guests thanked us for our work. The words of one man, a prominent local activist honored at the gala for his fight to preserve Chamelco's language and culture, made a strong impression on me. While I had known the man since 2004, our relationship had been strained. He, like others, felt exploited by previous investigators who conducted research in the region without sharing their findings with the community. I lived with his family for several months in 2005, but he nevertheless declined my frequent requests for an interview. We had worked together to organize some parts of the 2010 ritual ceremony and symposium, though our relationship remained tense, as he continued to be skeptical about my involvement in such activities. During the 2012 gala, however, he

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<sup>7</sup> Due to luggage space limitations, I could not take the rest of the books with me on this first trip. Instead, I took the remaining books to Chamelco in 2014.

approached our table and began to speak. “Thank you,” he said. “I was wrong about you.”<sup>8</sup> He proceeded to explain that he had doubted me, since he had no reason to believe that I’d act any differently than the dozens of other researchers he’d seen come through the community. With our book presentation, however, his feelings had changed, since I was one of the only researchers that ever “thought about” my friends in Chamelco and returned research results in written form. For this, he and others were grateful, he said. These words made a strong impact on me not only because of my past interactions with him, but because they reiterated the points Sebastian made to me in our earliest conversations about the nature of traditional ethnographic research. They emphasized the importance of and need for scholars to share the results of their research with the communities with whom they work and highlighted the value of collaborative research as a way to ensure that ethnography is purposeful and beneficial.

After the gala, Sebastian and I spent my two weeks in Chamelco visiting community organizations, a seminary, government offices, and libraries, where we donated copies of the book for public use. On one of my last days in Chamelco, Sebastian and I presented our book to most of Chamelco’s teachers and school administrators during the 2012 celebration of Día del Maestro, “Teachers’ Day.” More than 200 local teachers were in attendance at this event, held in a rural community on the outskirts of Chamelco’s urban center. Sebastian and I gave a short presentation about our collaborative work, about Aj Pop B’atz’ and his significance, and about the book itself. We explained how we had written the book and talked about how teachers could use the book in their classes. Following the event, we donated copies of the book to representatives from each of Chamelco’s schools.

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<sup>8</sup> I’ve reconstructed this conversation from my fieldnotes and memories as I did not record this interaction.

Returning to Florida a few days later, I reflected on my 2012 fieldwork in Chamelco. Out of my many trips to Chamelco and years of fieldwork, this brief period of fieldwork was perhaps the most transformative for me. As we spent countless hours meeting with librarians, NGO directors, clergymen, and government officials, I learned from Sebastian the virtues of patience and acceptance, as things rarely went as planned. Often, people failed to keep appointments, we arrived to find cultural centers closed, their directors missing and people seemed skeptical of our presence and desire to donate books to them. He never was bothered, concerned, or upset. He was always calm, positive, and optimistic. As someone with little patience, I learned from Sebastian to accept the progress we did make, and not to worry about what we couldn't change. He was right to think this way, as meetings with other Chamelqueños reinforced the significance of our work.

More importantly, however, I realized the value of collaborative research not only for enriching the quality of our academic work, but for supporting the interests of the communities with whom anthropologists work. Through our collaboration, Sebastian, the other members of the Grupo Aj Pop B'atz' and I were able to do things that we could never have done alone. For example, we successfully developed a rich and holistic picture of the life of Chamelco's great leader because we combined the information we acquired through our own experiences, knowledge, and interactions. The establishment of the August 3 holiday, the ethnohistoric conference in 2010, and the children's book all stemmed from this collaboration as well: none of us had the time, know-how, or resources to do it alone. While I had the financial resources to support the project and the time to execute it, Sebastian had the Q'eqchi' linguistic skills to perfect our written account of Aj Pop B'atz's life and the connections needed to make sure we had municipal support for our project. The contributions of other members of our group

similarly complemented our research. The overwhelming community reaction to our book presentation in June 2012 and support for our work inspired me to find new ways to engage with the community in future projects and to design my research to support Chamelco's interest in the preservation of Q'eqchi' history, language, and culture. Doing so would allow me to continue work towards fulfilling the promises I made to Sebastian during our initial meeting.

In June 2014, I returned to Chamelco to conduct an assessment of the Aj Pop B'atz' project. Though I left Chamelco in 2012 feeling inspired by our work and by collaborative research, I wondered if they had actually made a difference in local understanding of Chamelco's history or the life of the town's great leader. Had community members' knowledge of Aj Pop B'atz' increased? Were the children's books being used? Did children learn about their town founder in school? These were some of the questions I hoped to answer during my month of fieldwork in Chamelco. Sebastian had resigned from his job working in the national headquarters of the Academy of Mayan Languages in Guatemala City due to security concerns and had returned to live in Chamelco full-time. This meant that he had time to dedicate to working with me to assess our work. We set an ambitious agenda for the month we had together, planning to interview teachers, municipal officials, and others about their knowledge of our project.

Nevertheless, assessing the Aj Pop B'atz' project proved to be more challenging than we had anticipated. Though we developed extensive questionnaires and interview questions, we found it difficult to conduct the interviews with school teachers and municipal officials, as school was cancelled for more than two weeks in celebration of the town fair and many municipal employees simply didn't show up for work, preferring to stay home and watch World Cup soccer. When we did finally get to interview teachers at a sample of Chamelco's school,

many of them stated that while they remembered our book presentation two years before, they never received the book copies we had donated or that there weren't enough copies available to integrate the material into their curriculum. One of Chamelco's school superintendents shared that she was unaware of the books we donated and of the date of the Aj Pop B'atz' holiday, lamenting that she had no knowledge of the life of this important figure. The mayor, who offered his support for our project in 2012, told me that he was no longer interested in supporting cultural projects of any kind. I was extremely disappointed in what we were hearing, since it seemed like our work had little impact on the community.

In interviews with others, however, we got a different picture of the impact of the Aj Pop B'atz' Project. We found out that a committee of teachers in Chamelco's urban center had planned a school festival to roughly coincide with the Aj Pop B'atz' holiday. We were also invited to give a series of teacher training workshops, both in Chamelco and in nearby San Pedro Carchá. In these sessions, some teachers reported knowing of the children's book and using it with their students, giving examples of homework assignments they tailored around the book's content. They reported that our book was one of few available resources that taught children about their own history. While we did not have enough copies to give each teacher present one of the books, we distributed the book in digital form to those who expressed interest in using it with students. In addition to the positive feedback from teachers during these sessions, I received additional encouragement after my meetings with librarians at the public libraries both in Cobán and Chamelco. In both cases, librarians reported that the book was frequently used by students, who came in to research local history for school assignments. Interviews with representatives local NGOs involved in cultural and linguistic resurgence work revealed similar sentiments.



The mixed reactions to our project that we encountered during our 2014 fieldwork in Chamelco left me feeling confused about our work. While interviews with teachers and some local activists suggested some improvement in local understanding of the life and history of Aj Pop B'atz', other community members seemed unaware of, and uninterested in, our work. I shared my frustration with Sebastian each day as we'd drive back to Chamelco from our long days of work. He replied that I should not to feel discouraged, and that our project was a "long-term" one. The marginal improvement in Chamelqueños' understanding of Aj Pop B'atz' in just a few years time suggested that our project would succeed. Although the Guatemalan civil war ended in 1996, the Maya still face discrimination and bias in representation not only in government affairs, but in education as well. Cultural and linguistic revitalization projects took a long time to get off the ground, he said, due to the many obstacles they face.

While I found my 2014 fieldwork in Chamelco to be disheartening, Sebastian taught me that to find success in our collaborative work, we needed to be patient and optimistic. On my final day of field research, I interviewed Sebastian about our work together, about what we had accomplished and what we still needed to do. I asked Sebastian to talk about his perception of what we had accomplished since the inception of our working relationship:

What have we accomplished? I see for example, in the young people, maybe among the middle school students or the students in Chamil, San Luis, or maybe others, that now the children are almost starting to know [the story of Aj Pop B'atz' .]. And the other thing is that they are starting to be aware that the person was not Matalb'atz', but rather Aj Pop B'atz'. I believe that little by little we are going to go correcting this part of our history. Even if it's only with the act of correcting his name and recognizing who he was, with this correct name, I feel like we have achieved something.

I asked him to explain why it was important for Chamelqueños to know his Aj Pop B'atz's historical name rather than his mythological name used for decades and to know about his story more generally, "Because it is the base of our identity!" he exclaimed. "When we have talked, I have told you that our [the Q'eqchi'] problem is that we have not identified our leaders to be able to say look, I would like to be like him. It's like the schools themselves have taken this right and knowledge away from us." Sebastian felt that though the impact of our research might be limited in scope, it had provided an opportunity for community members who wanted to learn about their past to do so.

In this conversation, I also asked Sebastian to reflect on whether or not we had accomplished anything during our month of work together in 2014. He responded, "Well, I say that we have accomplished something just by going once again to spark people's interest [in Aj Pop B'atz'], [the interest] of the establishments, of the teachers, and of the university professors." While I felt disappointed in our progress, like our work had not made a difference as we had wanted it to, Sebastian saw hope and a glimmer of future success.

While many people we meet help to shape our academic careers--family, professors, friends fellow graduate students, the students in our classes--true mentors change the course of our lives. For me, my partnership with Q'eqchi'-Maya activist Sebastian Si Pop, has been one of the most transformative of my professional and personal lives. Our friendship has enriched my personal development through the kin ties we've established and the experiences we've shared and changed the way that I approach my academic career. Through our collaborative work on the Aj Pop B'atz' Project, Sebastian taught me to be as concerned with the people with whom I work as I am about my own career. As my mentor, Sebastian showed me that before embarking on any research project, one should consider its benefit to the communities who participate in it.

Because of the lessons I've learned from Sebastian, I remain committed to engaged ethnography both in my ongoing research in Chamelco and in my classes at Rollins College, where my students learn about the value of collaborative research in my courses through service-learning projects. My experiences working with Sebastian and my other collaborators in Chamelco thus suggest that for anthropologists, the most important mentors often are those we work with outside the confines of academia and with whom we share our lives in the field.

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