

Empowering the practitioners of the verbal arts: Lessons from a collaboration with Kaqchikel Ajq'ija'

Fitzgerald 2017 argues for the importance of documenting the verbal arts in three ways. First, the analysis of poetry, song, or ceremonial registers can shed light on a language's phonology. Data stemming from the verbal arts can also improve pedagogical exercises aimed at community members. Finally, documenting the verbal arts enriches the scope of revitalization efforts. In this paper, we discuss a case study that highlights a fourth and, we believe, increasingly urgent justification for documentation of this nature—namely, this work can empower practitioners of the verbal arts, providing them with a resource that can be used to respond to and dismantle prejudices levelled against them. Our proposal stems from an ongoing collaborative project with Kaqchikel Mayan *ajq'ija'* (spiritual guides) in Guatemala, a project to document the *ajq'ija'*'s ceremonies. As we describe below, Mayan *ajq'ija'* have endured a recent wave of violence and we contend that language researchers can play a role in responding to this violence. Our paper thus speaks directly to discussions in the literature about pursuing documentation projects whose development and outcomes respond to the needs of community members (Rice 2006, Florey 2008, Leonard & Haynes 2010, Dobrin & Schwartz 2016 a.o.), which can change over the course of a collaboration. In our presentation, we first describe the initial stage of our project, highlighting an event that triggered a shift in the priorities of our *ajq'ija'* colleagues, who allowed us as a result to share portions of the project's output. We then analyze data excerpts that showcase how discussing the style and content of ceremonial language can be used as a tool for countering narratives that have come to endanger practitioners of the verbal arts in the Mayan context.

The project, its initial purpose, and a shift in goals. In 2016, the lead members of *Waqxaqi' B'atz'*—an organized collective of Kaqchikel *ajq'ija'* based in Sumpango—proposed that we assist them in documenting a series of ceremonies celebrated regularly in the town's environs. The resulting documentation was to be used internally by the *ajq'ija'*—specifically, the video, audio, and transcriptions were to become a pedagogical resource for prospective members of the collective who needed to learn the structure of the ceremonies and the linguistic register used within. We secured a grant and documented 4 ceremonies in 2017, totaling 6 hours of audiovisual footage that was transcribed using ELAN. The project also included a training component where the guides learned to use the recording equipment and transcription software. Following an archiving process, all parties agreed that the recordings would not be shared without approval from members of *Waqxaqi' Ba'tz'*. All equipment then became property of the *ajq'ija'*, who thenceforth used the documentation as agreed upon and continued the documentation process without needing the input of external researchers.

An event, however, triggered a reevaluation of the project's goals. On June 6th, 2020, Tata Domingo Choc—a renowned Q'eqchi' Mayan spiritual guide—was burned alive after being accused of witchcraft in the town of Chimay. The murder was caught on tape and the perpetrators were arrested. Later, it came to light that religious fanaticism, fueled by rising neo-Pentecostal Christian sects, was a driving force behind the attack. The murder was unanimously condemned by *ajq'ija'* in Guatemala and drew international attention. Though members of *Waqxaqi' Ba'tz'* were no strangers to religious persecution, the savagery of the attack on Tata Domingo resulted in a change in perspective regarding the potential benefits of our project. Specifically, *Waqxaqi' B'atz'* members decided to support the discussion of their ceremonies in academic and informal settings, in Guatemala and internationally, to educate audiences broadly about their ceremonial practices. Here, we illustrate the kind of discussion that will form the core of our presentation, analyzing briefly the style and content of an excerpt of a ceremony that took place on June 20th, 2017.

Style. The poetic structures employed by *ajq'ija'* have long been a topic of scholarly interest, from Norman 1980's discussion of K'iche' to more recent studies (e.g., Vinogradov 2020 for Poqomchi'). The most famous characteristic of ritual speech in this regard is grammatical parallelism, be it syntactic, phonological, or semantic (Sam-Colop 1994; see Barrett 2017). Naturally, members of *Waqxaqi' B'atz'* are practitioners of this millenary tradition and employ parallelism productively. In the excerpt below, note how lines 7-8 form a doublet—the verbal stems are morphologically parallel except for the root (\sqrt{tzijoj} 'discuss', \sqrt{nataj} 'remember'). Lines 7-12, in turn, form a parallel sextet, where the noun phrase complement changes in each line (e.g., *taq qumub'al* 'drinking fountains', *taq siwan* 'ravines') but the definite determiner *ri* is held constant. Line 13 then harkens back to lines 7-8 and forms a triplet that envelops and closes the initial invocation of *Ajaw Tz'i'* (see below). By illustrating these poetic structures, we show that modern-day ceremonies like *Waqxaqi' Ba'tz'*'s can be construed as literary works that are in conversation with centuries-old pieces like the *Popol Wuj*, the latter which might be familiar to the audiences who could initially be prejudiced against the ceremonial practices of the *ajq'ija'*.

Content. While the style of ritual language used in ceremonies of this kind has received much *linguistic* analysis, we believe that the interpretation of their content from the perspective of the *ajq'ija'* themselves deserves similar attention. Put differently, we analyze excerpts from the ceremonies through the lens of the epistemological practices of the *ajq'ija'*, thus centering their knowledge and providing a perspective that eschews Western ways of knowing (see Leonard 2021 on this approach to language documentation). The data here is taken from a portion of the ceremony when the *ajq'ija'* alternate in calling upon each of the 20 sacred *Nawales*, offering gratitude as well as requests. The opening invocation of *Ajaw Tz'i'* that we chose to highlight here reveals the ecological preoccupations of the *ajq'ija'*—of particular interest is the diphrastric kenning (Hull 2012) used in line 7 'your hands, your feet', an expression that is interpreted as the four extremities of the Earth, its four cardinal points. *Ajaw Tz'i'* (literally 'Lord Dog') is in the words of the head *ajq'ij* "the caretaker dog of refined sense of smell", who protects the geographic features that appear in the invocation, and which represent all of Mother Earth by being named consecutively. Throughout the ceremonies, the *ajq'ija'* frequently touch upon humankind's duty to protect Mother Nature. By illustrating this preoccupation of the *ajq'ija'*, we make a connection to ongoing efforts by environmental activists to protect natural resources from megaprojects that have violated the rights of indigenous people and continue to replicate the extractive mindset that has characterized five centuries of colonial invasion (see Batz 2020 for discussion of the Ixil Mayan case).

1 Ajaw Tz'i'
2 Ajaw Tz'i',
3 Ajaw Tz'i',
4 loq'oläj ajaw,
5 chupan re jun loq'oläj ramaj wakami,
6 Ajaw Tz'i',
7 xqatzijoj ri aq'a' awaqän,
8 xqanataj ri alaj taq ixkanul,
9 ri taq qumub'äl,
10 ri taq siwan,
11 ri raqän taq ya',
12 ri nimaläj taq wuqub'äl,
13 qanataj wakami.

Lord Tz'i'
Lord Tz'i'
Lord Tz'i'
sacred lord,
in this sacred moment today
Lord Tz'i',
we discussed your hands, your feet,
we remembered the small volcanoes,
the drinking fountains,
the ravines,
the rivers,
the big drinking fountains,
we remembered in this moment.