“Picb’il”: digital repatriation and textile production as cultural revival in the Alta Verapaz of Guatemala.

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31 August 2018

This thesis is submitted
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Latin American Studies
To Grandma Haws,
for believing in me always
And to Reid,
for lifelong friendship
Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

Statement of Length

I certify that this thesis does not exceed the word limit of 80,000 words, excluding footnotes and bibliography, prescribed by the Degree Committee of the Department of Politics and International Studies.

Callie Vandewiele
31 August 2018
Cambridge
Abstract

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Textile production on back strap looms in the Maya region of Central America has continued uninterrupted for over three thousand years. Forming the backbone of a rich cultural tradition, the craftwork of Maya women remains an indigenous tradition in the Maya region to survive the Spanish conquest and subsequent waves of violence. For Q’eqchi’ women of the Alta Verapaz of Guatemala, textile production not only plays an important role in continuing indigenous culture, but also contributes to family and community economic life.

As artefacts of cultural production, Maya textiles are integral to collections across the world, and museums and academic institutions have sought after them since at least the mid-nineteenth century. In many cases, these collected textile objects have been divorced from their context. The names of the artists, and even the communities in which they were produced, have been forgotten or unrecorded. Contemporary groups and communities of Maya weavers often remain unaware that historic textile objects from their culture and communities are being held in museums in the United States, Europe and elsewhere.

This PhD research hinges on encounters between contemporary indigenous weavers in the Q’eqchi’ communities around Cobán in the Alta Verapaz of Guatemala and historic museum textiles by means of the visual repatriation of picb’il textiles; specifically, high-quality photographs of textiles in the collections of the University of Cambridge, the University of Oxford, and the University of California, Berkeley. This has resulted in weavers not only experiencing what they described during interviews as connections to their communities’ past and ancestors, but also reproducing lost textile patterns by copying the patterns present in museum textiles, which they did not recognise as being woven by modern weavers.

Relying on extensive interviews with weavers and local community members, I juxtapose the history of picb’il weaving in the region with the role that master weavers, or weaving teachers, play in the continuation of picb’il affecting weaving in local communities. The thesis elucidates how national or international markets and vendors affects the ability of communities to continue relying on textiles as part of the women’s income, as well as engaging with the role that textile collectors and museum buyers played in regional textile production in the past.

The first chapter is a short history of the region in which I worked. The Q’eqchi’ weavers I interviewed live in a complex and difficult political environment, one whose history is violent. This chapter seeks to situate the history of picb’il within the history of the Alta Verapaz as experienced and perceived by my informants. It includes a specific history of two of the communities in which I worked most closely with informants.

The second chapter covers the methodology used during the course of the PhD, including the research design process that led to the adoption of the methodology and the challenges that arose in the field. This necessitated a reconfiguration of the research model to ensure that it suited the circumstances. It is in this chapter that I address the concept of visual repatriation as part of a field research model. The third chapter addresses the role of gender in Q’eqchi’
communities and the role of weavers as gendered actors. This chapter draws from anthropological research and focuses on the way in which *picb’il* textile production is a gendered act of cultural preservation. The fourth chapter is an ethnographic overview of the *picb’il* textile and its cultural and ethnographic value. In this chapter, I address the construction of the textile as well as its spiritual and ontological significance to the communities where it is produced.

In the fifth chapter, I address the impact of international and tourist markets on *picb’il* production in the Alta Verapaz while considering the future of the textile as these markets continue to grow or potentially collapse. This chapter examines past “booms” and “busts” of *picb’il* production, and what may have driven those changes. The sixth chapter is on intangible cultural heritage and the reactions of the weavers and other informants I worked with to the museum textiles I visually repatriated. In this chapter, I address the value of visual repatriation and the role that visual repatriation can have in the preservation and recovery of disappearing or lost cultural heritage.

The final chapter encompasses the museum aspect of my work, including the value of engaging with museum objects in anthropological fieldwork and the impact that museums have had on the preservation of objects such as *picb’il* textiles. In this chapter, I address the role that previous researchers and collectors may have played in *picb’il* production.

As a whole, this thesis further examines the ways in which museums by means of their collections can engage with and be perceived by source communities and ethnographers working both within and outside the museum world. Through this research, it became apparent that weavers and local communities have a distinctive interest in museum textiles as being physical connections to a shared Maya heritage in the region. Community members and weavers view these textiles as tools that can be used to recover lost heritage, and repair cultural damage from colonisation and the ensuing centuries of violence and genocide.
Acknowledgements

It is a pleasure and an honour to recognise the community who have surrounded me during my time in Cambridge and in Guatemala. They have made this doctoral thesis possible. A PhD is more difficult a process than even the most aware students can know, and I could not have accomplished this without the support of more people than I can name here. Visibly present or not, their voices are echoed in this work.

First and foremost, I cannot offer enough gratitude to my supervisor, Dr Francoise Barbira-Freedman. She took me on as a student in 2014 after unforeseen circumstances left me at the beginning of my PhD without my planned supervisor. Despite my multidisciplinary background and winding path to academia, Francoise saw potential in my work. Her patience and support as I have learned (sometimes despite my own stubbornness) have been invaluable. Her open-minded approach to her own work and commitment to academic excellence are values I hope to emulate throughout my career. She has truly been a caring and committed guide and mentor.

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At a very young age I learned that as you leave every place, a part of your heart stays there, and you learn, as you grow, that none of us can live or work in isolation; what we accomplish is truly the sum of the support that our communities provide us. Thank you to my Cambridge ‘places’: The Gates Cambridge Scholars: you have made me believe in myself; to the Newnham College mcr, college staff and college fellows—especially Emma Mawdsley, Jenny Manders and Kate Fleet. I never imagined I would have a home so far from my own, and Newnham has proven to be not only a safe place to grow, but one that adopted me in every sense of the word: a special thanks to Penny and the Development Staff. Rachel, and the
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Glossary

Note: Q’eqchi’ terms, Spanish words used by my informants as Q’eqchi’ terms, or other words from Maya languages, will be italicised unless they are part of a book or article title or inside of a quote.

_Ajaw_: Leader/king

_Barrio_: Local neighbourhood

_Calada_: A style of weaving common to the Alta Verapaz

_Cofradía_: Catholic ‘brotherhood’ of community leaders.

_Corte_: Maya woman's skirt. Traditionally woven on a floor loom

_Eb’_: Pluralisation of Q’eqchi’ words

_Huipil_: Maya woman's blouse

_Hunabku_: Unified god spirit

_Ixq_: Woman

_Ixb’alam_: The moon goddess

_Junkab’al_: Q’eqchi’ kinship group, usually bound by blood or shared work ties

_Junta de directive_: Group of directors; cooperative leadership unit

_Kayajil_: Community market

_Kej_: Deer

_Kemok_: Verb: to weave

_Milpa_: Corn and bean patch, owned and tended to by family groups and essential both to sustenance and the cultural life of the _junkab’al_

_Nixtamal_: Ground corn mixed with water for preparing tortillas

_Picb’il_: White sheer weave with inlaid designs

_P’ot_: Q’eqchi’ translation of _huipil_

_Pueblo_: Community or village
**Qana:** A respectful term for an older woman, best translated as ‘grandmother.’ Often used as a title

**Rabin:** Daughter

**Rabin Ajaw:** Daughter of the King. Title of Guatemala’s indigenous beauty pageant, and title of the annual winner

**Tenamit:** Community or town

**Traje:** Indigenous Maya clothing or costume specific to geographic regions and linguistic groups

**Tzot:** A white sheer textile similar in construction to *picb’il* but lacking inlaid designs

**Tzuultaq’a:** Mountain spirits

**Winq:** Man

**Xorok:** Verb: to make tortillas (an important daily activity for women)

**Xul:** Animal, usually wild and associated with the uninhabited land around villages
Abbreviations

CEDEPCA: The Protestant Center for Pastoral Studies in Central America (El Centro Evangélico de Estudios Pastorales en Centroamérica)

CFICH: Convention for Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO)

CIA: United States Central Intelligence Agency

CREOMPAZ: Regional Training Command for Peacekeeping Operations (Comando Regional de Entrenamiento de Operaciones de Mantenimiento de Paz)

EGP: The Guerrilla Army of the Poor (Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres)

FEDECOVERA: Federation of Cooperatives of the Verapaces (Federación de Cooperativas de las Verapaces)

FGEI: Edgar Ibarra Guerrilla Front, Guatemala (Frente Guerrillero Edgar Ibarro)

IFAA: International Folk Art Alliance

IFAM: International Folk Arts Market

MAA: Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge


NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

ORPA: Revolutionary Organisation of the People in Arms. (Organización Revolucionario del Pueblo en Armas)

PGT: The Guatemalan Party of Labour (Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo)

REMHI: Recovery of Historical Memory Project (Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica)

UNESCO: The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

USAID: United States Agency for International Development

WWII: World War II.
Introduction

About the Moon. Ixb’alam. She is our grandmother. Because she was a weaver. But once she was a young woman. Ixb’ej in her father’s house. She wove every day, sitting on the porch under the roof. She would weave in the morning and in the evening. Using a candle as the light faded. It is bad luck to weave when the sun has set. But she did anyway. Perhaps she did not know. Or maybe it was not bad luck in that time. One day a young man, the Sun, passed by the house at dusk and saw Ixb’alam weaving in the candlelight at the corner of her house. He whistled, but Ixb’alam did not turn to see, because she was bent over her weaving, watching the thread grow. The Sun shouted, “Look here.” But Ixb’alam did not look, it was dark and she needed to concentrate to see her weaving in the light of the candle.¹

It is the end of August, 2016. I am sitting outside a long wooden board house with a packed earth floor. We are shelling corn with our thumbs for the tortillas which will make up most of our dinner. Anna Magdalena, matriarch to the family of seven children and four grandchildren, holds her youngest grandson in her lap while she tells the story of Ixb’alam, the first weaver, and her lover, the Sun. Anna Magdalena does not weave. However, each of her daughters does, as do most of the younger women in her isolated community of Santa María, just outside Cobán in the Alta Verapaz region of Guatemala. The story of Ixb’alam, as a myth centred on the experience of a young woman, is a defining part of how Anna Magdalena, and the half dozen other women who shared this legend with me situate the work of women weavers as culturally central to the life of Q’eqchi’ communities and Q’eqchi’ people.

Huipils (or blouses), woven in the picb’il style set the Q’eqchi’ women who wear them apart, not only from Ladino² women, but also from other Maya women. Throughout the Guatemalan highlands, textiles play an important role in the production of cultural identity. Women weave these blouses, or huipils, on back strap looms and each huipil ties its weaver and wearer to a specific language, region and even village. In the Alta Verapaz, the traditional huipils are made up of three panels of picb’il, a white sheer fabric, incorporating traditional designs inlaid into the textile, which are folded over and stitched together with a space cut out for the collar.³ Picb’il huipils are visual markers of indigeneity, a signal to the women who

¹The story of Ixb’alam was told to me by weavers in all the communities where I researched (field notes 2016).
²A Guatemalan term to refer to Hispanic non-indigenous Guatemalans with Hispanic ancestry.
³While many texts, particularly in the textile marketing world, refer to picb’il and similar textiles as ‘gauze’ these textiles are best classed as ‘open weave’ or ‘sheer.’ In this text these textiles, as well as archaeological samples or images where the weave structure is unclear, will be referred to as ‘open weave’ or ‘sheer.’ For a technical description of the structure of gauze textiles please see Irene Emery’s work The Primary Structure of Fabrics. An Illustrated Classification (1980 [1966]: 180-192).
wear them and the Ladino society they are surrounded by that Li Q‘eqchi’, the Q’eqchi’ people, continue not only to exist but also to assert their identities in the Alta Verapaz of Guatemala.

*Picb’il* textile production, once common across the Alta Verapaz, is today limited to a handful of communities and approximately two hundred and fifty weavers. Once disappearing, the tradition has experienced a series of mini-renaissances since the late 1970s. Today, the average age of a *picb’il* weaver is twenty-two and nearly two thirds of all remaining *picb’il* weavers live in three isolated communities near Cobán. Over fifty of these weavers can trace how they learned to weave back to a single woman who taught a large number of women to weave during the 1980s and 1990s. With the exceptions of her students, most women learn from relatives or in-laws. Weaving has been a part of her family’s economic income over generations.

Through ethnographic and interview-based work this thesis examines, first the value of *picb’il* weaving as part of a Q’eqchi’ specific heritage in the Alta Verapaz, and secondly, the value that digitally or photographically repatriated museum textiles can have to contemporary weaving communities. It posits that during the time period of my field research *picb’il* weaving was experiencing a shift in local value due to the introduction of significant international markets, and that the heritage value of museum and contemporary textiles can be of enormous importance to communities re-establishing lost heritage in the wake of suppression or violence. As a part of this research, I carried out a photographic repatriation of *picb’il* textile patterns in these same communities and found great interest on the part of community members in increased access to museum textiles through a variety of venues.

In a country where textiles have served, at least since the conquest, as markers of indigenous identity, this particular style of weaving is deeply connected to a pre-Hispanic past and culture, and greatly enmeshed with the economic futures of families where women weave it. For women *picb’il* serves as a connection between the past and present, and an anchor allowing weavers and indigenous women to philosophically and emotionally situate themselves in a tapestry of the history of not only Q’eqchi’ women, but Maya people as a whole.

The Q’eqchi’ language, which originated sometime between 500 and 750 AD, is among the oldest of the living modern Maya dialects. Spoken by just under a million people living across the western highlands of Guatemala in the departments of Alta Verapaz, Baja Verapaz, Izabal, and Petén, along with regions of southern Belize and Chiapas México, Q’eqchi’ remains the third largest Maya language still spoken and has the largest group of monolingual indigenous speakers in Central America (Wichman & Hull 2009: 877). Cobán, the centre of
the Q’eqchi’ world, is a centre for indigenous identity, political activism, and a base for cultural activity.

Politically, the Q’eqchi’ are one of the strongest Maya groups in Guatemala, and recognised as one of the most autonomous as well as, on and off, one of the most persecuted (Wichman & Hull 2009: 876). At the time of conquest, the Q’eqchi’ nation was described by a historian in the era as “...feroz y bárbara e imposible de domar y sujetar” (“ferocious and barbarous and impossible to pacify and subjugate”) (Remesal 1966[1619]: 311). The Spanish were less successful in subduing the Alta Verapaz compared to other regions of Guatemala, and eventually had to concede to local demands that priests and missionaries be the only outsiders allowed in the region. As a result, the Q’eqchi’ retained some semblance of autonomy for an extended period, including the instalment of the first indigenous governor for the Spanish crown in the Americas at the end of the 16th century in the figure of Don Juan Matalbatz (Aj po’op b’atz’) (Weeks 1997: 62; Kockelman 2003: 46).

Today the Q’eqchi’ conserve a rich cultural heritage and continue to make up a majority of the population within the department of the Alta Verapaz, thus ensuring that Q’eqchi’ remains the preferred daily language in Cobán, where Spanish is also widely spoken. In the outlying towns of San Pedro Carchá and San Juan Chamelco the vast majority of people speak Q’eqchi’ as their first, and often only, language. The Ladino population of the Alta Verapaz has grown exponentially since the end of Guatemala’s civil war in 1996, but despite this the Q’eqchi’ language remains an essential part of daily life, necessary for most professional positions and participation in local ceremonies and holidays. There is a strong sense in the local municipal centres that while the powerful elected positions are held by Ladinos, las comunidades, or ‘the communities’ voting power is considered significant and important. The Q’eqchi’, like most modern Maya groups today, feel a deep connection to the ancient Maya of the past. While many Ladinos refuse to recognise even genetic links between modern and ancient Maya, the Pan-Maya movement and many Maya communities publicly espouse this connection between themselves and the people they refer to as “nuestros antepasados,” or “those who came before us.” Contemporary Maya communities use cultural and spiritual traditions, shared with the ancient Maya, to authenticate claims to indigenous heritage, land rights and control of the commodification of Maya traditions, textiles crafts and other artefacts.

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4One educated Ladino informant, when presented with an article on Maya linguistic links between proto-Maya and Q’eqchi’, responded by asking incredulously, “Do you really want me to believe that the great people who built those temples and those cities are the ancestors of people like Pedro Ca’al who sells corn down the street?”
The vast majority of Q’eqchi’ women in the region continue to wear traditional clothing, or *traje*, on a daily basis. This includes the heavy, sturdily woven cotton skirts (or *cortes*) belted with a braided cord, and loose lacy *huipils* designed in the style of *picb’íl*, although often colourful and sewn from machine produced lace fabrics. For more formal events and special ceremonies (weddings, burial, etc.), women use more expensive traditional *traje* such as *picb’íl*. The *picb’íl* weavers of the Alta Verapaz make up a small, but significant, number of women whose skill as weavers situate them in the centres of both this cultural continuity through clothing, and an international textile market. At the core of this, are the weavers in Samac, Santo Domingo and Santa María; nearly all of whom have access to selling textiles in tourist markets in Antigua, and outside Guatemala at the International Folk Arts Market in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

These weavers are connected to historic weavers through the traditional knowledge that they share. Historic textiles, some of which are owned and preserved by museums, can also provide a connection with the past. This thesis investigates both of these connections. It is driven by the voices of the women who shared their opinions, their histories, their houses, their language, their food, their chickens, and their time with me during both my first period in Guatemala in 2008-2009, and during my second year in 2016. During the fieldwork for my PhD I conducted semi-structured interviews with over ninety *picb’íl* weavers in the Alta Verapaz and worked closely with master weavers and community leaders in four indigenous communities to conduct historical research and situate this textile tradition. For this research, I coordinated with FEDECOVERA, a ‘cooperative of cooperatives’ and local organisation representing indigenous rights. I interviewed winners and local participants in Guatemala’s indigenous beauty pageant, *Rabin Ajaw* and also attended the International Folk Arts Market (IFAM) in Santa Fe to learn more about the international market of *picb’íl* textiles. Furthermore, I interned as a volunteer on a semi-weekly basis at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) at Cambridge and travelled to Berkeley California to interview weaving experts and volunteers involved in the Hearst Museum. This research casts light on the value and importance of *picb’íl* textiles and furthers understanding of the connections between museum objects and source communities.

The first chapter of my thesis is a brief history of the Alta Verapaz. Guatemala, today home to over twenty-six indigenous groups as well as a large Ladino population which has a

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5Federation of Cooperatives of the Verapaces.
6Closed at the time of my visit for earthquake safety structural fittings.
complicated and difficult history—arguably, many disparate complicated and difficult histories. This chapter seeks to provide background information on the national and local environment for these weavers and their communities. It will elucidate the major changes that have impacted the community life of the weavers I work with and their ancestors.

The second chapter includes an overview of my research methodology, including the photographic repatriation of historic textiles to the communities in which I worked. It traces the unexpected challenges I faced during my research as the project expanded from interviewing around two dozen weavers in one community to over ninety in eight communities. It is here that I establish ontological links between contemporary communities and historic textiles and begin to engage with digital repatriation.

Chapters three and four come directly from the interview and participant observation stages of my fieldwork. They establish the importance of gender in Q’eqchi’ life and of picb’il in the Alta Verapaz. These chapters lay the groundwork for chapter five, which addresses current changes in textile production driven by international market demand, as well as engaging with the stresses that a significant international marketplace puts on tightly knit isolated communities in the region.

The final chapter (six) looks at the role of museums and collectors in Guatemalan textile collections in the west today, and the theoretical arguments for museums continuing to engage in outreach work and in digital and virtual repatriations. It seeks to pair the lens of the museum with that of contemporary Q’eqchi’ weavers.

The conclusion addresses the views of my informants on those museums and their desire to be more engaged with historic textiles held in museum collections. I also offer thoughts on strategies that museums could engage in for similar research in the future as well as reflecting on the tools already available to museums and communities pursuing digital or virtual repatriation projects.

This thesis relies on extensive ethnographic research for its theoretical grounding. The value of both contemporary and historic picb’il textiles is rooted in the methodologies of value employed by weavers and their community members. To that end, as a researcher, I have sought to interweave the narratives shared with me, of community history and life, with those documented by other researchers and historians. I have aimed to honour the ways in which the weavers and communities that I have worked with understand and situate themselves within Guatemala and the world without losing sight of the standards set by the academic community.

Many of the stories shared with me are deeply personal in nature, and I have honoured the requests of individuals to use pseudonyms when requested, as will be noted in the text. As
some of this thesis deals with community conflict around access to markets and international sales, including deep divisions within small and tight-knit families, I have sought to represent the situation as best I can and as needed for the clarity of this research, while honouring the privacy of my informants and respecting the sensitive nature of some of the information shared with me.

While I was carrying out fieldwork, a member of one of the communities, and one of the informants I spent the most time with, was able to rebury the remains of her father which were identified five years after they were discovered in a mass grave on a nearby military base. During the days leading up to the ceremony and funeral, and in those after, several of my informants shared personal and graphic accounts of the community violence that they suffered during Guatemala’s genocide. I have chosen to leave these accounts out of my thesis as they are only peripherally related to my research and they were shared during community events to which I was invited as a friend and observer, rather than as a researcher. Other researchers, notably Daniel Wilkinson and Kristen Weld, have gained permission to share direct and detailed stories of the kind of violence evinced by the Civil War and genocide, and for a deeper understanding of the direct impact this period had on communities I cannot recommend their work highly enough.

Through this ethnography I also seek to contribute to the process of decolonisation of museums, and to follow in the footsteps of community involvement and participation as modelled by forward thinking institutions such as the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) at the University of Cambridge and the intellectual work done on the creation of knowledge through museum ethnographies by researchers such as Kavita Singh, Margot Blum Schevill, and Amiria Henare. Much of my research work has come to fall under the unintentional auspices of what R. Gross refers to as ‘intellectual activism’ (although I prefer the term ‘intellectual academic’) in *The Independent Scholar’s Handbook* (1995). Following in the model of Robert R. Janes, I seek to “…make existing knowledge more accessible, understandable and useful to others.” Janes justifies this work by stating that “…intellectual activism creates the conditions for fresh discoveries through the conjunction of challenging ideas, or stimulates others to discover” (2008: 23). As will be seen in my first chapter, my research did not at first set out to create spaces of encounter, but through the nature of the data collected, and the responses of my informants, it has done exactly that.

This thesis establishes the value of digital or photographic repatriation of textile objects, sometimes too fragile to be moved, to source communities. It posits that museum objects
themselves can be central in the production of, or continuation of heritage. It establishes that for the weavers of the Alta Verapaz, the information contained within museum textiles is invaluable. That as a repository of lost history, these objects facilitate the connection which Maya people seek to have with long-dead ancestors and as such can authenticate the continuation or re-establishment of a disappearing heritage.
Chapter One: Land of True Peace: A Brief History of the Alta Verapaz

The Sun was enchanted by Ixb’alam. She was a woman and she was a worker and a weaver. So he started passing by her house each day as he went to hunt. But Ixb’alam rarely looked up from her weaving. And the Sun became embarrassed. Some days he returned from his hunts with deer, or other animals and other days he walked by Ixb’alam’s house with nothing. His hunting bag empty. He was ashamed on those days. And so he filled the skin of a deer with ashes, so that every day he could pass by her house carrying back a trophy.

But Ixb’alam was not fooled by the Sun.

Built Geography

To fully understand the decline and re-development of picb’il weaving in the Alta Verapaz, it is important to situate the textile historically before we situate it socio-culturally and economically. The communities in which I conducted interviews fall into three categories: Municipalidades, Aldeas, and Cooperativas, and are all in the department, or state, of the Alta Verapaz of Guatemala. Located at the northern end of the Guatemalan Highlands, the Alta Verapaz serves as a border between the more populous south of the country and the jungle lowlands of the Petén. The region is geographically isolated, the main road from Guatemala City finally being paved in the early 2000s. Economically it is the second poorest of Guatemala’s departments and one of the least developed areas in the Central American region. Travel from Guatemala City to Cobán, the regional capital can take anywhere from six to 18 hours, depending on traffic, accidents, mudslides, etc. Roads are frequently blocked, and coach drivers are killed on a semi-regular basis by drug gangs who run extortion rings using the threat of violence to ensure regular payments of ‘safety fees.’ Between the high cost of travel, and the relative risk, travelling south out of the region is rare for most people living in the smaller villages.
Well off the ‘beaten path’ of Guatemala’s tourist destinations, visiting the Alta Verapaz involves using local ‘chicken buses,’ or the Monja Blanca, a regional line which transits between Guatemala City and the Cobán area. It is unusual to encounter another gringa or gringo, particularly working in non-urban areas. While there has historically been a USAID and Peace Corps presence in the region, most foreign residents or visitors are missionaries or mission groups from Evangelical or Protestant churches. Within the Alta Verapaz, local regional and municipal governmental structures often have a more significant impact on the lives of communities than does the Guatemalan national government.

**Regional Governmental Structures**

**Municipalidades** (Municipalities) are larger towns that serve as the civic and regional centres for sub-departments in the larger department of the Alta Verapaz. The four major Municipalities in which picb’il textiles are produced are: Cobán (urban pop. 94,300), Chisec (urban pop. 12,755), San Pedro Carchá (urban pop. 11,941), and San Juan Chamelco (urban pop. 11,944) (Cobán Municipal Office).

These towns serve as markets and cultural centres for the outlying municipal areas and *aldeas*. People living in the
municipal centres have access to electricity, trash service, running water,¹ good cell service, and even the Internet. Most people living in the municipal centres are engaged in the wage economy, and many have better access to education than those living in the aldeas or outlying rural areas. As the urban centres are also the locations of most major markets, or kayill eb’, they serve as nexi at which the Q’eqchi’ communities interact. Q’eqchi’ remains the first language for all four municipalities. However, for individuals living in the municipal centres, a working command of the Spanish language has become increasingly important since the end of the civil war as a trade language.

**Aldeas** (Villages) are semi-rural communities that usually comprise two hundred households or less, aldeas are the most traditional Q’eqchi’ community type still in existence. Most aldeas have access to communal running water, but very few have regular electricity or cell service, and almost none have paved access roads or internet service of any kind. Q’eqchi’ aldeas are primarily monolingual, and education is only provided up to the sixth grade. The aldeas make up the overall rural populations of the municipal areas: Cobán (rural pop. 156,375), Chisec (rural pop. 56,550), San Pedro Carchá (rural pop. 136,393), and San Juan Chamelco (rural pop. unknown²) (Cobán Municipal Office).

To this day, the community structure of the aldea is organised around a council of community elders, who act as leaders with responsibility for settling disputes, managing community issues, and liaising with outsiders (Guatemalteco or Gringo) about access to a community or community members. Aldea groups have their own spaces in the larger municipal markets where they vend together. Often a van or pickup truck is owned communally by the aldea or a handful of members provide transportation in areas where public transit is non-existent. All aldeas in the Alta Verapaz have Catholic churches (always painted white), while priests oversee between eight and ten congregations, placing daily services and weekly activities under the care of Cofradías and their members.³ More recently, evangelical churches have been making inroads to Q’eqchi’ communities, and their brightly coloured church buildings are beginning to appear throughout the Alta Verapaz. These evangelical churches are far less tolerant of Maya spiritual practice than the Catholic Church, and often the presence of

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¹Running water is disappearing throughout the Alta Verapaz because of the drought conditions. However, the infrastructure remains.
²I was unable to find reputable data on the San Juan Chamelco municipal population, and the two census workers I spoke with in the Alta Verapaz commented on the ‘unfriendliness’ of Chamelco communities to government documentation and the municipal office in San Juan Chamelco did not have population statistics to hand during any of my repeated visits.
³A Cofradía is a group of Catholic lay parishioners within a community who care for a church, its saints and the community’s celebrations and ceremonies. Local Cofradías use traditional ceremonial indigenous dress, or traje, and are often community leaders. Both men and women can be members of Cofradías.
an evangelical minister in a traditional community leads to extended conflict between evangelical congregations and local practitioners of Maya spirituality. Evangelisation is, in many ways, the new face of economic development and cultural repression.

The *aldeas* of the Alta Verapaz are viewed with distrust by many Ladino elites in Guatemala City and even in the municipal centres because extrajudicial justice is not uncommon. Labelled as “lynchings” by outsiders and by the national press, these events are often referred to as “trials” within the communities and are highly structured processes of justice that occur outside the Guatemalan government’s purview. The “trials” often take several days to complete, involve many community witnesses giving either testimony or opinion, and conclude with some kind of punishment, usually corporal, for the “convicted.” On rare occasions, the “trials” end in extrajudicial executions (Sharp 2012). Communities have killed Ladinos from other regions of Guatemala, international tourists, and members of their own or neighbouring communities (Weston 2011: 79). Ongoing Maya spiritual practice and the existence of justice systems outside the state’s purview are evidence of spaces outside Ladino power and control that have been created in many Q’eqchi’ *aldeas*.4

**Cooperativas** (Cooperatives) are landowning communities that earn income using the land that they live on. In the early 1970s, two Guatemalan governments, under President Colonel Carlos Osorio and Brigadier General Kjell Garcí, attempted minor land reform in some of the outlying departments of Guatemala as a response to ongoing civil unrest. As a part of this reform, unfarmed but fertile land owned by the Guatemalan government, particularly in the Alta Verapaz and Quetzaltenango regions, was given to indigenous communities living on that land to form agricultural cooperatives. Many of these tracts of land were former German plantations that had been confiscated in the early 1940s when US interests forced many German families to flee Central America (Kinzer & Schlesinger 2000: 39-42).5 The establishment of cooperatives was designed to pacify indigenous communities thought to be supporting the guerrilla movements throughout the western highlands and to serve as an unspoken form of grievance redress for communities who had lived in virtual slavery since the mid-nineteenth century. Communities were given hope for a future that was more secure than serving as

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4A handful of *aldeas* (Campat and Chamil, notably) have grown into communities that better resemble towns than they do *aldeas* and, in the case of Chamil, have begun to agitate for their own political autonomy as a Municipality.

5The US government was concerned about the presence of Nazi sympathisers on the North American continent and sought to force all German speaking and/or German allied people out of the region. These fears may not have been unfounded, as the largest Nazi party in the western hemisphere was in Guatemala (Friedman 2003).
migrant labourers picking coffee, sugar, or cardamom on large fincas (or farms) in the lowlands (Interview FEDECOVERA staff member June 2016).6

Because of their differing histories and structures, weavers in municipalities, aldeas, and cooperatives have had varying levels of access to local and foreign markets, and Guatemala’s turbulent twentieth century has impacted each type of community differently. The three cooperatives which I worked with were located in a small geographic region outside Cobán, on land that once belonged to a single German finca owner, Gustav Helmrich, from the mid-1880s until his death in the early 1930s. As a result, much of their recent history is similar or shared.

One of the cooperatives formed during this period in the Alta Verapaz was the community of Samac, which was granted ownership of large tracts of lands around the village to farm coffee and cardamom. By the 1980s, most of these communities, including Samac, had again been dispossessed as Guatemala’s civil war escalated under the government of General Ríos Montt to an all-out war on indigenous individuals and communities. This war went far beyond simply stripping land ownership from these recently created cooperatives; in most cases, armed forces destroyed town centres and forced households and families to abandon the community, with members either spending the remainder of the 1980s in forced resettlement villages run by the Guatemalan military or surviving in the Guatemalan highlands (McClintock 1985: 132-135; Interview Samac Community President Francisco Ca’al).

As a part of the 1996 Peace Accords, communities that had been granted cooperative ownership of agricultural lands were allowed to return to their homes and to re-establish their cooperatives (FEDECOVERA Interview). Other communities were allowed to purchase land, or petition for land grants to form new cooperatives (Santo Domingo de las Cuevas and Santa María among them) (field notes 2010). The cooperative model in the Alta Verapaz is a structured and formalised version of the aldea community model. Individuals have access to, or ownership of, a small parcel of land where they live and grow milpa (a combination crop of corn and beans). The community as a whole takes turns sharing labour for cash crops, which are usually coffee and cardamom. Community councils are elected for periods of between one and three years. These councils, which include a president and secretary, not only oversee the financial functioning of the cooperative but also manage internal disputes and serve as gatekeepers or arbiters between the cooperatives and the outside world. While the offices are elected positions within the community, these elections are often simply a legitimisation for

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6Many of my FEDECOVERA contacts requested anonymity.
government officials of an informal power-sharing governance model used by communities in which elders essentially take ‘turns’ in specific leadership roles.

In the Alta Verapaz, most of the cooperatives are members of FEDECOVERA, a “cooperative of cooperatives” that serves as a liaison between cooperatives and the Guatemalan government, foreign investors, researchers, etc. FEDECOVERA is much hated by finca owners and the local elite within the Cobán region, as it is an organisation perceived as inflexible and blamed for driving wages up and encouraging worker agitation. FEDECOVERA employees and cooperative members were victims of targeted disappearances and massacres during the Guatemalan civil war (as were many organised labour groups). As a result, cooperative members appear more likely than individuals living in aldeas to have been victims of violence during the war (field notes 2016).

SAMAC & THE Q’EQCHI’ COOPERATIVES

Today the Q’eqchi’ of the Alta Verapaz are proud of their long history of resistance and have a reputation among the Ladino population for intractability. While San Juan Chamelco is the historic centre of the Q’eqchi’ region, Cobán was made the municipal seat by the earliest Spanish conquistadors and rulers and has remained so since. During fieldwork I conducted interviews with picb’il weavers in a variety of communities. In San Juan Chamelco and San Pedro Carchá municipalities, I interviewed weavers in their homes. In the Cobán municipality, the only places where there are women who still weave picb’il are three Q’eqchi’ cooperatives (Samac, Santa María & Santo Domingo) to the south of the city. I was able to conduct extensive interviews in all three cooperatives.

Villagers in these cooperatives share a close and interlinked history. Samac, the largest and best organised of the three, is now a coffee cooperative. It first appears in historical records when the land (and its inhabitants) were granted to a German entrepreneur, Gustav Helmreich, in the late 1870s as a potential coffee plantation and cardamom farm. Helmreich was one of many Germans migrating to Guatemala during this era on the promise of cheap or free land and ‘affordable labour.’ By the beginning of WWII Guatemala’s Nazi Party was the largest in the western hemisphere and the German School in Cobán was one of the best in the region. Although details of Samac’s specific history during this era are scarce it is evident from historic photographs, and the ruins of a sprawling plantation house, a series of gravestones written in German dating from the 1880s to the 1930s, the remains of a nineteenth-century coffee mill, and a Catholic hermitage, that the Helmreich farm was extensive and productive. Local oral
tradition indicates that a majority of the current families living in the Samac Coffee Cooperative today believe that their grandparents or great grandparents “worked for the Germans,” and that their great-great-grandparents lived in the same region, but were not affiliated with los alemanes (the Germans). Land ownership reverted to the Guatemalan government sometime between the 1930s and 1950s with the death of the Helmreichs and the eviction of many other German residents of the Alta Verapaz to Europe during World War II (Friedman 2003: 115-120). It remains unclear how many, if any, of the residents of Samac, Santa María, or Santo Domingo were directly impacted by the Agrarian Reform Law of the 1950s through the gifting of a land grant.

In 1972 (or 1973) the coffee cooperative of Samac was officially formed. The Guatemalan government was under extreme pressure to re-engage the population after the bloodshed of the 1960s, and the formation of cooperatives in high-conflict areas was used as a strategy to pacify populations seen as volatile. The land was granted to a collective group of citizens who formed a cooperative board of directors to manage the development and agricultural production of coffee and cardamom. Those directors travelled regularly to Guatemala City for government training in agricultural practices—which they were required to complete before they could receive an official land grant (oral history Samac Community Council 2008).

**General History**

Prior to the 1520s, Q’eqchi’ speaking people were concentrated mostly in what is today the Alta and Baja Verapaz of Guatemala. There is evidence that the municipality of San Juan Chamelco served as the population epicentre and important trading town of the Q’eqchi’ region in the Post Classic era, prior to the conquest (Kistler 2013b: 285). After the 1519 arrival of the Spanish in what is present-day Guatemala, the Maya of the Baja and Alta Verapaz fought fiercely to protect their region. By the 1530s, the highland mountains of Central Guatemala had gained a violent reputation that led the governor of Guatemala, Alonso de Maldonado, to call the region “the land of war.” Governor de Maldonado all but gave up on traditional conquest of the region because of the high casualty rates he faced each time he sent soldiers into the mountains of the Alta and Baja Verapaz. Dominican friar and pacifist, San Bartolomé de las Casas, seeking a more peaceful form of conquest in regions known for their intractability, chose the Alta Verapaz of Guatemala for an experiment in colonisation through Catholic missions in the mid-1530s. Las Casas led a team of Dominican friars who established mission
centres and began converting indigenous people. This effort led to the construction of a series of churches (many still standing today) and a new nickname for the region: “eternal peace,” or Verapaz (Wagner 1967).

**HE OF THE FIVE THREADS: SAN JUAN CHAMELCO IN THE LATE SIXTEENTH AND EARLY SEVENTEENTH CENTURY**

S. Ashley Kistler has done a great deal of work specifically on the San Juan Chamelco-centric, historical understanding of the conquest period (late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries), particularly examining the history and legends surrounding the life of the first indigenous governor of the Alta Verapaz, *Aj Po’op Bat’z*, known in Spanish as Don Juan Matalbatz. Kistler’s documentation of Q’eqchi’ understandings of this history through the legend of *Aj Po’op B’atz*, or the Leader of the Five Threads, provides a counter-narrative to the Spanish story of conquest. It is a story that local *Chamelqueños* are often eager to share when asked, as this particular narrative gives the Q’eqchi’ pueblo as a whole, and Chamelco specifically, a sense of agency and control over what surely must have been a harrowing time period.

*Aj Po’op B’atz* was born in a cave after the *tzuultaq’a* (mountain spirits) of the Verapaces saw the death of Q’eqchi’ leader Tecun Uman. They realised that while the defeat of “li Q’eqchi’,” or “the people,” was inevitable, it was necessary that the people should not forget who they were, or else cease to be in contact with the *tzuultaq’a* (mountain spirits). *Aj Po’op B’atz* was born to guide the Q’eqchi’ in such a way that their military defeat did not mean the end of their being Q’eqchi’. He was known as a man who meditated, often in caves, communicating regularly with the *tzuultaq’a*. When he was appointed the “chief of chieftains” of the Q’eqchi’, it was on the advice of the mountain spirits that he converted to Catholicism after convincing his fellow chieftains to allow the Dominicans into the Alta Verapaz (Kistler 2013b).

According to the story told within the communities, *Aj Po’op B’atz* was appointed governor of the Alta Verapaz as a Catholic and sent to Spain as a representative of the local Maya to meet the Spanish king. Mirroring other indigenous/European encounter-stories, *Aj Po’op B’atz*’ is said to have refused to kneel before the Spanish ruler, instead greeting him as one king to another. Rather than punishing him, the Spanish king gifted *Aj Po’op B’atz* with three bells, to be hung in the church in San Juan Chamelco. In a twist of magical realism,⁷ the

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⁷Very much in the vein of Márquez, Esquivel, Allende, Borges and others.
Q’eqchi’ leader grew sick from the boat’s movements, and meditated. During his meditation, he asked the tzuultaq’a he knew in the spirit realm if he could travel through their world, under the earth, to return home. His request was granted. So Aj Po’op B’atz took the bells into the spirit world. Two of them he brought to San Juan Chamelco, the third he left under the ground, between the two worlds, in case one of the first two should ever break. It pushed up the earth above it into a bell shape with its impatience to ring, and now sits under the town of “Sa Campana” (within the bell). Aj Po’op B’atz did not die. He was instead re-absorbed into the earth while meditating in a cave outside of present-day Chamil, deep in the mountains, after the eb’tzuultaq’a were satisfied that the people (li Q’eqchi’) would not forget them and that while conquest had been inevitable, the destruction of the history and belief that made some people Q’eqchi’ would not be (Kistler 2013b; field interview Margarita Beb 2016).

For many Chamelqueños, this alternative history of the conquest of the Alta Verapaz re-centres the Q’eqchi’ experience as the dominant narrative in a clash of cultures. It valorises Q’eqchi’ spirituality while providing Q’eqchi’ Catholics with an ontological and personal justification for engaging in a plurality of spiritual practices. This narrative also places the geography of the Alta Verapaz at the forefront of Q’eqchi’ survival. Li eb’tzuultaq’a, the mountain spirits, ensured the survival of the Q’eqchi’ way of life at the time of conquest by providing the Q’eqchi’ with a “third way.” Contemporary Q’eqchi’ people can then establish their indigenous identities by seeking out innovative and ever-evolving methods of cultural survival, which include the integration of external philosophies and lifestyles—not to the detriment of being Q’eqchi’, but as a tool to ensure the continuation of the culture.

**THE LIBERAL REVOLUTION & GERMAN SETTLERS OF COBÁN**

It was during President Barrios’ “Liberal Revolution” shortly after 1871, that the government opened Guatemalan land to external immigrants, specifically Germans, for settlement and cheap purchase. Upon arrival in the region, these immigrants could expect to become plantation owners in exchange for “developing” the regions in which they were granted land by the Guatemalan government. Much of the land that they were granted was inhabited. Communities and villages farmed and lived on land throughout Guatemala without land titles or recognition of ownership. This was especially true in the Verapaces.

From the 1870s to the early twentieth century, German immigrants drove the production of a coffee industry in the highlands of Guatemala, concentrated in and around the Mam highland city of Quetzaltenango and the Q’eqchi’ city of Cobán. These immigrants included
not only Gustav Helmreich but also Rodolfo Dieseldorff, and the Reich family, all of whom, or their descendants, would directly play a role in the *picb’il* production of the Alta Verapaz (field notes 2010 & 2016). As one of the first German families in the region, the Dieseldorffs gained control of vast tracts of land around Cobán and Carchá, much of which they still own today. They have been particularly influential due to their financial capital and the land they own and control in the region (Falcón 1970).

The presence of German landowners is remembered as a very distinctive time by community members across the Alta Verapaz. Elderly weavers in Samac reported that the local “patrón” would not allow women to weave as it took up too much working time. One weaver surmised (repeatedly) that perhaps the only reason women in Samac did not remember their grandmothers weaving was because of this ban on textile production. All the older interviewees in areas owned by German *finca* owners, have distinct memories of the presence of German plantation owners in the Alta Verapaz. Weavers’ grandmothers were born before the Germans came, and their grandchildren were born after the Germans left. Community members are acutely aware of the economic success that the *fincas* experienced, and of the fact that the workers were in no way beneficiaries.

As an older weaver told me of her very young childhood:

I was nine before I had shoes, because the owner (*el dueño*) paid the men nothing. My mother and my father would both go pick coffee all day for him, and we could barely eat, let alone buy things like shoes or pay for a bus or pick-up truck to take us to the market. So we walked, with our bare feet.

The presence of German landowners in the communities has left an indelible mark, and stands as a complicated layer of colonisation in the Alta Verapaz. As many German immigrants arrived in the 1880s and 1890s to take advantage of land grants, the relationship between coloniser and colonised was renegotiated around land ownership at the turn of the twentieth century. Some German landowners married or had children with indigenous women, and the presence of a German Mestizo community in the Alta Verapaz still exists today. Many older community members in the cooperatives where I worked are the children of people who lived and worked on the German plantations, often directly for Helmreich.

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8 About the latter I can find little data.
9 In an unrecorded personal conversation during which she did allow me to take notes.
The elders of Samac talk about their village having existed before the Germans arrived. One informant in Samac stated that her grandfather had been born “before el dueño” and that Samac had been a village before it became a German finca. When asked about the community history, members of the Poou family—the children and grandchildren of one of the current cooperatives founders—spoke first and foremost of how both men and women were forced to grow and harvest coffee for the “right” to stay in their houses and grow their own milpa. The community attitude towards los alemanes (the Germans) is however somewhat ambivalent.

They tell stories of families who could not afford to buy food or fix broken houses; of men working long hours picking coffee and having their fingers chopped off if they were suspected of stealing. Women were not allowed to weave so that they would have more time to pick coffee and contribute to the finca’s economic production, and instead were forced to purchase imported huipils through the coffee finca itself. Stories of horrific punishments and evictions likely served to help keep local populations docile on individual fincas throughout this era.

Everyone I spoke with agreed that living standards in the community as a whole had improved (“we have shoes now,” “we sell our own crops,” “we have a school”), but many remembered Helmreich and his wife almost fondly. Their graves, well cared for and recently re-entombed in concrete, still sit on a hill overlooking the long flat valley that the cooperative centre occupies next to the plantation house. This house, the visual epitome of the economic and power differential between los dueños y los mayas in the community is today crumbling to the ground.

US ECONOMIC INTEREST

The history of the communities does not exist in a vacuum, and much of the upheaval and violence suffered in Samac and Santa María can be traced to national conflicts in Guatemala, and international interference by the United States. Around the turn of the twentieth century, the United Fruit Company, along with the Standard Fruit Company (now Dole), had begun to wield major influence throughout Central America. As the Monroe Doctrine10 became entrenched in US political theory, these companies brought with them the might of the US military, as well as economic and governing force (Grandin 2000).

10A political ideal from the 1820s in which the United States laid out an interest in the politics of neighbouring countries on the American continent as direct interest to the United States, specifically outlining a moral obligation to intervene if any European nation became involved in Latin American politics (Sexton 2011).
During this time, Guatemala’s infrastructure was completely redeveloped. A railway system was created (with a huge push from the Germans in Cobán and Quetzaltenango)\(^\text{11}\) and telegraph lines were extended across the nation: many of these improvements were funded and owned by major US firms or German interests. During the Estrada presidency, crackdowns on indigenous peoples and communities were particularly harsh. If men failed to work their “allotted” time on private, usually foreign-owned fincas, they could be jailed or forced into labour with their families evicted from their homes. The legacy of this instability continues in land rights battles to this day, with communities continuing to fight to regain or maintain control of land on which they have lived for generations.

In 1931 Jorge Ubico won the presidency in an uncontested election and began a fifteen-year authoritarian rule. As one of the generals in Guatemala’s army, Ubico quickly conformed with his predecessors’ support of US corporate interests in Guatemala and further suppressed labour organisers and indigenous community leaders. Having cut his teeth in Guatemalan political leadership as the governor of the Alta Verapaz, by the time he took the presidency he already had a reputation for cracking down on crime, dealing ruthlessly with the Maya, and urbanising rural communities (De Los Ríos 1948).

Pledging a “march toward civilisation,” Ubico imagined himself as Napoleon and garnered the nickname “Little Napoleon of the Tropics” (De Los Ríos 1948). He routinely wore his general’s uniform and militarised Guatemala’s civil services. He sought to create an “efficient” government and ruthlessly pursued that goal. During Ubico’s fifteen-year tenure, the United Fruit Company became the most powerful company in Guatemala, and perhaps the most influential company in Central America. Import duties were dropped, and the Ubico government offered a variety of tax exemptions.

By the early 1940s, Ubico’s policies had led to widespread unrest. Members of Guatemala’s growing middle class—made up of newly fledged intellectuals and professionals—formed a successful uprising that led to Ubico’s resignation from office. Eventually Guatemalan activists gathered enough support across the nation and from sympathetic groups in neighbouring Central American states to overthrow the government. Led by Jacobo Árbenz they assaulted the national palace. As a result, in 1944 Guatemala had its first truly democratic election. In October of that year a decade-long period known as Guatemala’s “Democratic Spring” began, as Juan José Arévalo won the presidential election.

\(^{11}\)To the extent that German descendants living in Cobán today take full responsibility for the building of a railroad and believe that their eviction from the region is the direct reason the railroad was dismantled.
(Kinzer & Schlesinger 2000: 29-32). Riding a wave of popular support, Arévalo immediately set out to institute major reforms in the minimum wage, education, suffrage, and labour. Before even reaching the mid-term of his presidency, Arévalo found himself at odds with the US government, the United Fruit Company, Guatemala’s old elite, and the Catholic Church due to massive land reforms (Kinzer & Schlesinger 2000: 32-40).

By the time WWII was in full swing, the US had pressured Guatemala into deporting many of its German-Guatemalan citizens and freezing the accounts and lands of those remaining. While some Germans would return to Guatemala after the war and regain control of the land they had been granted, most would not. In the post-war years, the impact of the Germans in Guatemala was significantly limited in comparison to the past (Friedman 2003).

Despite its populist undertones, many of Arévalo’s reforms did little to impact Guatemala’s agricultural labourers and indigenous peasantry, which made up the bulk of the population, especially in the Alta Verapaz. He was slapped with the label “communist” and faced over twenty-five attempted coups during his short term in office, many funded by the United States (Kinzer & Schlesinger 2000). That unrest, and the accompanying rhetoric thrown at the Arévalo government from US corporate and other international interests, was not enough to derail the course of Guatemala’s future and, in 1951, Jacobo Árbenz—hero of the revolution—was elected to the presidency in a landslide. Árbenz did more than simply continue the reforms started by Arévalo in the 1940s. He set his sights higher and pushed through a piece of legislation designed to help bring Guatemala’s poor agricultural workers and indigenous people forward as equal members of the nation’s economy. He passed a law that would become known as Decree 900 (17 June 1952). This land reform act had the potential, or so he and his supporters believed, to change the landscape of Guatemala both literally and figuratively (Kinzer & Schlesinger 2000: 54-56). This law, despite its short-lived existence, is perceived locally as having had long-lasting impact on regions such as the Alta Verapaz, where a glimpse of the possibility of land ownership sparked a new cooperative movement later in the 1960s and 1970s. Margarita Poou, local weaver, daughter of a “cooperatavista,” and founding member of Samac, spoke frankly during interviews about the value of land ownership:

[My father] went every month into Guatemala City with some of the other founding members. They had no money and all the families would help send them. They would not give us our land if they did not go to workshops and trainings. Sometimes they had to walk from here into Cobán during the night, before they could get to the city. Before this we worked the coffee, but earned nothing. But my father knew owning the land our parents
and grandparents had worked on would mean we would not be so poor. (Interview Margarita Poou June 2016)

Decree 900 legislated that unused parcels of land sized two hundred and twenty-four acres or larger would be divvied up and redistributed to local agricultural workers—mostly indigenous peoples. Landowners were compensated the stated tax value of the land with government bonds, which could be exchanged for cash. Between 1,500 and 1,700 estates were divided among almost a half a million families, or about one-sixth of Guatemala’s population at the time. In a nation where, at the time of Árbenz’s election, 2% of the population had control over 70% of the arable land, of which only 12% was being cultivated, agrarian reform had the potential to remake Guatemala as a nation. Árbenz and his liberal government saw a redistribution of wealth and capital as essential for moving Guatemala from a feudal economy to a capitalist economy, and in the brief eighteen months that the law was in effect, it revolutionised Guatemala and the lives of many Guatemalans. Called “one of the most potentially successful land reforms in history,” Decree 900 was the first major attempt in Central America to jumpstart an economy by re-enfranchising indigenous communities and families who had been deprived of land or autonomy since the Spanish conquest. In addition, Decree 900 had the potential to skyrocket Guatemala’s agricultural output, since only unused land was to be redistributed (Kinzer & Schlesinger 2000: 52).

With the advent of Decree 900 and the beginning of land transfers, the idea of land ownership as an achievable goal for campesinos living in villages across Guatemala began to be realised. For the first time, communities and individuals saw that it was possible to shift political will and government mechanism into land redistribution for indigenous peoples. The idea of land ownership paired with traditional cooperative lifestyles led small communities to begin pursuing the legal ownership of the land upon which they had lived for generations, and planted the seed of the idea that the aldeas and communities of the highlands were not inevitably shackled to an exploitative relationship with large landowners in order to continue living in their homes.

The United Fruit Company, displeased with the loss of 600,000 acres in Guatemala’s Boca Costa region, brought a complaint home to the US Department of State, presenting Árbenz as a communist sympathiser and the land reforms as Soviet outreach into the Americas. The United Fruit Company was joined by other major corporate interests such as the Wm. Wrigley Jr. Company in boycotting certain Guatemala exports in protest of the land reform and lobbying the US government to intervene and bring “democracy” to Guatemala. In 1953, the Central
Intelligence Agency (CIA) began a steady, and powerful, campaign against the Guatemalan state. Enlisting Guatemalan military exiles and funnelling hundreds of thousands of dollars into smear campaigns against the Guatemalan government, the CIA established, bit by bit, the building blocks for a US-funded and -led coup (Cullather 2006).

The CIA’s campaign, with covert support first from Truman’s White House, then Eisenhower’s, was a multi-tiered paramilitary operation aimed at ending Guatemala’s “democratic spring” and reinstating a political structure that was friendly to US corporate interests in the region. An ex-military leader, Colonel Castillo, who was living in exile at the time of the uprising, was handpicked to lead the coup d’état, which resulted in the overthrow of Guatemala’s government. Facing increasing military threat in the early 1950s, and with nowhere to turn, the Guatemalan government purchased armaments from Czechoslovakia in 1953, an act that was widely portrayed in western media and throughout Central America as proof that Guatemala was in league with the Soviet Union, thus planting Guatemala squarely opposite the United States in geopolitical terms (Cullather 2006: 77-82).

Lawmakers in the US pointed directly to the Monroe Doctrine as evidence that the CIA and US military actions in Central America were not only warranted, but also justified in the face of what they called a “communist revolution” in the “backyard” of the US. This in turn led to an increase in domestic support for US military involvement not just in Guatemala, but across Central America. As 1954 dawned, tensions between the United States, Guatemalan paramilitary groups, and the legitimate Guatemalan government worsened and, on May 20th of that year, the US Navy sent out regular air and sea patrols around Guatemala under the auspices of stopping the shipment of Soviet weapons, and to “protect” Honduras from a Guatemalan invasion. It wasn’t long before these patrols turned into a blockade, and every ship entering or leaving Guatemalan ports were boarded and searched (Kinzer & Schlesinger 2000: 160-164).

Less than a month later, on June 18, 1954, Colonel Castillo led a military force into Guatemala, called the “Ejercito de Liberación,” four hundred and eighty right-wing military supporters and CIA-funded mercenaries entered Guatemala at five points between the Guatemala-Honduras border and the Guatemala-El Salvador border. Trained saboteurs targeted key bridges, telegraph lines, and points of communication ahead of the invading force, and throughout the invasion a US funded radio station, the Voice of Liberation, falsely reported the fall of the Guatemalan government and the size of the invading army. These reports blatantly

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12This was in fact untrue, Guatemala had no alliances with the Soviets.
ignored the initial defeats of Colonel Castillo’s mercenary army in areas such as Zacapa and Puerto Barrios. Despite these initial defeats, Castillo had the might of the US military behind him, and an air raid began on June 27, 1954, which targeted military installations and cities, and even destroyed a British cargo ship in the process of loading Guatemalan coffee and cotton for sale in Europe. By this time, the Guatemalan air force had defected to join the CIA-led paramilitary. With the nation in turmoil and a military officer revolt beginning, President Árbenz resigned from his post and requested exile to Mexico (Kinzer & Schlesinger 2000: 199-201).

Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas rode into Guatemala City victorious and military government was reinstated in Guatemala, thus ending the “democratic spring” and land redistribution once and for all. Over the successive weeks, various local and military uprisings would appear and be subdued as five separate military juntas were created and dissolved, until finally Castillo gained the presidency of Guatemala and began reshaping the nation. The first of these acts was to purge many of the democratic reforms pushed through in the preceding decade, beginning with the agrarian reform. In tandem with this action, Castillo instituted a brutal suppression of agricultural workers and the nation’s poorest communities, including those of the Alta Verapaz, that contributed to an uprising in 1960 of Árbenz supporters hoping to bring back Guatemala’s decade of democracy. This sparked a thirty-six-year-long civil war which would be marked by genocide, brutal repression and the deaths or disappearance of over two hundred thousand people (Garrard-Burnett 2010: 6-9).

On November 13, 1960, a concerted uprising against the Guatemalan government began, initiated by junior military officers sympathetic to the left-leaning aims of the deposed Árbenz government. The initial revolt was a failure, and the survivors fled into the mountains in Eastern Guatemala and renamed their movement “MR-13,” or “Movimiento Revolucionario 13 Noviembre” (McClintock 1985).

By 1965, the Guatemalan Armed Forces were engaging in targeted bombing campaigns across Eastern Guatemala, and the US military was offering assistance in the campaign to wipe out resistance across the country. This assistance included the presences of Green Berets and CIA advisors to provide training and military support in fighting the guerrilla insurgency. In 1966—after yet another regime change in the presidency as President Julio César Méndez Montenegro assumed office—the first major military offensive against the insurgency was launched. Targeting militants in the department of Zacapa—closely affiliated with the Alta Verapaz—future president Colonel Carlos Arana Osorio employed a “scorched earth” policy for the first time in the fight against the uprising. His reasoning was that if the insurgency had
no civilian base from which to work, revolutionary groups could more easily be flushed out and destroyed. Therefore, civilians were targeted in the fight against the FAR, particularly indigenous civilians and communities, as they were viewed as supporting rebel groups. The same year, “Operation Clean-up” began targeting dissidents in urban areas, and for the first time in Guatemalan history abductions and secret executions entered the sphere of normalcy. In March of 1966, thirty individuals associated with the PGT were kidnapped and tortured. As far as their families were concerned, they had been “disappeared” by Guatemalan military security, marking one of the first occurrences of organised major mass disappearance in Central America, and signalling an escalation in state violence. Before long, labour leaders, student activists, journalists who reported too widely, and academics were disappearing. No individual suspected of leftist sympathies was safe from either the urban disappearances (called White Terror) or the scorched earth policy being meted out against entire communities in rural regions. Death Squads, such as the Mano Blanca, became household names (McClintock 1985).

As the Guatemalan government cracked down, another military commander assumed the presidency. Colonel Carlos Arana Osorio began the domination of Guatemalan government by the forming of the Institutional Democratic Party, a military organisation. Prior to assuming the presidency, Osorio gave an infamous speech in which he stated, “If it is necessary to turn the country into a cemetery in order to pacify it, I will not hesitate to do so.” (Dunkerley 1988: 425). The Osorio government continued the military persecution of indigenous communities and the disappearance of urban citizens suspected of leftist leanings; these killings marked a major turning point in the way in which the Guatemalan government dealt with opponents (McClintock 1985).

In 1972 Amnesty International classified Guatemala as being in a state of “human rights emergency.” With fewer and fewer active insurgents or dissidents to target, many of the death squads that were operating in Guatemala's urban centres began targeting those suspected of crime. It is estimated that, by 1974, 20,000 individuals had been killed or disappeared by government or military death squads and violence had spread to communities across the highlands.14

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13Disappearances were a common tactic used by military dictatorships in Latin America throughout the twentieth century. Individuals would be arrested, often at night on their way to or from home, and often violently, and then never seen again. Families were not informed of these arrests and individuals were rarely tried. Killed, they simply “disappeared” physically and bureaucratically, as their deaths were never recorded.
In the aftermath of the complete suppression of MR-13 and PGT, the mid 1970s were relatively calm. Economic injustice persisted, and an election was held. This window of temporary peace opened a door for the development and redevelopment of major labour groups, including the Committee for Peasant Unity, which united indigenous and Ladino workers in fighting for better working conditions on plantations throughout Guatemala. Labour rights organisations, such as FEDECOVERA (officially founded in 1976), were coming into being, as Q’eqchi’ people continued to organise and agitate for agricultural worker’s rights in the Alta Verapaz. On February 4, 1976, Guatemala suffered a 7.5-magnitude earthquake that took the lives of almost 25,000 people and highlighted the government’s inability to function in the face of catastrophe. It became clear that thousands had died due to a lack of physical infrastructure, and thousands more suffered as Guatemala’s government ignored or was unable to provide relief to the poorer barrios in the major urban areas. The aftermath of the earthquake led to the organisation of local community groups who banded together to dig out the living and dead from the rubble, chase looters off, and rebuild their communities. Facing little to no repression, this solidarity emboldened Guatemalan citizens and citizen groups to strengthen, and to begin demanding for social reforms (Levenson-Estrada 1994).

A new guerrilla front also appeared in the wake of the 1976 earthquake. EGP, or Guerrilla Army of the Poor, emerged from the Mayan regions in Northern Guatemala, and for the first time there was a group whose members and leadership came primarily from indigenous backgrounds. In 1975, a military commissioner was assassinated, and in retaliation the government kidnapped church and cooperative workers in the Q’eqchi’ department. Shortly before the election of Lucas García in March of 1978, President Jimmy Carter cut off much of the US military aid to Guatemala, citing the Foreign Assistance Act stating that aid could not be given to a nation that “engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognised human rights” (Cunliffe 1989: 121). That, coupled with the Sandinista Revolution unfolding in Nicaragua, motivated the Guatemalan military to push once again for repression of those seeking to foment change in Guatemala. The García government obliged, and in May of 1978 the bloodiest period of Guatemala’s civil war began with the Panzos Massacre in the Alta Verapaz, where 150 Q’eqchi’ individuals were gunned down by Guatemalan special forces.¹⁵

In Guatemala City and other urban areas, disappearances once again became common and the death squads that had largely remained silent in the previous few years were suddenly

dropping bodies off at morgues again. Reported disappearances between January and November of 1979 totalled almost 4,000 individuals. Violence escalated and on January 31, 1980, Quiché and Ixil farmers stormed and occupied the Spanish Embassy in protest of the murders and disappearances of people in Uspantan. The Guatemalan government’s response was to attack the building with incendiary explosives and then to trap those trying to flee inside the building. Called the “defining event” of the Guatemalan civil war by some, this incident saw the death of thirty-six people, and as a result the Spanish government terminated diplomatic relations with the Guatemalan government, citing human rights concerns (Arias, 2007).

By 1980, thirty to forty Guatemalans were being killed daily by government forces. Trials were unheard of, and García’s Vice President Francisco Villagrán Kramer resigned to protest against the human rights abuses. The continuing violent crackdown on any and all dissidents radicalised portions of Guatemala’s resistance and increased public and local support for insurgent guerrilla forces (Kinzer & Schlesinger 2000). Despite initial success, the Guatemalan insurgency was vastly outgunned by the Guatemalan military, which organised a massive offensive in response to the uprising. With the Reagan Administration ramping up US support for the Guatemalan military government with over ten million dollars’ worth of military equipment and a newly funded CIA covert operation, an emboldened military began the mass killing of unarmed civilians. Villages were razed to the ground, crops and animals were destroyed, and a reign of terror in the highlands intensified. Slowly, the Guatemalan government lost internal support, and on March 23, 1982 a coup d’état occurred, and General Efraín Ríos Montt took over the presidency of Guatemala (Garrard-Burnett 2010: 53-55).

Ríos Montt proved to be a ruthless and effective military leader. He “cleaned house” internally, suppressing supporters of General Lucas early on, intensified the “scorched earth” policies of the earlier regimes, and instituted “model villages” or “camps” where civilians displaced by the violence were rounded up and forced to settle. Civilians were conscripted into militias, and “food for work” programs were instituted across the nation.16

Ríos Montt lost the presidency on August 8, 1983, when Minister of Defence Óscar Humberto Mejía Victores led a coup, claiming that Montt’s extreme devotion to protestant

16According to the Guatemalan human rights commission in 1984, Ríos Montt’s first month as president, was one of the Guatemala’s bloodiest. Documents show that 3,300 people died; however, it is estimated that several thousand more were probably disappeared and killed during this time period. Sexual violence was introduced as a military tactic, and there are hundreds of cases of death squads killing children in front of their parents or specifically targeting pregnant women. Bodies were interred in mass graves or left out in the open as warnings to supporters of the insurgency across the nation.
religion made him unfit to be president. By the time Mejía got hold of the reins of power, the Guatemalan military ruled the majority of the nation with an iron fist. Hundreds of thousands of indigenous people lived in refugee camps in Mexico, forced into “model villages” throughout the highlands, or hid in the mountains. As international attention focused more and more on the actions of Guatemala’s government and military, President Mejía agreed to form a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution for Guatemala. Despite this renewed focus on governmental reform, extrajudicial state violence continued throughout Guatemala (Jonas 2000).

In the late 1980s the Cerezo government publicly denounced political violence and endorsed a newfound urgency to re-establish the rule of law. A human rights committee was established, and the Office of Human Rights Ombudsman was formed: an office that would play a pivotal role in the documentation of human rights abuses and the prosecution of guilty parties. The legal system underwent a series of reforms. However, Cerezo faced at least two major coup attempts as the economy collapsed and Guatemala’s population once again began protesting against corruption and violence. In 1990, Jorge Antonio Serrano Elias was elected, marking the first election in Guatemala since the end of the Democratic Spring. Serrano further helped implement civilian control over the military and began rebuilding the Guatemalan economy. Serrano attempted to illegally dissolve Guatemala’s congress in 1993, but was forced to flee the country. The remainder of his term was carried out by the Human Rights Ombudsman, de Leon. De Leon used his time in office to tackle corruption and help foster the peace process being brokered by the United Nations between Guatemala’s government and the remaining insurgent forces (Jonas 2000).

LOCAL EXPERIENCES

The community of Santa María was founded sometime in the late 1880s or early 1890s. Based on a series of oral histories told to me in 2016, it appears that during between 1885 and 1895 a total of six young couples with children left Carchá and settled in Santa María, where their descendants have continued to live, with the exception of the period during the civil war when they were forcibly resettled to the “model village” of Samac. The community population has grown because of a rising birth rate and the relocation of members of smaller, more isolated communities following disruptions to local life such as floods and the Guatemalan genocide.

Juanita Chen Coy, a weaver who is more than ninety years old, describes the settling of Santa María as occurring in response to “one of the violences” faced by the Q’eqchi’ people.
She classifies many events as “violences,” from the evictions in the 1980s to the act of conquest in the sixteenth century. For her, all of these events are linked and ongoing. It occurred during a period of unrest in the distant past in Carchá when the founding families of Santa María chose to leave Carchá (“and their brick houses”) to settle in the valley that is now Santa María. She thinks that there were five or six families and is insistent that when they found the valley in which Santa María now sits, it was “empty”—a place where they could create “un pueblo Q’eqchi.” One weaver talks about her grandmother telling stories of entering the valley as a small child and being surrounded by “giant trees” and encountering “pumas” (cougars) and “venados grandes” (large deer).17

Don Chus Macz, a former cooperative president, member of the REMHI18 team in Cobán, and the only survivor of the 1982 civil war disappearance in Samac, explained to me that it was not only the series of acts of violence that drove their ancestors from Carchá, but also the fact that the people in Carchá at that time were losing their language and identity. In his telling of the founding of Santa María, the “grandparents of [his] grandparents” were looking for a place where no one would care if they spoke only Q’eqchi’ and lived Q’eqchi’ lives. In exchange for being allowed to settle on the land, the early residents of Santa María did six months of agricultural labour every year for Gustav Helmreich.19 This was in stark comparison to other Q’eqchi’ villages, where work was imposed upon communities in order to forestall eviction and violence. Rosario Coy (a weaver to be discussed later) recalls the stories her mother told her of the community when she was young. With the valley full of trees, and nowhere to plant corn, her mother watched the trees come down and houses being built. When they first left Carchá, Rosario says that they were looking for an inaccessible place, far from a city and with at least one mountain inhabited by a tzuulfaq’a, who would look after the community.

Contemporary community members today talk about isolation as a form of cultural protection. Don Chus Macz reiterated to me through many conversations that:

Here we are Q’eqchi’. Yes, there is no water and no electricity and life is hard, but we speak our language and remember our grandparents. Here our children do not forget who they are. We are building our community, and houses with pistos (floors). I

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17In referring to the deer as “large,” this weaver is creating a distinction between this type of deer and the smaller, more common, non-native muntjac deer that inhabit the region today. This sets the story of her grandmother in the remote past and emphasises the “Maya-ness” of the experience, by situating it in a Maya ecological context prior to the disappearance of the native deer.
18Recovery of Historical Memory Project carried out by the Archdiocese of Guatemala in the early 1990s resulting in a publication documenting Guatemala’s genocide.
19Placing settlement of the valley around 1885.
have my house and a house for my daughter and her children. Because here we are un pueblo de los Q’eqchi’s (a community of Q’eqchi’ people).

For many of my informants, the 1970s and the 1980s represent distinct phases in Guatemala’s period of violence. For the people living in cooperatives, the events of the 1970s represent a growing awareness of national and local threats paired with the excitement of opportunities made available through land grants to cooperatives. This was an era that, while rife with violence, seemed hopeful for many of the communities in the Alta Verapaz. The genocide that was to come seemed far from inevitable, and even as the government cracked down on movement between communities, the land grants and education programs provided hope that indigenous rights and community autonomy were still respected. While many of these events were national in nature, they were also harbingers of local violent incidents to come, and for many of my informants they served as reminders that the indigenous people of Guatemala were engaged in the same struggle, despite spiritual, language, and cultural differences.

During this era the cooperative of Samac was disbanded and the area where the original cooperative had been headquartered was used as the centre of one of these ‘model villages.’ Members of the Samac cooperative were forced to relocate their houses to a small centralised area where the school yard stands today, and residents from outlying communities (such as Santa María) were forced to relocate to Samac where they were heavily guarded, their movements controlled and their activities monitored. Families saw their homes and milpa fields destroyed in this process. Many people spent over a decade living in the ‘model village’ and some never returned to their home communities. Their experience was not unique, as thousands of indigenous survivors of the genocide spent years or decades in displacement.

Many men in the communities outside Cobán were involved in local political organising, and massacres devastated almost all families. FEDECOVERA retains a great deal of respect locally for having survived the violence and continuing to represent Q’eqchi’ agricultural labour rights throughout that era and into the present. For my interviewees, this period seems disconnected from the eras directly preceding or following it. Weavers talk about la violencia (the violence), los dias duros (the hard days), and durante la guerra (during the war), universally. The experience is so consistent that the idea I might question what interviewees mean is almost ridiculous. To talk about a disappearance is to talk about the 1980s. To talk about a massacre, or a loved one dying violently, is to talk about the rule of Ríos Montt unless otherwise clarified. For weavers from abandoned communities, the assumption is simply
that they lived in their homes until 1981, and then did not. The question is not, “Was your family impacted?” but rather “Who did you lose?” or “Who disappeared?”

The violence came to the region in a very personal way in early 1982, when a group of men returning from the coffee harvest in Samac were surrounded and killed, and then in September of the same year, a military unit burned the village to the ground and massacred just over a quarter of the residents. Rosario Coy’s oldest son was among those killed, and QanaDel (Adela Pop)’s middle son would be the only survivor of a group of men who were arrested and “disappeared” during that same time period. The survivors scattered, and a handful of them, including QanaRux (Rosario Coy), her surviving children, and her daughter-in-law, found themselves (along with most of their neighbours) forced into residency in the “model village” of Samac.

The REMHI report, compiled and released by the archdiocese of Guatemala, has short, grim descriptions of the violence that occurred in the Alta Verapaz. Despite at least three community members working as translators for the nuns and priests compiling the report, and most of the weavers I interviewed mentioning providing testimony to REMHI, very few of my informants were interested in or willing to talk about their experiences during this time period, referring to it often as durante los ochentas (during the eighties), la violencia (the violence) or cuando eran los ejércitos (when the military was). What is clear from both the REMHI report and the limited oral history is that traditional day-to-day life in the region was all but obliterated. This hazy oral history is contrasted with the sharp memory and precise stories of the communities’ recoveries beginning in the early 1990s, with greater detail again from 1996 when the peace accords were signed, giving them the power to begin campaigning for the right to own the land they and their ancestors had fought so hard to live on.

**POST-2000**

Since the early 2000s, the crime rate in Guatemala has skyrocketed, and the nation has become part of a major thoroughfare for drugs shipped by cartels from South America to the United States and Canada (Bunck 2012: 204-206). Conservative political parties, including that of Ríos Montt (with the political party Mano Duro), pushed for a return to Guatemala’s militaristic approach to crime. In the last few years, the government (headed by Alvaro Colom) re-militarised many of Guatemala’s departments, including the Alta Verapaz, in an attempt to crack down on major drug gangs such as the Mexican cartel, Manos Blancos, who are exerting control along drug trade routes through the country. In 2003 Montt received 11% of the vote
in the presidential election. Many Q’eqchi’ regard the increased presence of the Guatemalan military with deep suspicion and consider the problems of the drug trade yet another import of the Ladino/colonising state. Similarly, many people in the Alta Verapaz are suspicious of the increased military presence of CREOMPAZ (the local military base). Although they are not current targets of violence, the communities of the Alta Verapaz suffer from a shared trauma which colours community and individual perception of state control and presence.

**RISE OF THE PAN-MAYA MOVEMENT**

Since 1996, indigenous activists across the country have united with academics and other urban activists in rediscovering Maya heritage, finding shared cultural and spiritual ground, and building a loosely organised and largely organic political movement called the pan-Maya movement (Arias 2006). The pan-Maya movement attempts to create a shared Maya identity through memory of oppression, ancient Maya sites and objects, and common political interests. The pan-Maya movement has in many cases relied on Maya cultural heritage as documented by western or local anthropologists and elites. To further the political power of the disparate Maya groups, the pan-Maya movement has sometimes had to “build” a heritage accessible to a more Ladinoised population. It has also meant finding ways to unite different Maya groups, who, while sharing an ancient heritage, have been distinct for generations and experienced the civil war and genocide very differently. The civil war united Maya groups in a shared experience, but also compounded their differences because in some regions (the Ixil triangle, Huehuetenango, and Cobán) the violence was far more immediate and severe, while in regions closer to Guatemala’s capital disappearances were more common (REMHI 1996). The narrative constructed to unite these diverse experiences is one that highlights the oppression of the indigenous people and the strength of their spirit in the face of oppression.

Pan-Mayanism originated in both Mexico and Guatemala and was in many ways driven by the Guatemalan diaspora and refugee movement beginning in the late 1970s and culminating in the early 2000s. As communities were destroyed and individuals were forced to either live in urban centres, modern villages, or leave Guatemala entirely, ideas of what constituted the Maya world expanded. Refugees in Mexico and Belize found themselves living in communities of people who spoke Maya languages, wore Maya clothing, and engaged in Maya spiritual practices as they did in Guatemala. Languages were related and in many cases refugees fleeing

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20Wire Staff, the CNN (December 20, 2010). "Guatemalan government declares siege to fend off drug gang."
the Guatemalan genocide had far more in common with Maya peoples in Mexico than they did with their Ladino compatriots in Guatemala.

The pan-Maya movement is broadly understood as a reaction to the ongoing suppression of the indigenous Maya populations of the nations in Central America. It implies recognition on the part of indigenous groups that disparate political actors in the indigenous communities shared far more common goals than they do with Ladino or Latino government leaders. In the wake of the Guatemalan genocide, the pan-Maya Movement has been driven by a need to specifically recognise the repression of the rights of indigenous peoples (Arias 2006).

**THE COOPERATIVES TODAY**

The cooperative in Samac was disbanded and the community emptied in the fall of 1982 after a series of massacres and disappearances in Samac then in Chisec, Santa María, and other communities in and around Cobán. Under President Ríos Montt, military patrols in the Cobán area had increased. The military base in Cobán was restructured to serve as a centre for military activity and a prison for those that the Guatemalan military wished to detain and question. Between Samac and Santa María, over twenty individuals, who are listed on a monument to the dead and disappeared in Santa María, were killed or disappeared over a three-day period, with the military massacring most of the dead on the afternoon of September 7 or 8, 1982, in Santa María and on the road leading from Santa María to Samac. Although the vast majority of those disappeared were men between the ages of fifteen and forty-five, there was no differentiation between men, women or children during the massacre at Santa María. The community was abandoned, and while some residents fled into hiding in the mountains, many joined the residents of Samac and Chisec in two “model villages.” One was located near what is the centre of Samac today and the other established near the Cobán airport (Oral History Santa María Weavers Guild, 2010).

As part of the 1996 Peace Accords, Samac and Santa María, like many other communities, were re-established as villages where residents were allowed to begin the slow process of rebuilding their lives. Long-time residents of Samac and Santa María began to trickle back to their communities. Samac successfully campaigned for their land ownership rights to be restored, while in Santa María residents began rebuilding their homes. Santa María petitioned the newly democratic Guatemalan government in the late 1990s to form a similar cooperative and was granted the rights to the land on which they lived. With no support for the development of infrastructure, the community banded together in 1993 to pipe in water and
carve a roughshod road out of the mountainside in a project completed entirely using hand tools and limited funding that, as far as I can tell, was financed via a loan from FEDECOVERA (Personal Interview 2009).

Since then, a third community has been founded—Santo Domingo de las Cuevas. The residents of Santo Domingo de las Cuevas are members of the Sacrab family (by blood or marriage), who split from the Cooperative Samac after it was reformed post-Peace Accords in the late 1990s and purchased a tract of land where they engage in controlled logging and pine farming for a partial income. Many younger men in Santo Domingo earn extra income as day labourers for relatives in Samac, or travel to the Boca Costa to work seasonally on sugar plantations. The Sacrab family has a reputation in the Cobán region for being savvy, intelligent, and very capable of looking after all closely affiliated family members.

In the mid-1990s, Samac petitioned USAID for a Peace Corps Volunteer. Since the early 2000s Samac has hosted four Peace Corps volunteers and Santa María shared one of those Peace Corps volunteers with Samac between 2002 and 2010, when the Peace Corps program was discontinued in the Alta Verapaz for security reasons. Santa María has repeatedly petitioned the Guatemalan government for better infrastructure and services, and as a result the community road has been slowly rebuilt and reinforced starting in late 2014. Community leaders in Santa María have been involved in efforts across the Alta Verapaz to recognise and commemorate victims of la violencia and bring perpetrators to justice, including serving as translators for REMHI recorders and testifying on their own behalf to UN special rapporteurs and within the Guatemalan justice system. In recent years, these efforts have led to the exhumation and reclamation of over five hundred victims buried in and around the Guatemalan military base in Cobán. As of yet, only one of the men who disappeared from Samac and Santa María in the early 1980s has been exhumed and identified.21

Starting in January of 2009, the Alta Verapaz of Guatemala became the site for conflict between the Guatemalan government and the Mexican drug cartel enforcement gang, Los Manos Blancos. In the five years since 2009, Cobán has been remilitarised, and the rate of violence in the Alta Verapaz has skyrocketed to levels similar to those experienced during the civil war and genocide.22 For many survivors of the genocide the presence of armed military teams in pick-up trucks patrolling the countryside is distressing, and reminiscent of the 1970s and 1980s.

21Henderson, E., Nolin, C., & Peccerelli, F. 2014. With updated info from a community contact whose father was identified in July of 2016. See introduction, pg. 6).
22Wire Staff, the CNN (December 20, 2010). "Guatemalan government declares siege to fend off drug gang."
On May 5, 2017, the president of the Samac cooperative, Francisco Rafael Ca’al, was shot and killed at a small restaurant in Cobán while waiting for a bus to return to Samac with Q110,000 to pay all the families participating in the winter 2017 coffee harvest (personal correspondence 2017). His death marked at least the second murder of a business or cooperative officer outside the Banrural bank in Zone 12 of Cobán in the spring of 2017 (Cobán municipal office 2017). I anticipate that the murder and theft of what amounts to up to a third of the cooperative’s income for the year will have significant repercussions for the community’s well-being. Several of my local contacts blame a gang from Guatemala City that works up and down the Pan-American Highway from time to time, and anticipate that, after a few months, the gang will move into another region of Guatemala23 (field notes 2009, 2010, 2016 & 2017).

What this recent incident demonstrates is that reverberations of Guatemala’s violent past continue to have impact today. Whatever Guatemala’s future holds, and whatever future the Q’eqchi’ people have, the challenges currently present in Guatemala will make understanding that future, and surviving it, difficult. This also emphasises the ever-present role of violence in the formation of a Q’eqchi’ identity, and the continuation of the Q’eqchi’ people and community. Being Q’eqchi’ is, as seen through the myth/history of Aj Po’op B’atz’, a constant negotiation for survival. An ability to manage a plurality of identities, and to simply out-wait foreign intruders (the Germans, the Peace Corps, the drug lords) of Q’eqchi’ land have all proven essential to the survival of Q’eqchi’ culture and el pueblo Q’eqchi’.

23It is not unusual for the Alta Verapaz to experience spates of violence lasting a few months, while gangs move through the region.
Chapter Two: Engaging with the weavers: Methods & Field Research.

One evening, tired of the Sun’s swaggering past her house, Ixb’alam sat ready, and as the Sun passed by the house she knocked over the nixtamal she kept for her weaving. As the sticky nixtamal spread across the road the Sun slipped and fell. As he fell, the deer he carried fell and opened up, spilling ashes across the road and onto the porch. “Ayayayayay!” shouted Ixb’alam and started laughing. For she had proof that the Sun was not truly hunting. He wanted to cheat so that she would admire him. So Ixb’alam gathered up her loom and went into her house. And the Sun was ashamed.

In designing the research model for this PhD thesis, I originally focused on the rates of picb’il weaving reduction in the 1970s and its renewed expansion in two waves: the late 1980s and the early 2010s. Once common across the Alta Verapaz of Guatemala, picb’il weaving began to decline at the beginning of the 20th century with the introduction of cheap imported lace fabrics. By the early 1970s fewer than two dozen women were weaving picb’il in the Alta Verapaz (Interview Amalia Gue 2016). Then, in two waves, the first during the 1980s at the height of Guatemala’s genocide, and the second in the mid-2010s, picb’il weaving experienced mini-renaissances and today over two hundred and fifty women weave in the region.

Building on prior research conducted in 2008 and 2009 on behalf of Endangered Threads Documentaries,¹ my initial inquiry focussed on the role locally prominent individuals played in the development or redevelopment of cultural practices. My specific aim was to investigate the way in which the relationship between two people: Doña Leslie Hempstead and QanaRux Coy influenced the number of women who continued to weave picb’il textiles in the Cobán Municipality of the Alta Verapaz of Guatemala. Through a close examination of that process, I intended to contribute to the theoretical literature on cultural preservation and development by providing insights into the role of individuals, both insiders and outsiders, in cultural preservation. Specifically, I sought to examine the ways in which the introduction of external demand can create new value in local markets, and/or extend those markets.

During the first year of my PhD I established the continued relevance of picb’il for the Q’eqchi’ Maya, as well as laying the groundwork for my eventual fieldwork. Studying picb’il as a single textile produced by a relatively small number of women weavers in a relatively remote geographic region through the recent turbulent history of Guatemala can provide a lens

¹Conducting surveys of the number of weavers of picb’il in the region surrounding San Juan Chamelco.
to better understand the cultural significance of weaving in the re-invention of the Mayan heritage.²

Textiles in Guatemala have been extensively studied (Ardren 2006; O’Neale 1945; Osborne 1935, 1965; Rowe 1982; Schevill 2006; Start 1980 [1948]). Due to the existence of a rich textile tradition, in which textiles represent not only individual taste but also group and family cultural, religious, and linguistic identities, the collection of Maya traje (clothing) has played an important part in the formation of ethnographic museum collections. Ethnographers and archaeologists have collected textiles from Guatemala for museum collections across the United States and Europe. Although the roots of Maya traje differentiation are poorly documented due to the destruction of pre-colonial documents and art objects, since the early nineteenth century anthropologists have easily been able to link the Guatemalan Maya people with a region, specific community, and language simply by looking at the clothing they produced and wore.

Replete with symbolic meaning communicated through the motifs inlaid into the fabric during weaving, these textiles serve as a gateway to understanding history, identity, and even life and work patterns (Arnold & Dransart 2014: 10-16). Additionally, many major museums in the west seeking a representative textile or ethnographic collection for the American regions have collected Maya textiles for their beauty and complexity.

Museum textiles, specifically those held at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) in Cambridge, provided me with ongoing physical access to woven picb’il objects prior to my fieldwork. The materiality of those textiles opened a door to thinking about the ways in which museum textiles could serve as a bridge between me, the western researcher, and the Q’eqchi’ communities in which I had worked in the past and hoped to work in the future. These textiles gave me the opportunity to research textile construction and patterns as well as textile evolution over time. By examining and photographing historic textiles collected from this isolated region prior to the decline in picb’il weaving, I built the foundation for my understanding of the techniques used in modern textile production and the continuity of pattern and technique transmission over the course of the last century.³ This engagement with museum textiles helped me develop an interest in exploring the links between past and present, and broadened my thinking regarding the involvement of agents in cultural production to include museums and collectors.

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²Approximately two hundred and fifty.
³My research, as it is based on the material presence of physical objects, is limited in this case study by the age of the textiles available in museum collections, with the oldest dating from the 1930s.
As I interacted with historic museum textiles, I decided to incorporate their use into my field research. I intended to bring photo booklets illustrating three historic picb’iil textiles to the Alta Verapaz as interview aids and to learn what my intended informants understood or perceived about the changes in textile production in the Alta Verapaz over the last fifty years. I hoped to use those photograph booklets as tools to compare contemporary and historic textiles and textile motifs.

**Museums and their relationships to source communities**

In 1992 Eileen Hooper-Greenhill posited that the institution of museum served as a significant contributor to the shaping of knowledge and western academic discourse. Using frameworks of knowledge production through discourse, provided by Foucault, Hooper-Greenhill presented a compelling case for museums as the producers and co-producers of knowledge through their ability to structure and present images and narratives of the world through the management, display and study of objects (1992: 20, 64, 85, 121). For Hooper-Greenhill, and others after her since museums are spaces that not only have the power to produce knowledge, but that also have the power to preserve knowledge held in objects. The collectors who help build those collections then become gatekeepers, standing between source communities and the collective body of knowledge held in the Eurocentric world.

As an ethnographer in this context, I was concerned with the production of textiles and the state of knowledge as ‘held’ within objects; working through the institution of the museum could illuminate my ethnographic research of weaving practices in the isolated communities of the Alta Verapaz. Including the textiles and institutions I was working with in the United Kingdom (UK) and in the United States (US) could shape my planned ethnographic study.

In light of all this, I began to engage with the methodologies available to modern museum professionals and researchers working with museums and their collections. Mary Bouquet (2012) posits that the modern ethnographic museum is “…an essentially 19th century institution” (89) before going on to challenge researchers and museums to continue imagining new ways of working with and utilising the invaluable cultural and historical riches held in museum collections. A great deal of work has been done across the world building frameworks for ethical and cooperative engagement with indigenous people and objects. Museums in the Pacific Northwest are noted for their work in this area. In the basement of the Portland Art Museum in 1989 museum staff, anthropologists and Tlingit community representatives and elders met to discuss the museums Northwest Art Collection (Clifford 1997: 188).
resulting event and discussion, while initially failing to result in any immediate changes in the handling or display of the collection (Bouquet 2012: 145) proved ground-breaking in that it was one of the first times in the United States that indigenous peoples, museum curators and research academics had gathered as equal guardians to discuss the role of the museum and the objects held in that museum. During the late 1980s and early 1990s museums across the world, but especially in Canada, began communicating more regularly with the communities from which objects had originated. In some cases, objects, like a Totem pole held in the Swedish Museum of Ethnography, objects were returned, replicas were created for display and museum professionals and indigenous groups were able to work together to meet the tangible and intangible needs of both groups (Bouquet 2012: 169-171). In other cases, such as the ‘Spirit Sings’ exhibition held by the Glenbow Museum in 1988 and protested heavily by the Lubicon Lake Cree of Northern Alberta proved points of contestation leading to dialogue (Clifford 1997: 205-207).

Out of this era, and into contemporary work, come ideas such as the ‘right of portrayal’ (Griffin 1996), the ability to think of museums as active restorative agents (Herle 2008) as well as a series of practical guiding documents, such as the Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples produced by the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association in 1994.

As a part of dialogue with source communities most major museums and their curatorial teams have had to grapple with, and address issues related to repatriation and to the physical regeneration of objects that have remained in collections. The politicisation (necessary or otherwise) of the objects within their collections has become a factor to be considered. Furthermore, without the funding that would allow indigenous students to work directly with objects, or staff to evaluate the feasibility and desirability of the physical repatriation of indigenous objects, both museums and source communities have trouble communicating the role of museums and material culture in the decolonisation process and the reinstatement of justice-centred values in museum collections. Nevertheless, museums are continually developing better understandings of the challenges they face in engaging with source communities, ensuring that collections meet both social justice and research needs (see Chapter six).

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4 More on Clifford & ‘contact zones’ in Chapter 6
5 Both individuals and institutions are facing ongoing budget shortages as governments turn to increasingly neoliberal policies that do not favour the funding of arts and humanities research that engages with indigenous communities.
On March 28, 2017, shortly after I returned from field research, Professor Kavita Singh of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, delivered the annual Von Hugel lecture at Cambridge, entitled “Museums, Heritage, Culture: Into the Conflict Zone.” In this lecture Singh addressed the increasingly complex role of the museum in the modern world, challenging her audience to engage with the need for museums to reinvent themselves so that they not only serve the institutions that created them as spaces for ethnographic and historic resources, but also respect the communities represented in those collections and tapped for those research opportunities (see more on contact Zones and Clifford’s work in Chapter 6). She then problematized this very outreach by presenting three case studies in which museum collections and objects were politicised using de-colonial and repatriation language—not for the purpose of cultural revitalisation or reclamation, but in order to use and weaponise heritage in broader political battles. Singh emphasised the complex role that museum objects can play in the imaginations of local and international communities. Any work around repatriation or reconnection must be done with a recognition of the objects’ past and the community’s present. The original stakeholders’ concerns may have been vastly different than those of contemporary stakeholders, and far fewer, or far more, people may be interested in a historic object than in a contemporary one.

Singh’s lecture served to further emphasise the work done by the MAA in Cambridge in the development of exhibitions such as ‘Pasifika Styles’ (May 2006-February 2008) which were created in conjunction with contemporary indigenous artist’s work, and the input of community members from the places of origin for objects held in the collection and exhibited by the museum (Herle 2008). Much of the literature on museum studies over the last two decades (both curatorial and academic) focuses on the fact that repatriation and source community engagement efforts are governed by multiple factors in a variety of settings, and as such, engagement around ideas of connection and repatriation must also then include many stakeholders and be flexible in their approach. From this view, for my work, with fragile textiles whose ownership by the museum is uncontested, models of digital, virtual or visual repatriation provided opportunities to engage with research into *picb’il* textiles in museums that could illuminate my ethnographic research of weaving practices in the isolated communities of the Alta Verapaz. Including the textiles and institutions I was working with in the United Kingdom (UK) and in the United States (US) could shape my planned ethnographic study.
**Visual Repatriation**

As I sought to draw from existing connections between weavers in the Alta Verapaz to museum textiles through a visual or virtual medium, I needed to ground my research in the unfamiliar field of museum studies and to approach museum objects and ethnography through a decolonising lens. As I understood from Clifford’s reflections on the encounter between museum professionals and Tlingit elders in the Portland Art Museum in 1989 (Clifford 1997) I knew that facilitating encounters between people on different sides of the colonial project exposes the role that knowledge plays in the production of power. Exploring the construction of western society, Foucault posited a direct link between the production of social knowledge and the exercise of social power:

> We should not be content to say that power has a need for such-and-such a discovery, such-and-such a form of knowledge, but we should add that the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information… The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power… It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power (Foucault, 1975: 51-52).

For Foucault, the production of power and the production of knowledge were linked in a dialectic of escalation. During the Victorian era, the act of colonisation itself established a growing need to categorise knowledge and information about the world. The act of “discovery” allowed for the knowledge of other peoples of the world to be codified into the European consciousness of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Universities and academic institutions not only created spaces for people to conduct research, but also came to play an integral role in the institutionalisation of what is “known” and “knowable.” These ideas are more thoroughly explored by academic such as Bennet, Dibley and Harrison (2014) who have grappled thoroughly with ideas of coloniality, objects power and museums. I also engaged with the work of Anne Fien-up Riordan (1996: 2005) around concepts of photographs as tools of repatriation (see page 148 for her influence on this work). Her engagement with community elders and use of photographs as vital parts of ethnography has helped develop the increasing importance of the idea of ‘photographic repatriation’ in my own work, and will be touched upon throughout this thesis.
As seen through the work of Bouquet (1992) the development of museum collections, as part of the colonisation process and in a post-colonial world, has very much been part and parcel of the production of a western identity that associates imperial expansion with human advancement. Documenting the “other” allows for the definition and placement of that other within a Eurocentric narrative of the world. That does not mean that museums today must be limited by this colonial mentality. Objects once collected as a part of the colonial process are regularly reimagined and repurposed by modern museums to serve other roles. My ethnographic research is based on the *picb’il* objects themselves; objects that have already physically traversed colonised and museum spaces. By conducting interviews about *picb’il* textiles and production history that were focused on physical museum objects, my research engages with contemporary changes in museum studies while connecting with local understandings of *picb’il* in the communities where it is produced and worn.

Such object-centric research, as that carried out by Appadurai (1982), Miller (1987) and Hodder (2012) allows for a redefinition of the objects themselves in addition to engaging both museums and source communities in dialogues about the role of objects and the value of the knowledge contained within them. For this purpose, I have followed the path of the objects, from museum to source community and back again, adopting the same trajectory as previous researchers engaging with communities of weavers.

S. Ashley Kistler built her anthropology of Q’eqchi’ markets around the idea of cooperative anthropology. The model of cooperative anthropology that she relied on in the region focused first on building relationships within the market community, then on allowing local community leaders to guide her research. As an anthropologist, Kistler had to relinquish direct control of her project and allow for the community to define itself, at least in part, rather than being defined entirely by postcolonial powers or the only alternative, the Guatemalan Non-Maya Ladino gaze. In working closely with community leaders, Kistler supported Q’eqchi’ women in defining themselves, and at the same time occasionally allowed a non-academically trained voice (2010a) to guide her research; a difficult but rewarding balance.

Using Kistler’s research model, which she has successfully published in a variety of venues, as an inspiration, I built my own research model in such a way that I would be able to draw on the relationships I had already developed in the Alta Verapaz starting in 2008. Kistler successfully used participant observation to build a research network, and then worked as an anthropologist in an overt way with her gatekeepers to develop a research question that allowed her to conduct her study. She also provided the community with information that it considered valuable. Kistler, in some sense, sought to offer her skills as a researcher to the community in
exchange for access to community data. From her model, I borrowed the idea of allowing my informants to guide my research questions and model in a direct way.

I drew from the existing connections between communities in the Alta Verapaz rather than forging entirely new ones. In building my data collection in a collaborative way, my intention was to create a body of work that contributed not only to my study with the Q’eqchi’ Maya, but also to model ways in which other multidisciplinary researchers working with decolonial frameworks could think about methodologies. To this end, I decided to facilitate a visual encounter between informants and museum textiles through the use of printed photo booklets as a part of my interview methodology.

**SURVEY DESIGN**

Prior to the start of my fieldwork, I conducted a survey of *picb’il* textiles held in three museum collections in the United States and Europe in order to select three separate textiles to use in the photograph booklets (see Appendix C where I present one of the photo booklets as an example). I established the following criteria for the selection of those textiles:

1) The textiles must have been collected as part of a research or collecting trip with the express intention to house the textile within a private or museum collection.

2) The textile must have adequate documentation noting its collection date and location, as well as information on the textile collector and their time researching or travelling within Guatemala.

3) The textile must have been produced in the Alta Verapaz of Guatemala prior to Guatemala’s period of civil unrest (1963-1996 approx.).

4) It must be feasible for me to acquire adequate photos of the textile for use in photo booklets, and it must be possible for me to acquire the rights to use those photo booklets in field research.

After reviewing the collections of over thirty academic museums with significant Maya textile collections (including the Peabody Museum at Harvard, whose collection must be noted for its breadth and quality), I selected three textiles to use in my research.\(^6\) The following textiles were selected:

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\(^6\) I limited the number to three to ensure that my research project remained within a feasible sample size given the timeframe of the PhD.
1) University of Cambridge, MAA, accession number 1962.151 (textile predates 1962, entered the museum’s collection via the acquisition of another collection). This textile appears to have been collected new, potentially made to order by the buyer (possibly Elsie McDougall, who was noted for her collection of Guatemalan and Mexican textiles). It is in excellent condition, unstained, and the head space has not been cut out of the textile, indicating it has never been used.

![Image of textile](image1.jpg)

*Figure 2.1* Museum Object Accession number 1962.151, MAA, University of Cambridge.
Photograph Callie Vandewiele
Copyright held by the MAA, Cambridge.

2) University of Oxford, Pitt Rivers Museum, accession number 1946.6.54. This textile appears to have been well worn. To judge by the fraying both within the textile and along the connecting seams, it was patched in the centre panel some time prior to collection using fragments from another well-worn textile. There is staining along the shoulders, the collar and the bottom back edging. The patched textile has (unusually) been placed parallel in orientation to the original textile. Limited collection notes include only ‘Cobán’ as the collection location.

![Image of textile](image2.jpg)

*Figure 2.2* Pitt Rivers Museum object accession number 1946.6.54 Pich’il Maya Textile.
Photograph Callie Vandewiele
Copyright held by the Pitt Rivers Museum.

3) University of California, Berkeley, Phoebe Hearst Museum, Museum number 3-29591. This textile was collected during the 1930s by the American anthropologist and historian of textiles, Lila O’Neale, who conducted extensive fieldwork in Guatemala. It is new, unused and embroidered in a style that remains popular today. It is unclear if this textile was documented as handwoven at the time of collection; however, the structure and form of the textile indicate that it is likely handwoven. Present-day weavers have been able to imitate the pattern closely. The textile is unusual in that the third panel is significantly smaller than the first two and is sewn on in a parallel pattern – almost as though the textile was once made for a smaller person and then expanded.

![Figure 2.3: University of California, Berkeley, Phoebe Hearst Museum object, Museum number 3-29591. Sheer textile; Alta Verapaz. Source: Hearst Museum Online Database. Copyright held by the Hearst Museum.](image)

All three textiles came from broader textile collections created by collectors during long research stays in Guatemala, either on their own part or when travelling with a researcher spouse. These textiles were purchased with the interests of museum or significant personal collections in mind and were intended as representative pieces of the textiles of the Alta Verapaz, both in quality and in form. As there was no direct information on the particular communities that museum textiles were collected from, aside from the municipal centres, I chose sites associated with contemporary rather than historic weaving.

I was able to acquire high quality digital photographs of the textile held in California from the Hearst Museum’s publicly accessible object database, and to photograph the two textiles in Cambridge and Oxford myself. Using these photographs, I assembled the three booklets prior to fieldwork for use during my interviews; one per textile. They demonstrate the
front, back, seams and motifs on each textile. The photos selected were intended to emphasise the artistic, stylistic, design and construction elements in each textile.

During my survey of textiles held in museum collections I noted that there was a great deal of diversity of motifs present on *picb’il* textiles. I identified twenty-nine disparate patterns or pattern combinations. While I did not at the time understand the ontological value of these patterns within Maya cosmovision, I was curious as whether or not these motifs were being used by contemporary weavers; if new motifs had been introduced and if these motifs had significance. To answer these questions, I produced a fourth textile photograph booklet intended to demonstrate each of these 29 motif or motif combinations.

I hoped to use this fourth booklet to compare contemporary motif use with the motifs present on museum textiles in order to better understand the development, or loss, of motifs over time. Many of the photographs in this fourth booklet can be seen in tables 4.1 and 4.2, starting on page 102) where I present the pattern interpretation given to me by informants who viewed those images along with further patterns identified in the field but not represented in museum objects or collected textiles.

**INTERVIEW DESIGNS & MATERIALITY**

I designed interviews based on the fact that Q’eqchi’ culture—as has been documented by scholars of Maya culture and anthropologists working on materiality (Paul Kockelman 2011), Richard Wilson (1991, 1995) and Abigail Adams (1999, 2001)—allows for the intertwining of identities among people, objects, and geography. According to this broad understanding of materiality material objects and human beings are linked in spiritual and physical ways (Kockelman 2011: 440-442). Personhood, as I will discuss in chapter three, on gender, is tied inseparably to the social roles and activities an individual carries out. As many activities require the use of objects, from clothing to tools, a person’s identity and selves extend to those objects, which are essential to their performance of that self. For example, a man’s machete is a part of that man, as without it he is unable to plant maize, cut weeds, or otherwise fulfil his social roles as a Q’eqchi’ man. These connections spring from the original “first owner” or “maker” and serve to connect an object to all of the people or organisations that own it throughout its life. Clothing makes up a significant part of a small subset of Q’eqchi’ objects that are referred to as “inalienable possessions” (Weiner 1992) in the Q’eqchi’ language in the same way as body parts and immediate family members. The extension of personhood to what Paul Kockelman refers to as “objects essential to personhood” (Kockelman 2011) via the grammatical structure
of Q’eqchi’ stresses the importance of textiles and clothing as personal objects. These kinds of objects can become an actual extension of identity, affirming the full humanity of the wearer and situating them grammatically as a full person in the Q’eqchi’ world. Drawing from Gell’s work on distributed personhood, researcher Sophie Woodward argues that garments can, across many cultures, become integral to the production of an identity, stating that for many individuals, “...clothing becomes a means through which disparate facets of their selfhood are objectified” (Woodward 2005: 34-35). While Woodward’s arguments are broad and relate more to the idea of clothing generally as identity-producing objects, within Q’eqchi’ culture, the distinct gendered nature of who does, and who does not, continue to wear traje suggests that, for women in particular, wearing indigenous clothing is an act of both identity and resistance. Embracing a Q’eqchi’ identity is more than simply wearing Q’eqchi’ clothing—it is engaging in the continuation of Q’eqchi’ culture in the face of generations-long oppression.

This extension of clothing as an act of individual identity within a kinship and community group structure is grounded in Gell’s work on the “extended person” (1998: 6). As I developed my methodology, I drew on the work of Daniel Miller’s exploration of material culture to include textile objects. Miller observed that “...cosmology, that is one’s understanding of the nature of the universe and one’s place within it, is often formulated through the making, displaying and destruction of fibres” (Miller 2005: 10). Garments serve to connect individuals to the wider world and to protect those persons from that world, including the formation and expression of identity. Textiles become the frontier through which we negotiate our experience on physical, emotional and psychological fronts that are beyond the bounds of the self. As such, clothing can take on public politicised roles as a part of identity. As such, clothing can take on public politicised roles and hold intimate personal meaning, much of which applies to the ways in which Q’eqchi’ women relate to, and think about, the textiles they weave and wear, and those their ancestors wove and wore. Indigeneity is linked to membership and residence in local communities labelled Q’eqchi’ Maya, and for my informants, the public presentation of a Q’eqchi’ identity through clothing served as an affirmation of their value as indigenous women, as one informant stated:

From the huipils and the cortes you can see in the markets, we are all indígena, we come from the communities. You can see the women in their traje sitting in the section of the market for their aldea. The markets are indígena because the women in them are indígena.
This particular cultural context could be assumed to throw light on the potential interactions between museums and source communities. Not only the point when a museum purchases an object, but also the ownership of this object becomes significant. The patterns and designs used in *picb’il* textiles by Q’eqchi’ weavers are deeply connected to Q’eqchi’ Maya cosmological beliefs, as well as to local regional identity (Vitale 2010). The ontological and undeniable social value of textiles in the Maya world allows for textiles to serve as a ground for cultural engagement around ideas of identity, heritage, and value. This general background allowed for a multifaceted approach to the value of both contemporary *picb’il* woven in the Alta Verapaz and heritage textiles stored in museum collections.

I used the following research questions to guide the development of my field research:

1) Can *picb’il* textiles serve as conduits of ongoing connection between museums and source communities in the Alta Verapaz, and if so, in what ways? In the absence of any current connection, then what interest or roles do these museum objects hold for the source community or vice versa?

2) Is there any evidence of the extent to which any of the relationships of *picb’il* textile weavers to *picb’il* textiles have changed over the last seventy years, are changing, or may change in the future?

These research questions, paired with museum booklets, were the foundation from which I developed my initial set of interview questions (see Appendices A and B) which assumed that all the weavers I interviewed would have similar responses to each question; based on their similar backgrounds and life experiences.

Initially, I had planned on working with *picb’il* weavers who were members of the *Ixch’alam Ke* weaving cooperative and living in the village (and coffee cooperative) of Samac. My plan was to use the cooperative structure to gain access to the community and as a space in which the weavers would be able to engage with and understand my work from a position of relative power. Since I approached and worked with the elected cooperative board as representatives of the community, I did not need to explain my research to each individual weaver, but the women still had the opportunity to give or deny me access. By the end of my fieldwork, I was working with three similarly structured cooperatives in three distinct communities.

The interview questions regarding the ontological connections between individuals and objects were focused on definitions of individual roles within the weaving world, such as “Do
you consider yourself a weaver?” and “Why do you weave picb’i?” To build the history of the textile, I had to find out where the women learned to weave, and from whom, as well as whether or not they themselves were teaching other women to weave. I naively assumed that I would retain control of my textile booklets, and that I would be able to introduce those photographs at junctures of my choosing in the interview process. I also assumed that the cooperatives and organisations I had worked with on previous visits to the region would remain stable, and that I could rely on the gatekeepers I had used in the past to gain access to informants.

Prior to the start of my fieldwork, I had planned to interview between twenty-five and thirty-eight weavers from the estimated seventy-five members of the Ixb’alam Ke weaving cooperative based out of the Samac Coffee Cooperative. I selected this cooperative in order to take advantage of the tight-knit communities in which the weavers live and work, with a view to exploring the historical evolution of gender relations within these communities. My previous work in the region\(^8\) allowed me to develop professional relationships with the current and past presidents of Ixb’alam Ke, which I believed would give me easier access to interview subjects. I planned to draw parallels between the site of the weaving cooperative and other weaving traditions and cooperatives across Guatemala. Fuelled by the pan-Maya revival around the turn of the twenty-first century, weaving cooperatives have played a vital role in supporting the use of Mayan textiles and traje within the pan-Maya movement (Vitale 2010), not only as an integral part of a modern pan-Mayan identity, but also in formalising a long-time women’s economic practice (Kistler 2013a), as I will explore in later chapters. It was clear that textiles provided an income for local Maya communities in the Alta Verapaz during an era of violence when traditionally male-dominated sources of income (coffee farming, working on plantations, adjoining road construction teams, etc.) were unavailable (Ehlers 2000). In the post-war period, textiles continued to play an important role in connecting the community with external and international markets, bringing in researchers and tour groups as well as providing women with direct access to marketers, researchers, filmmakers and tourists, boosting their social value within their own communities (field notes 2016). Most importantly for my research, these cooperatives provided weavers with a structured way to interact with interlocutors, and me (as an interlocutor) with a clear and ethical way to gain access to communities and conduct interviews with individuals with the permission of the residents of that community.

\(^8\)2008-2009 and part of 2010 doing community health education and outreach.
FIELDWORK

I arrived at the primary field site in the Cooperative Samac in mid-February of 2016. To my surprise I discovered that, in the six years since my last visit to the community, a series of personal and market disputes had split the weaving cooperative into three distinct organised groups. *Ixb’alam Ke* had collapsed as a cooperative but continued to operate under the leadership of Amalia Gue as a small business. The coffee cooperative (the official governing body of the community) had organised their own “women’s committee” to market textiles in response to Amalia’s perceived betrayal. Another family, the Sacrab family, had split off into a third group of weavers after falling out first with Amalia, then with the Samac Directiva. By the end of July 2016, I would discover a fourth organised weaving textile cooperative forming within the community.

This division necessitated an immediate restructuring of my initial research plan. I concentrated on creating a network of connections within the various weaving communities of Cobán and Chamelco, expanding the networks in which I would be able to do interviews by identifying a broader community of *picb’il* weavers and community leaders. Refocusing my field research on a broader community also meant that I needed to re-evaluate my interview schedule to focus less on the weaving genealogy of Samac and Santa María and more on the process of visual repatriation itself, making it applicable to a wider number of communities and weavers. Furthermore, I would need to be more careful about negotiating my relationships within the community in order to retain access to women involved in all aspects of the schism.

Facing this major hurdle necessitated revisiting my research design. To counter the limitation generated by the breakdown of the cooperative I chose to increase the number of weavers I interviewed and work across an additional set of communities outside San Juan Chamelco and San Pedro Carchá. To this end, to my original estimated population of eighty weavers, I added 150 to 170 potential *picb’il* weavers living in the outlying areas of the three major municipal centres of the Alta Verapaz: Cobán, San Pedro Carchá and San Juan Chamelco. Increasing the geographic and numerical scope of my research project meant that, before I could begin interviewing in earnest, I needed to conduct a survey of weavers to identify where weavers were living, and to form connections with potential gatekeepers in those communities.

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9 A prominent family in the community with a reputation for being “difficult.”
10 A falling out I have come to believe was inevitable based on the history between the cooperative Samac, and the cooperative Santo Domingo (established circa 1999) where the majority of the members of the Sacrab family now live, see chapter 1.
11 Re-establishing and re-forming long lasting friendships proved tricky, as many of the people I had worked closely with in the past had fallen on opposite sides of the dispute.
communities. The increased workload and interview count meant that I had to balance interview data from communities outside the conflict zone and my original intended data set. I also needed to broaden my ability to engage with the relationships that weavers in different communities had with museum textiles.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I was able to confirm the presence of at least two hundred and fifty picb’il weavers, with over two hundred identified by name, community, and family. This includes weavers who had moved from Samac, the initial community where I had intended to work, into local areas (primarily Santo Domingo de las Cuevas) and over twenty-five picb’il weavers who were members of a weaving cooperative based in San Juan Chamelco called Hijas de Aj Po’op B’atz’, which once had strong ties to Ixb’alam Ke but severed those ties sometime in 2011 or 2012 in response to the dissolution of the larger weaving cooperative. These weavers, while affiliated with the Chamelco-based cooperative, lived in the following aldeas, Campat, Sebob, Sa Campana, Paapa, San Miguel Chamil, Santa Cecilia and Chamisun.

By developing a database of weavers in different communities, I was able to map out the prevalence of picb’il production in the municipalities of San Juan Chamelco and Cobán. Through this process, I began to develop a sense of the ways in which picb’il weavers were organised in the different regions of the Alta Verapaz. This database enabled me to perceive the importance of junkab’al (family/kin group, discussed in chapter three) in Q’eqchi’ life and
the role that it played not only in contemporary picb’il weaving, but also in the ways that weavers perceived and interacted with the visual repatriations of historic textiles.

Having identified six distinct organised weaving groups that were either made up exclusively of picb’il weavers or had picb’il weavers as members, I reassessed my research plan. There was only one community in the outlying areas of Carchá where I would be able to safely conduct research (Chamisun de Carchá), 12 I decided to use this community as a pilot field site, hoping to gauge the impact of recording and the ways in which my originally planned questions were received. With many women, the presence of the audio recorder on a first visit made a second visit impossible. Women did not wish to be interviewed, particularly if they had never spent time with me before. Once they had the opportunity both to fully interrogate me across the span of several visits about my work and to assess if I was genuinely interested in spending time with them and their families, they often allowed not only interviews but also audio recordings. Over the course of my fieldwork, a theme that would become increasingly apparent was the high value my Q’eqchi’ informants placed on my commitment to spending time with them in their communities and homes, and on my willingness and ability to travel to isolated communities and house groups to do so.

As I worked through my first set of interviews in the field, it became clear that the interview schedule I had laid out in my preparation for research was not only flawed as a basis to provide me with a usable data set, but also might actually impede my ability to access the very communities and weavers I sought to interview. It became readily apparent within my first two weeks in the field that I would need to account for the relationship between geography and spirituality, complex personal dynamics between weavers as well as between communities. I also quickly realised that picb’il plays an essential role in the production of Q’eqchi’ culture. It became clear that my entire interview schedule had to be restructured. For example, in my original interview schedule I started with the question “Do you weave, or are you learning to weave?” This question, as I began meeting informants, was useless and seen as somewhat patronising by my informants, several of whom frankly informed me that I already knew they were weavers, or else they would not have been introduced to me as weavers. Instead, beginning an interview by asking a weaver how long she had been weaving, and if she was working on a current textile, proved both more respectful and elicited more conversant answers.

12I believe there to be more weavers outside of Carchá than I was able to identify or interview, but I chose not to work too closely in the region as during the period of my fieldwork a land dispute was occurring between local communities and a regional landowner that resulted in at least two separate killings and a deep mistrust on the part of many people in Chamisun towards my work, with the general suspicion being that I was somehow affiliated with the land-owning family and/or working on their behalf.
While I was re-establishing connections in Samac, my original planned fieldwork site, I did a series of early interviews in the aldeas outside Carchá. These interviews produced very little usable data, as weavers were suspicious, not only of my motives, but also of my connections with other communities. Nevertheless, these early interviews played an invaluable role in helping me reshape my interview schedule and learning how to work with my informants in a productive and respectful way.

I worked with my Q’eqchi’ translator (Mary Elena Toj) after my time in Carchá to rephrase the order of my interview questions (see Appendix B). We started by introducing the photo booklet and explaining the presence of historic picb’il textiles in museums, then moved on to more every day questions about weaving itself, the economics of the family/region, and the role that textiles played in community life. In the restructured interview, I highlighted the importance of life roles by targeting different questions at young women, married mothers and older women; questions that highlighted their community roles in relation to picb’il weaving. I discovered that the photo booklets, which the women could pore over and ask questions about, proved to be a foot in the door, as they provided evidence to the fact that I was in fact working on textiles and not using them as a way to gain access to the communities for some other project.

Many weavers who initially refused to do an interview, or to be audio-recorded during an interview, were willing to change their minds once I had visited a cousin or a close friend with the photo booklets, provided they could go through the booklets first. With the textile booklets foregrounded in the interview process, I was also able to address the fact that women would, inevitably, talk and share in-depth information about the content of the photo booklets during or between my interviews and visits. Presenting the booklets before requesting interviews also allowed me to use them as a tool to gain access to communities.

The interviews allowed me to notice the important role that weaving cooperatives played in textile continuation and value. Chamisun, an aldea isolated from many of the market opportunities provided by the weaving or coffee cooperatives outside Chamelco and Cobán, had seen little growth and limited interest in textile production from younger weavers. They valued wearing the textiles but did not see any economic benefit in producing them in any great quantity, which further allowed me to shift the interview scheme to include questions about the specific role of women in cooperatives or other marketing organisations, and how that had impacted the increased (or decreased) production of picb’il. I included questions such as “Are you a member of a cooperative?” “Have you sat on the cooperative committee?” While many women had never participated in leadership roles in the cooperative officially, many informants
had well-informed and extensive opinions about the cooperatives’ operations. Community, family, and cooperative politics overlapped; asking about the cooperatives and the markets was another way of asking about the community.

As I worked through my interviews, I situated myself within the political context of each weaving cooperative as well as the complex overlap of relationships between blood and kinship ties through the unit of the junkab’al (see chapter three). This proved essential to understanding why I was being guided in particular directions at particular times, as well as to situating each interview within the broader picture of family, kin, and social ties of each community and uncovering kin ties between communities and weavers. Positioning myself as a researcher, I picked apart these networks of kinship and family ties. It became progressively clearer that many of the schisms within the weaving cooperatives were extensions of ongoing schisms between competing junkab’al in the community as a whole. This meant that nearly every interaction I had during my time in the community illuminated my place in the cooperative structure and the community conflicts.

Before re-approaching other weavers with the revised interview schedule, I approached the “comités” (leadership boards) of the cooperatives of Samac, Santa María and Santo Domingo to gain permission to connect with the weaving organisations within those communities. At this point I was able to approach Ixb’alam Ke, the women’s committee of the cooperative in Samac, the women’s committee of the cooperative in Santa María, and the leadership committee of Hijas de Aj Po’op B’atz’ with a presentation about my research, its goals, and the role I hoped that the women would play in this process. I recognised that communities would have had different levels of engagement through markets, the Peace Corps, or family connections, and with international networks. Weavers might or might not have encountered researchers in the past.

**Organisation**

As I unpicked the depth and breadth of the international connections held by some of the weaving groups, I became curious as to whether the weavers involved in those groups would view the links between museums, textiles, and communities in a different light than would weavers in more isolated communities. I wanted to know what interest the ongoing or future

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13At this juncture I did not know that Ixb’alam Ke had gained an international market with the help of a German-Guatemalan named Olga Reich. I was assuming that the marriage of Margarita Poou’s younger sister Concepción to a Peace Corps volunteer, Jonathan Tharin, would have been the strongest connection amongst the weaving communities to outside markets and opportunities. This is explored further in chapter five on markets.
roles of museums and museum objects hold for source communities as their continued involvement in the international sphere and market provide them with opportunities to imagine their own actual and ideal roles in those spaces. It also meant that the women working with Amalia Gue had very different ideas about museums and their roles than women without the same access to the outside world. Amalia’s visits to Santa Fe and her involvement with the Folk Art Museum in Santa Fe (sponsor of IFAM) had a ripple effect, impacting the understanding of museums across her community.

I took the advice of the secretary of the weaving cooperative Hijas de Aj Po’op B’atz, one of the only weavers I encountered with any real fluency in Spanish, and concentrated on interviewing weavers who were considered to be community leaders, teachers or elders; in other words, women whose views and understanding of these textiles had or would have an impact on the way that other weavers think about picb’il. Margarita (the secretary) encouraged me to follow the model I used in Chamisun: assume that the first, second, or third visit to a weaver's community or house would not yield even a partial interview, but acknowledge that the visits were nevertheless a chance to better understand both the family life of the weaver and the role that weaving plays in her life. Visits could take anywhere from three hours to an entire day, with daily life occurring around me and often with my involvement.

This approach, as prompted by my gatekeepers, added an essential element of participant observation to my research. As such, these visits became significant and contributed integrally to the ways in which I came to know communities and form friendships. They provided me with a context in which to place the data gathered during the “official” interviews and broadened the scope of my research. Weaving seemed to fill gaps in time rather than happen for hours at a time. Weavers were more comfortable allowing me into their homes and communities as a participant observer rather than as an interviewer.

This added angle to my research meant that, while learning to make tortillas, I was able to broach sensitive topics and gain a window into the personal and community politics surrounding each weaving cooperative, particularly the dissolution of the original Ixb’alam Ke. The more time I spent with each household, the franker the weavers living in those households were with me. The daily conversations I had with families and weavers making tortillas, grinding corn, watching children, and otherwise going through the daily routine of the household provided me with a context that became essential for situating my research in the Q’eqchi’ world.

This access allowed me to conduct a micro-ethnography. The community connections and the time I was spending in each community outside of the interviews proved to be as
valuable as the interviews themselves. Were it not for the disruption to my initial fieldwork plan, and the subsequent re-evaluation of my interview schedule and my research approach, I may never have had the opportunity to truly situate *picb’il* weaving within the broader tapestry of Q’eqchi’ life in the Alta Verapaz. I certainly would never have had the intimate window into community conflict and conflict resolution that I was ultimately exposed to during my fieldwork.\(^{14}\)

**WORKING WITH TRANSLATORS**

With the help of my translator, Maria Elena Toj, I stumbled across another research aid: the credibility of my translators’ indigenous identity, or status as “puro Q’eqchi’” in the communities where I worked. All four of the translators I worked with over the course of my fieldwork had been winners of at least two stages of the *Rabin Ajaw*, the indigenous beauty contest held each year in Guatemala. Called “Reinas” or “Princesas Indígenas,” these women were considered by members of both the Ladino and Q’eqchi’ communities to be ambassadors of the Q’eqchi’. Through *Rabin Ajaw*, they all had access to collegiate-level education and extensive experience working with “gringos” or “extranjeros.” Once my translators were satisfied that my research was honest, worthwhile, and non-exploitative, they proved to be vital in my ability to conduct in-depth research in the Alta Verapaz, as they would vouch for me in each community where I worked, using their own hard-won reputations to help me gain access and trust.

**FIELDWORK CHANGES TO DATA CHALLENGES**

My revised data collection and interview methodology also meant that the data I gathered did not fit my initial research questions. Before I could begin to think about *picb’il* textiles as economic or social actors, or about the politicised role of the museum in source communities, I first had to grapple with the meaning and value of the *picb’il* textile itself, and to do that I had

\(^{14}\)I became so enmeshed into community life in Samac that several of the women in the different weaving cooperatives incorporated attempts to manipulate me (some unsuccessful, others perhaps I was not aware of) into their ongoing feud. Amalia Gue sought out photographs of her enemies to use to cast a curse (then of me, for the same purpose) and the leader of another small cooperative routinely quizzed me about any information I might have on *Ix b’alam Ke* or the Pop family cooperative, going so far as to provide me on more than one occasion with a list of potential interview questions specifically about income that she believed only needed to be asked of a handful of specific weavers with market ties, hoping that if I conducted those interviews she could then glean information about markets from me.
to start exploring and understanding day-to-day life in the communities where I was living and working. This meant not only relying on the ethnographies I had used to build my research methodology and to situate my research in a broader context, but also using that data as a springboard for conducting my own textile-centric mini-ethnography. The reliance on the photo-booklets I had created narrowed the focus of my research from textile production in general, to the very specific role of picb’i’l textiles held in museum collections as tools for weavers to access their past. The booklets became ways not only for me to interrogate weavers; but for them to interrogate me to gain a better understanding about historic textiles, museums, and the value of picb’i’l outside of the Alta Verapaz. The pattern booklet became an essential tool for understanding the links between textile patterns produced and Q’eqchi’ spirituality and the representations of ancient Maya spirituality in contemporary textiles. This shift in the use of the photo-booklets, from interview aids to keys to my research pushed me to re-centre museum collections within my work and challenged me to engage with ideas of heritage creation and cultural continuity through what had organically become a photographic repatriation.

By openly sharing with key informants (including my language teacher) the goals and process of my ethnographic data collection, I both gained and lost access to information. I lost the ability to simply observe people without engagement through interviews and as a result, the opportunity to act solely as an observer. What I gained was the creation of relationships with informants who actively sought to fill me in on what they perceived as important aspects of Q’eqchi’ culture that I might be missing out on. I gained guides who shared information with me such as dreams (and their value), religious practices, visits to sacred caves, and an explanation of how to make “boj”\(^{15}\) both poorly and correctly. It was from these conversations that I was able to ask people questions around identity, spirituality, immigration, language and history. These conversations in turn guided my recorded interviews. As I gained context, I also gained an ability to better follow trains of thought and to identify the points in interviews that were worth exploring further.

**Conclusions & Discussion**

My research model builds upon the work of other anthropologists engaging in fieldwork in a cooperative way. It provides a further example of ethnographic data that was collected with the

\(^{15}\)A local alcoholic beverage produced via the fermentation of sugarcane.
active participation of the informants. The participation of my informants problematises my research in some respects because the data collected was necessarily subject to the lenses applied by myself and by my informants and guides. From one perspective, this can “muddy the water” as it were, obscuring the data. From another, the active participation of informants expands the ways in which I was able to think about my subject through the data. In creating an environment where I was the learner, not the expert, I was actively inviting an encounter between an outsider understanding of picb’il textiles and an insider understanding of those same textiles. This allowed for a richer and more thorough theoretical grappling with the data and the way in which they fit into the growing outside understanding of the Maya, giving me the opportunity to take into account not only my own voice as researcher, but also that of my informants and friends as co-researchers.

The expansion of my research into museum ethnography and digital repatriation opened doors to engaging with picb’il textiles across temporal and geographic distances which were brought up by the objects themselves. My revised strategies, driven by these museum objects and my informants’ responses to them, allowed for a broader and more holistic understanding of Q’eqchi’ textiles, picb’il, and the communities in which I worked. This shift in my research model further pushed me to think not only about the role of picb’il textiles in the Alta Verapaz, but also at their role as museum objects in my own context. This came to light as I was returning to Cambridge in late September of 2016. I was presented with the task of collating the data collected, revisiting my initial research proposal, and bringing the two processes together to form a coherent understanding of the building blocks I had established before leaving for fieldwork and the reality of what that fieldwork became during my time in Guatemala.

It was during this collation process that I began to understand that photographic repatriation would become a central theme to my; albeit one that was at first unplanned, and one which was very much driven by my informants. In the following chapters, I address the results of this photographic repatriation research and I aim to bring together the data obtained to form a better understanding of picb’il weaving and the relationships that women have to weaving, historic textiles, museums and their own heritage through textile production.
Embarrassed and contrite, the Sun thought and thought. He wanted to be with Ixb’alam. So he turned himself into a hummingbird and visited the garden around Ixb’alam’s house every day. He settled on tobacco flowers and the tobacco flourished. He sat among vegetable plants when they were young, and the vegetables grew and grew. Ixb’alam could not understand the power of this hummingbird, but she cherished it and she wanted it to weave into her loom so that she too could have its power of life.

So she asked her father to kill the hummingbird with his dart gun. At first her father refused, telling her it was a waste to spend the shot of his blowgun on such a small animal. He was a hunter of deer. But she begged, and finally he captured the hummingbird for her in a napkin. And the Sun, as this hummingbird, pretended to be dead so that Ixb’alam would carry him into her room. Seeing the beautiful delicate bird dead, Ixb’alam cried, and wrapped him in her tecomat, which she placed under her pillow.

It is possible to surmise from the remaining oral history, depictions on vases and murals, and the history translated from ancient Maya glyphs that remain on ruins across Central America, that within ancient Maya civilisations, gender (a constituent part of social hierarchies) was often perceived as a binary structure. Gendered roles in society fell into well defined, if not strict, categories (Cohadas 2002: 21-25; Haviland 1992; Joyce 1999).

The limited visual evidence we have of the pre-classic, classic and postclassic Maya societies comes from painted vases, murals in excavated temples, and the five remaining partial codices that were saved from destruction in the sixteenth century. The post-classic period was documented in a very limited fashion by the early Spanish conquistadors and monks. Gender becomes important when specific named individuals or individuals carrying out gendered tasks are depicted, and often in these cases the gender is subsumed to the person’s place or role in society (Joyce 1992: 63).

When dealing with a named or known individual, gender comes into play in a much more significant way in both their depiction on vases, carvings, or murals and the role that they held in society. This is true for both human historical figures and divine spiritual beings or gods. Male gods and their roles depicted on Maya vases, codices and murals are given a broader range of existence than female gods and roles. Female gods and individuals find their social

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1See the work of K. Anne Pyburn (2004) for a further discussion regarding the difficulty of presenting firm conclusions in archaeological settings.

2Maya written texts, known as codices, were burned by monks and priests during the conquest as they were viewed as antithetical to Christian teachings. At the time of the conquest early bishops such as Diego De Landa recorded the presences of “...a large number of books” (De Landa, translator Gates 1978: 82).
roles and power bifurcated by age and the differentiation between child, young woman, and old woman. Women’s power as creators, carers, and destroyers is rooted inherently in their reproductive life cycle, whereas the power of the male deities is much more deeply rooted in their social and economic role as part of a larger whole, rather than a generalised or gendered one (Devereux 1987; Hendon 2006: 80-82).

Gender can be divorced from the individual or channelled to enhance the power of the opposite gender social role; for example, warrior queens being depicted as particularly bloodthirsty or effective as they are able to channel the destructive power available to women as life-bearers. Women are depicted as rulers in sites from Palenque in Mexico to Tikal in the Petén of Guatemala. Women who rose to prominence in the era of the classic Maya were, like their male counterparts, heirs of previous rulers, or regents to rulers too young to take power on their own behalf (Normark 2012; Bruhns & Stothert 1999: 227-230). It appears to have been crucial for ruling families to keep the power within the family, devaluing the role of gender in comparison to the ability to ensure that specific heir, regents, or even rulers themselves were drawn from within family groups, so much so that the term ajaw or “leader” is genderless in most Maya languages. Lady Six Sky, of Naranjo, demonstrated that women could establish dynasties in their own right. She rose to political prominence and reformed the political landscape after her arranged marriage to an unnamed prince of Naranjo, whose role in history is vastly outshone by hers (Normark 2012). Lady Six Sky is depicted as a conqueror on multiple carvings, including one (see below) that demonstrates her standing over the body of a prisoner of war. Other significant female Maya rulers include Lady Eveningstar, Muwaan Mat, Lady Yohl’ik’nal, and the Lady of Tikal (Martin & Grube 2000).

Maya warrior queens shared in many rituals conducted by their male predecessors or counterparts, including bloodletting, leading warriors to battle, and sacrificial offerings to the gods. The symbolic importance and mythology tied to the ability to create human life was highly valued among ancient Maya, leading some archaeologists to believe that the piercing of male genitalia as an act of bloodletting was done in order to create the new via a symbolic menstruation. This imitation of the menses was seen as necessary for the “birthing” of new eras or successes of the kingdom as a whole (Gustafson 2002: 162). Gendered social roles are more

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3If it were not for the negative connotation in modern language practice to use the term “hag” it might be appropriate here in the sense that hags have been perceived to hold social and spiritual power, wisdom and knowledge.
a result of gendered social profession and depiction rather than servitude of that profession (Gustafson 2002).

Within the ancient Maya pantheon of gods, female gods, male gods, supernatural beings, spirits, and deities without clear or solid gendered identities are responsible for specific aspects of human life and the natural world; thus, when ceremonies were carried out, they too incorporated (and continue to incorporate) specific practices targeted at those gods, and have been historically carried out by individuals who would have a reason to pray to or communicate with a particular deity, often along gendered lines (Bernal-Garcia 2002). Since the fall of the Classic Maya civilisation, Maya language and cultural groups have splintered into individual histories of experience. Maya spirituality, too, has fractured, with some groups focused more on ancient Maya practices of timekeeping (Quiché) or similarly ancient landscape-centred worship (Q’eqchi’) (field notes 2017).

Gendered roles in ancient Maya societies seem to have been imagined as complementary to one another. Men and women fulfilled unique but interdependent roles within any given community, which could not then function if one set of gendered roles were to disappear. An example of the gender binary in ancient Maya depictions can be found in the raising and hunting the deer. Depictions of deer, both as living wild animals and as food, show that while deer were hunted exclusively by men, women are depicted as raising deer, providing them with food and ensuring deer populations remained plentiful. In some cases, deer are depicted as domesticated or semi-tamed. In depictions relating to deer, both men and women are portrayed as vital to the life of the community, with tasks being complementary but specifically gendered in nature. Women, as creators, provide deer with sustenance, but in their dual role as destroyer, also create a situation in which the deer are inevitably the victims of a violent death. Today, the deer depicted in pich’il textiles are one of the images most deeply

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4A powerful and common symbol in ancient Maya mythology. Kej (“deer” in Q’eqchi’) are considered to be spiritually significant animals for contemporary Q’eqchi’ people, and encountering one is both a sign of good luck, and that you are in good standing with the eb’zuul t’zaq’a, or mountain spirits.
associated with an ancient Maya past by contemporary weavers—an extension of a gendered relationship with deer from the past into the present. (White 2005: 373).

**Contemporary Q’eqchi’**

At the turn of the twenty first century there were approximately 6 million Maya people living in Central American and Mexico, who shared more than a geographic space and lineage with their ancient Maya ancestors (Ochoa & Martel 2002). Despite colonisation and hundreds of years of cultural change, the modern and ancient Maya share some spiritual practice and potential cultural continuity in concepts such as family, community, and social roles. Even as Guatemala’s Ladino population continues to adopt westernised understandings and lifestyles, including an ever-shifting understanding of gender and the role of gender in the life of the individual, family, and society, many rural Maya groups continue to live deeply traditional, gendered lives. For the Q’eqchi’, gender is simply one of many important traits that help define an individual’s role within the family and community (Wilson 1995: 40-42).

Many Q’eqchi’ express and understand gender through the binary lens that we understand may have existed in a pre-colonial Mesoamerican world, and some pre-colonial gender norms remain evident in gender relations and conceptions today. The presence of machismo, defined by R.W. Connell as “...a masculine ideal stressing domination of women, competition between men, aggressive display, predatory sexuality and a double standard...” (Connell 2005: 31) continues to influence modern Central American gender norms. Connell stresses that we understand the “gender consequences” of colonisation and the blending of conquistador and local cultures, stating that:

> It is a familiar suggestion that Latin American machismo was a product of the interplay of cultures under colonialism The conquistadors provided both provocation and model. Spanish Catholicism provided the ideology of female abnegation, and economic oppression blocked other sources of authority for men...This has influenced contemporary expressions of Masculinity (Connell 2005: 198).

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5 According to the Guatemalan Department of Education: “The Ladino population has been characterised as a heterogeneous population which expresses itself in the Spanish language as a maternal language, which possesses specific cultural traits of Hispanic origin mixed with indigenous cultural elements, and dresses in a style commonly considered as western.”

6 This is not to dismiss the hierarchical aspects of social relations, which will be discussed shortly.
Evidence of a strong gender hierarchy adopted from Spanish and Ladino cultures is present and influential, as is evidence that, underneath the veneer of that machismo, a subverted and indigenous understanding of gender identities and relationships exist. The presence of an imported hegemonic masculinity does not exclude or override the value of non-hegemonic indigenous masculinities, or other blended Ladino/Maya masculinities. In the town of San Juan Chamelco, local protestant ministers continually preach against the evils of homosexuality, going so far in 2016 as to celebrate a massacre at a gay nightclub in Florida as God’s “reward” for sin (field notes 2016). Meanwhile, an indigenous Q’eqchi’ trans-woman is well known and tolerated, if not accepted, in the Q’eqchi’ Catholic community of the town. She regularly attends church using Q’eqchi’ women’s traje instead of men’s clothing and often shops in the local market or participates in community activities in either women’s traje or western feminine garb. Conversations about her with Ladino contacts were met with phrases such as “the devil,” “he will go to hell” or “how strange...there must be something wrong,” while my Q’eqchi’ contacts just shrugged their shoulders and said “así es así.” “It is what it is,” almost without exception.7

Neither the Ladino/Protestant community nor the Q’eqchi’/Catholic community provided much support for this woman during her frequent arrests and harassment by the police—mostly non-Mayans from Guatemala City. The Protestantism that is spreading through the Alta Verapaz often utilises traditional gender roles as another tactic for differentiating themselves from the Catholics or even non-Christian practising Maya. The tolerance in Catholic communities for individuals such as trans-women and couples living together extensively before marriage is used as a dividing point (as is language: Q’eqchi’ vs. Spanish) by Protestant congregations and preachers. Being Protestant means being more Ladino, and that means rejecting aspects of male and female identities that do not mesh with the overt machismo ideals (field notes 2016). This layering and blending of different masculinities between communities is emblematic of the layering and blending of Q’eqchi’, Ladino, and western culture in the Alta Verapaz throughout the centuries since colonisation.

Within contemporary Q’eqchi’ society, gender roles are closely linked to kinship ties, the social roles within kinship groups, and the roles that smaller kinship groups play within communities. Q’eqchi’ men and women occupy specific places in the Q’eqchi’ junkab’al’, or family—both of which are important, and neither of which can function without the other, thus

7The only exception was a woman who was concerned that the trans woman had stolen a corte from a drying line, but her concern was not with the trans woman living as a woman, but rather with theft in general.
giving women more social power and status than machismo affords. The subtle de-emphasis of machismo in Q’eqchi’ culture does not mean that Q’eqchi’ culture represents a space in which women are not dominated. It is possible that gender relations within communities are complicated by an overt machismo being subverted by a more flexible understanding of the relations between genders. This may explain the powerful role that women have played in helping resist the Ladinoisation of the Alta Verapaz as indigenous gendered roles and norms are less overtly oppressive or violent towards them. The junkab’al, as we shall see, is the core of Q’eqchi’ community life and identity.

Further to understanding this complex interplay is the relationship between identity, weaving and personhood in the Alta Verapaz. For the purposes of this work, the term ‘identity’ is used in reference to social categories that differentiate groups of individuals. Building from the work of Charles Hale (1997), within the Latin American context social identities are complex, multi-layered and vital to understanding complex relations between individuals and the state. Personhood is (for the purposes of this work) considered to be those internal characteristics which endow a human being with the essential characteristics necessary for being a ‘person.’ In this context not all people share all aspects of personhood, but all individuals have some aspects of personhood. These aspects can be internal or relate to one’s social and community roles.

To better understand personhood in Q’eqchi’ society it is necessary to understand the base unit of Q’eqchi’ life: the junkab’al. The term junkab’al, literally “one house” (jun = one, kab’ = house) can also be understood to represent the unit as a shared identity. For Q’eqchi’ families, this junkab’al includes not only current living members, but also ancestors and descendants; all the individuals who have participated in building, and will one-day benefit from, the junkab’al. Through the junkab’al, individuals share a very real connection with people they will never meet. The junkab’al itself is dependent on the ability of each individual member to carry out their expected role, which is defined by gender, age and social status. Throughout life, people will move from one set of responsibilities to another. These transitions are more emphasised for women as they transition from child, to young woman, to wife, to mother and/or aunt, and then to grandmother, with clear social roles tied to biological fertility; however, men have complementary roles from child to father to grandfather (field notes & interviews 2016).

The Q’eqchi’ extension of the personhood of the individual into care and work objects (Kockelman 2011: 440) can be understood on the macro level as well, whereby individuals are then part of the larger kinship identity group established by the junkab’al. Just as objects are
smaller parts of greater wholes, individuals are smaller parts of kinship or family groups, which are themselves smaller parts of pueblos or communities. Within the junkab’al, individuals play specific and important roles, and the success or failure of an individual is then the success or failure of the junkab’al as a whole. Without the sum total of the working parts, the whole could not function; conversely, any individual part outside the structure provided by the whole would be lost.

The roles of men and women within a junkab’al are of equal importance, as the kinship unit could not exist or function without a variety of both masculine and feminine roles. The fulfilment of these gendered roles is essential to the personhood of individuals. Although sons are preferred to daughters because men are responsible for the economic wellbeing of the junkab’al by working outside the home or community, either as labourers, store owners, or employees, daughters play an important role in the life of the junkab’al. Men have the responsibility to provide spiritual leadership, and to represent the family as a unit at religious events during the course of the year. Women within Q’eqchi’ families are responsible for the home from the point of its construction within a family grouping of houses until their deaths. This extends from meal preparation to the purchase, care, and washing of clothing to garden management to child rearing. Women, too, can engage in economic labour, but rarely migrate or work outside their local communities or nearby towns. Women are responsible for stalls in the kayajil (market) and often vend food and snacks from their home. Women with the requisite skill-set weave or tailor.

With the exception of immigration to Guatemala City, or the United States for work, Q’eqchi’ young adults do not leave their parents homes until they marry, if they do at all, and even then, daughters go to live in the same home as their in-laws, or in houses very near their in-laws’ house, while sons stay with their original junkab’als (or family units). In either case, it is considered the social responsibility of the young men and their wives to care for the young men’s parents. This holds true whether there is only one son, or many.

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8In a Q’eqchi’ village midwives can be paid double or even triple for the delivery of a boy baby than they are for a girl baby. Average rates in the aldeas of Cobán range from two hundred to three hundred Quetzales (twenty to thirty pounds) for a girl, and six hundred to nine hundred Quetzales (sixty to ninety pounds) for a boy. Hospital births cost the same regardless of gender; however, families are hesitant to attend hospitals for births because of the high incidence of unnecessary caesarean sections, with some local health workers estimating that over 60% of women they send to hospitals receive caesarean sections (field notes 2017).

9Both of which are considered very temporary states, and usually undertaken in such a way to better the financial situation of the entire family. A Q’eqchi’ immigrant does not establish themself in the new geographic space, rather they work for six months to two years, and then return to the community, having accomplished a goal: financing the building a new house, saving up enough for children to attend private schools, paying for a medical expense, buying a truck.
Young people, usually teenagers, who have the opportunity to pursue middle or high school education will stay with relatives or close family friends outside their own communities—or, as a last resort, school-provided housing. It is exceptionally rare for individuals to willingly live outside of the network provided by their junkab’al, and even those living away will return whenever possible for weekend or holiday visits.

It is exceptionally unusual for an individual to live alone, or even to “rent” a room from a family. Employees might live with employers, but even then the relationship developed is far stronger than that of landlord and tenant, employee and employer. Living with non-blood relatives means incorporating yourself as an “adoptee” into their junkab’al. With that unofficial adoption, the roles that you play in that family unit extend far beyond what a tenant or employee would take on and may include childcare, family celebrations, being cared for yourself when ill, and marking major holidays or ceremonies with the family you live with rather than with your blood family. While there are hierarchical differences between blood family members who live together, and employees who live with employers, those differences seem to fade over time, and the longer someone has been living within a junkab’al, the more likely they are to be considered an invaluable member of their family. During the course of my fieldwork, establishing blood ties between individuals proved difficult as interviewees would refer to individuals they identified as being a part of their current established junkab’al as “my sister,” “my mother,” “my cousin,” or “my daughter,” when in fact there was no blood or marriage tie. Q’eqchi’ communities were based on kinship as ‘relational,’ an idea Janet Carsten used to expand our understandings of kinship beyond ties derived from common ancestry. For Carsten, kinship can be a connection forged by action (Carsten 2000: 150). In the Q’eqchi’ world it manifests as shared living space, labour, and memory. The interchangeable use of familial tie terms to describe kinship ties speaks to the degree of importance that members of a junkab’al share in each other's lives.

What might be called as “new” junkab’als are not regularly established, as it takes years and even decades for a household to become a full part of a community, just as it takes decades for an individual to become a full adult. People simply move from one established household to another, or their roles within that established household shift and change as they age. Should a family with many sons establish a series of households, they are not truly independent households or junkab’al until well into the adulthood of these sons. Once the younger generation have established families of their own capable of fulfilling all the roles necessary to live as a unit within the community, they can be considered a junkab’al. Without all the
requisite social roles—grandfather, grandmother, fathers, mothers, aunts, uncles, children, animals, etc.—the junkab’al cannot exist.

CORN PLANTING

The strictest gendered activity in contemporary Q’eqchi’ life is the planting of milpa, or corn. During the annual corn planting, it is only men who may plant corn, and the oldest male member of the household is responsible for inviting friends, neighbours and relatives to participate in the planting of his milpa patch. The planting of corn is an important ceremonial, spiritual, and economic event for the family, as corn and its production are deeply tied to the identity of the modern Maya as ‘children of the corn.’ Corn makes up the staple in most Q’eqchi’ diets, so a good milpa crop can mean the difference between economic success and starvation. Corn planting and harvest also feature heavily in the understanding of and keeping of time, and the relationship between time and the natural world by marking out the phases of the agricultural year. During the corn planting it is the mature women of the household who prepare a ceremonial dinner, set up an altar and offerings, burn incense, and serve the food when the corn planters arrive home after the day of work. In the week leading up to corn planting, men will have travelled into the mountains and petitioned the tzuulíaq’a through special ceremonies.

All family members, and male volunteers, will eat simple diets of tortillas, corn meal, and beans in preparation for the planting of the corn. Abstaining from sex, alcohol, as well as meat and other rich foods, men and women sleep in different rooms, as a successful planting requires men to be “pure.” Many comparisons are drawn between the corn planting ceremonies and sexual relationships (Wilson 1995: 152). The Maya were created by the gods from maize, and are sustained by it, hence the growth of maize is the creation of life. In the act of corn planting, the earth supplants the role of women. Planting corn becomes an act of insemination, and all of the actions carried out by communities for the preparation, planting, and celebration of corn are then seen as male-acts, including the activities carried out by women.

A family, or junkab’al, as a whole becomes male in response to the female nature of the earth. The role required by humankind in order to facilitate a successful corn harvest, upon

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10 Or weeks, my informants were vague on the amount of time necessary to prepare for the corn planting.
11 A term I suspect is borrowed from the Catholic Spanish, as within an indigenous sense and in the Q’eqchi’ language, terms applied more to a “fullness of vitality” or a “preparedness” rather than a “purity.”
which all family members depend for life, wellbeing, and food, is a male one. This transition into a gendered identity, by the junkab’al, speaks to the fluidity of gender itself in theorised conceptions and the rigidity of gendered roles in day-to-day life. What is not important is the gender of the junkab’al in general; what is important is that the junkab’al perform as a male gender when engaging in a male gendered act: the planting of the corn. After the corn planting, it is men who conduct the actual planting; although, without the entire household participating in the preparation, celebration, and care of the crops, the corn planting loses its value as a spiritual as well as sustenance act.

The success of the corn crop is never dependent upon the earth, which is viewed as always fertile, but rather on the actions of the community and the corn planters themselves. If the corn is planted and it does not germinate, or if there is a drought or a flood which kills the seedlings, or the rain ends early and the corn ends up small and dry, the failure is seen as the fault of the men in the community, because they failed to properly honour the tzuultaq’a or did not adequately prepare themselves for planting. This could also be because they lied in their ceremonial practices, offerings, and prayers, or failed to recognise the gifts of the tzuultaq’a and the earth in the preceding corn plant and harvest, or were too greedy and prideful of a good harvest—taking credit for something that they did not create. The earth, and by extension the fertility of the woman, is viewed as substantially more powerful than the fickle virility of the man, and by extension far more stable and rooted in existence.\(^\text{12}\)

**Gender and the Life Cycle**

Women within a junkab’al are responsible for the identity, care, spirituality, and language of the home. Moving into a new community, a woman and her family will hire a Maya priest to bless the room or home in which she and her new husband will reside. (Such spaces often remain empty and unused for weeks or months after construction, until they are blessed in a ceremony and considered suitable for human habitation). Women conduct ceremonies to protect the home and to ensure the health of individuals within it. Women’s lives revolve around the creation of the space, which fosters the creation and sustainment of the family and of the Q’eqchi’ Maya community. Without the space provided in the home, sustaining an

\(^{12}\)This belief can in turn have very difficult consequences for women who are unable to conceive and labelled infertile by western-educated doctors, as it is a failure of their very gendered identity rather than simply an illness or medical condition. It also leaves these women with limited roles in their communities, where their power as “creators of life” and “nurturers” are what set them apart from male gender norms and afford them the limited recognition and freedoms that they do have.
identity as a Q’eqchi’ Maya becomes impossible, as the Q’eqchi’ do not exist as isolated individuals, but rather as members of the complex social structure of the junkab’al and the communities formed by the eb’junkab’al. The home as an explicitly Q’eqchi’ space serves as a political tool to continue the political existence of the Q’eqchi’ in the face of ongoing colonisation, racism, Ladinoisation, and globalisation. As Q’eqchi’ communities are encroached upon by the outside world, the ability of a woman to maintain a space in which Q’eqchi’ language, belief, culture, and religion remain central becomes essential to the continuance of Q’eqchi’ communities and Q’eqchi’ political power. The more “puro Q’eqchi’” a woman is, the more “puro Q’eqchi’” (pure Q’eqchi’) her husband and children are able to be.

Throughout a woman’s life, she will fulfil a series of roles, as the gendered places of both women and men in Q’eqchi’ communities shift as they age. As young children, both boys and girls spend most of their time at home with their mothers, grandmothers, and aunts. Childcare in Q’eqchi’ communities—especially small aldeas—is very much a community affair. Women going to market to vend vegetables, fruits, and other agricultural products will often take an older child along with them while leaving the younger siblings at home with another relative. While small children under the age of three or four are rarely outside of physical contact with their mothers, slightly older children roam freely within communities between the houses of close relatives. During the course of my fieldwork, it became obvious that children more or less ate meals at whichever home they were in when food was being prepared, provided the parents were relatives or members of what could be considered one junkab’al. By the age of ten to twelve, boys start going to clear fields or pick coffee with their fathers, and girls make tortillas and take care of younger siblings at home. Despite recent increased efforts by the Guatemalan government to provide a grade school education in more Maya communities, it is unusual for a boy to stay in school past the age of fourteen (grade nine), and for a girl to stay in school past the age of twelve (grade six). Even for children who are in school, attendance is sporadic. Families frequently pull children out of school to assist with economic activities such as coffee harvest and community social and cultural events such as corn planting or religious holidays, or even because they disagree with something a teacher has said or done. While boys will be allowed to travel to neighbouring communities to attend middle or high school, it is considered very dangerous for girls to do so. Unless there are family

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13Plural for junkab’al.
14Both as a helper, and as a witness should a jealous husband accuse her of cheating on him.
members that they can board with near the school, it is essentially impossible for young women to get an education outside their own small village.

As young women mature, they take on more responsibilities in their houses. This can include learning to weave if they are a part of weaving family or taking over in market spots and engaging in more external economic activity as they demonstrate their ability to contribute to their own family, and to their future in-laws. The concept of an inherited social role is key, with women following directly in the footsteps of their mothers, grandmothers or, more often, mothers-in-law. Inheritance, as a theme, came up over and over again during my interviews. Parents provide for their children through the use of physical, ontological, and cultural inheritances. Just as people could physically pass on a piece of land to their children, they were also capable of passing on an identity. This lifestyle fosters a special relationship between women and their mothers-in-law. Prior to the birth of a woman’s first child, she is still very much considered a child in her mother-in-law’s home; full adulthood is not granted to young wives until they themselves are mothers. It is the responsibility of the mother-in-law to ensure that a young woman is able to fulfil her social duties within the junkab’al and the responsibility of the young woman to care for and assist her mother-in-law as she manages the parental household. Market stalls, in both indoor markets and outdoor street markets, are inherited matrilineally, and occupations such as weaving, tailoring, or baking are taught within the family. Women inherit as much of their social and labour capital from their in-laws as they do from their own parents. Many women who did not learn to weave from their mother, instead learned to weave from mothers-in-law, as social and economic skills are transmitted both to your own children and to new members of your junkab’al.

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15This happens particularly in families where women had no daughters of their own—the daughter-in-law will then take the place of the daughter.
While marriage proposals are usually driven by romantic love, for a proposal to be accepted, both families must be in agreement that the young man is able to economically support his family in the event of an addition of another mouth to feed, and the young woman must be able to demonstrate to her mother-in-law that she is capable of providing a Q’eqchi’ home for her new husband. Young women go from being the “helpers” in their homes of origin to being the helpers of their new mother-in-laws, who are expected to educate their new daughters-in-law on the ways in which their family runs a home. The youngest daughter or the newest daughter-in-law in any family carries the brunt of the physical labour in the feminine sphere. With no children of her own, she will wash clothing, make tortillas, and maintain the house so that her more senior female relatives have time to vend at the market, tend to children, weave, or engage in other economic activities. New daughters-in-law may apprentice at market stalls or even in a new agricultural pursuit the
family is engaging in, but only once her other household duties have been fulfilled. Transitioning into young motherhood is the first step that a woman takes towards holding a senior position in her new family, and the first sign that she is able to hold authority. Mothers, even if grandmothers are present, are the ultimate authorities in the lives of their children. Young women are expected to heed the advice of older women and other mothers as they care for their children, and their position as a mother, and a holder of motherhood, provides them with a degree of authority not only in their own home, but also in the community at large. The transition into motherhood is not a transition from childhood into adulthood, as women are considered more or less to be adult around the age of seventeen to eighteen, but rather an assumption of further responsibility, and a step into a fuller adulthood, that in turn gives her more authority within the community at large. Many young women of this age who have not learned to weave from mothers or grandmothers will learn to weave from neighbours or more distant relatives during this transition.

The chart in figure 3.2 demonstrates the total numbers of weavers interviewed or encountered sorted by their specific age. My interview data demonstrates that the vast majority of women who currently weave *picb'il* are in their early twenties and are either recently married or planning on marriage. These women have both the time (as they have few or no children) to weave, and a vested interest in developing the skills that will give them financial stability moving forward. The prevalence of weavers of different ages in each of the communities where I worked was slightly different. In the charts shown in figures 3.3 & 3.4 I demonstrate a breakdown of age range by community, using the two communities in which I conducted the majority of my interviews, Santa María and Samac.
GENDER, FAMILY, LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

The act of bearing and raising children remains an essential aspect of all Mayan societies, including that of the Q’eqchi’. A Q’eqchi’ identity is not simply a blood relation or ancestral tie to people from the past; it is an active understanding of and engagement with Q’eqchi’ communities and ways of being and living, which are rooted in the experience of being raised in a “Q’eqchi’ home” by a Q’eqchi’ mother. Many of my informants identified people as “being Q’eqchi’” based on whether or not their mother was Q’eqchi’. One informant outside of San Juan Chamelco told me repeatedly, “My children’ are Q’eqchi’ because I am Q’eqchi’.”

Women, and the ways in which they express or think about their identities as Q’eqchi’, are essential to the production of this identity in children. It is through their mothers and grandmothers that children learn language, and via their mothers that boys in particular continue to use the Q’eqchi’ language in their adult lives despite their formal education in Spanish. In most Q’eqchi’ communities of the Alta Verapaz, women over the age of thirty have, at best, the ability to understand some Spanish, but very few speak any. Adults whose mothers spoke Q’eqchi’ at home will consider themselves to be Q’eqchi’ to an extent, regardless of the degree to which they then speak Q’eqchi’ in their adult lives or the degree to which they have entered Ladino culture (e.g., speaking more Spanish than Q’eqchi’, or abandoning indigenous traje). Conversely, individuals raised by Ladino mothers may never be considered full members of Q’eqchi’ communities despite any fluency in Q’eqchi’ obtained because, while the language holds a great deal of cultural power to construct identity, unless it is literally one’s mother tongue, that power holds little meaning.

THROUGHOUT LIFE

As women age, their importance, authority, and respect in Q’eqchi’ community’s increases. Older women are not only respected for their experience, but also credited with being the literal source of life for every child, grandchild, and great-grandchild that they have. Grandparents, and grandmothers in particular, are viewed as holding more of a connection to ancient Maya knowledge, and a Maya past, than younger individuals. This affords them a level of respect in the community due to a sense of a more complete “Q’eqchi’-ness.” Living a long life in and of

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16The term “grandmother” in the Q’eqchi’ language both refers to someone who physically has grandchildren and is also a term of respect for an older woman in a community who is perceived to have contributed a great deal during her life and to hold a significant amount of knowledge.
itself provides grandparents with a connection with a Q’eqchi’ past that younger individuals are simply incapable of having or understanding. Grandmothers within houses are the authorities not only on household matters, but also on economic and spiritual ones. Older women may choose not to carry out ceremonial practices or visit the remote mountain caves where the tzualtaq’á can be reached via prayer, but they remind younger male and female members of their households to complete these rituals.

Grandmothers, and in their absence older aunts, are also considered the experts on illness, injuries, and the differences between a physical ailment that requires a visit to the doctor and a spiritual one. In some communities of San Juan Chamelco, grandmothers are considered so connected with the spiritual realm that they can foresee their own deaths and will request a special huipil to be woven in the style of tzot\(^\text{17}\) that they will wear from its completion to their own deaths, and as funerary garments. Only women have access to this information; men, who are unable to give life, are thought to be unable to sense when their own life is running out.

Entering motherhood impacts a woman’s weaving only in that she will have less time to weave as the responsibilities of parenting come into being. Many women weave through pregnancy and will even nurse while weaving. The communal nature of Q’eqchi’ life allows for mothers to rely on the help and support of sisters, grandmothers, and older daughters in the raising of children.

Older women who no longer weave are still considered weavers in the same way that all old women are considered “grandmothers,” independent of whether they had children. Old men are treated with the same respect and given the same food upon return from the corn planting as young men, even if they did nothing but nap at the house in a chair. With age comes a transition from needing to engage in the active daily life of a community to contributing just by being present as an anciano, or old one. For the Q’eqchi’, the state of being old is in and of itself an important part of the life cycle, and “grandparents” are viewed as not only good sources of advice, but also people who have a more authentic and deeper connection to the Q’eqchi’ past, and thus to the Q’eqchi’ identity.

In this sense, Rosario Coy, a weaving teacher to many women in Samac and Santa María is known as Grandmother Rosario (QanaRux). The recognition of her as a grandmother, through the title Qana, is not based simply on her age, as many other women of comparable or older age are not referred to as Qana outside their immediate families, but rather a recognition

\(^{17}\)Another style of white on white sheer weave, associated with the ancient past. Tzot huipils in museum collections hold less value than picb’il textiles do to local communities because the textile production is much simpler, does not include ontologically significant designs and has not been ‘lost’ in part in the same way.
of the role she has played for so many women in the community, quite literally that of their grandmother, at least as far as textile production is concerned

Q’eqchi’ women express Maya or indigenous identity, not only through their commitment to serving as mothers, aunts, daughters, and grandmothers within the traditional structure of the junkab’al, but also overtly within and outside of their Q’eqchi’ communities through the utilisation of the traditional Q’eqchi’ blouses (huipils, which are exclusively woven by women) and skirts (cortes, which are woven by men on floor looms). With the use of male indigenous dress having all but disappeared in the aftermath of the Guatemalan Civil War (1963-1996), it can be seen that the indigenous dress of Maya women from all language groups has come to symbolise a commitment to Maya culture and a resistance to the ongoing process of Ladinoisation and, by proxy, colonisation. As the pan-Maya movement has gained some traction, it has become more and more common for women to wear not only their own trajes, but to seek out and wear trajes from other regions both as stylistic choices and as a way to express an identity that is more “Maya” than, for example, Mam, Quiché or Pocomam.

GENDERED IDENTITY AND POLITICAL EXPRESSION

In the past fifty years, the role of women as the “bearers of culture” has come to particular prominence as Guatemala’s violent civil war limited the ability of men to wear indigenous traje, speak indigenous languages, or engage in Maya spiritual practices. In the past twenty-five years, as men immigrated to Guatemala City, Canada, and the United States for work (sometimes returning, sometimes not), women have become the pillars of a continuous Q’eqchi’ presence and identity in the Alta Verapaz.

Unlike their husbands, brothers, and fathers whose indigeneity is only recognisable when it is openly claimed, Q’eqchi’ and other Maya women declare their indigeneity via their clothing. Literally wearing their identities on their bodies, women are unable to escape the rampant racism against the indigenous that exists in Guatemalan society and are a visible reminder to the world that the Maya people remain, in some sense, unconquered still. In wearing traje they are not simply Maya, but Maya women. Looking back on Judith Butler’s work around embodied identity (Butler 1999: 137), the use of Maya traje symbolises the

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18 Common before the start of the civil war, today men only continue to wear indigenous traje, or clothing, in a handful of Tzutujil, Mam, and Kaqchikel communities. Indigenous clothing was used by the Guatemalan military to isolate and identify suspected “guerrillas,” and men facing violent repression and death began wearing western clothing to hide indigenous affiliation and identity.
intentional adoption of two politicised and repressed identities in Guatemala; that of woman
and that of Maya, as well as a subvert third identity specifying where they sit in the Maya
world. Early on in my field research an interviewee pointed at her daughter, wearing sports
clothing and making tortillas on the *comal* and said:

> We are indígena. She is indígena. But if she wears her *traje* to
school they call her ‘indio’ and ‘estupido’ so she doesn’t want to
wear it. She doesn’t understand that her *traje* and *corte* and
*trienas* are who she is, if she doesn’t wear them no one knows
that she is Q’eqchi’. She will forget that she is Q’eqchi’. And she
should not, I am proud to wear my *traje*, people need to know I
am indígena. (field notes 2017)

The importance of women to the Q’eqchi’ ability to retain cultural autonomy and an
independent identity cannot be understated. Silvia Federici has emphasised over and over again
the value that women play in the expression of dissent, in large part enabled by their separation
from the wage economy (Federici 2012). Whether by design or accident, the gendered division
of labour that provides for a male and female sphere of dissent also provides indigenous women
with the ability to create Q’eqchi’ spaces separate from Ladino spaces. The *eb’kayajil* (town
markets) are formalised and organised by women who do so in the Q’eqchi’ language using
Q’eqchi’ social norms. The Q’eqchi’ control of local markets extends the influence of Q’eqchi’
villages into the larger mixed towns and municipal centres, as we will see in chapter five on
Markets. Federici’s work focuses far more on the role of global capital in breaking down
ditional gendered spaces and forcing women into wage markets, but the basis of her analysis
gives grounding to the informal and unrecognised role that women, and female-gendered
spaces, have in the creation and sustenance of resistance. Her work also gave credence to the
idea that as colonisation ignored the spheres of women, it inadvertently left pockets of space
that were never directly colonised, and perhaps to this day remain only partially colonised—
spaces in which Q’eqchi’ identity, culture, and heritage survive.

The use of Maya *traje* has given women a public platform from which to silently voice
political dissent through identity. By publicly wearing their identities on their bodies, Q’eqchi’
and other Maya women are not only rejecting westernised ideals of femininity, but also
embracing and asserting Q’eqchi’ and a Maya femininity tied into personal and community
histories. During interviews, many women talked about weaving as a part of a longer tradition
of women’s work and women’s identities. One informant stated:
We do not know very much about the grandmothers of our grandmothers. What they say is that all the grandmothers used to weave. My grandmother was older then, when I was born, but it was not long before I saw her weave, and she told me that weaving is what all women used to do. For their *huipils* and *traje*.

For this informant, and others, the role of weaver is an identity that they have maintained control over to some extent specifically because of their exclusion from the capitalist market economy and as a part of creating identity through activity and clothing. Building from Simone de Beauvoir’s famous “one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman,” (de Beauvoir 1949: 267; Butler 1994) Judith Butler insists that we cannot understand gender in a space or time or society without acknowledging that gender itself is an active and political state. The production of a gendered identity is an ever-fluid “repetition of acts,” and “…the personal becomes an expansive category, one which accommodates, if only implicitly, political structures usually viewed as public. Indeed, the very meaning of the political expands as well” (Butler 1988: 523). For Q’eqchi’ people, this expansion becomes temporal as well: gendered identities are rooted in not only the “repetition of acts” within one individual’s lifetime, but also the manufactured belief that these acts are a shared part of Q’eqchi’ experience across time.

The very act of being Maya can be an act of political resistance. Maya women, wearing Maya clothing, are demonstrating to a non-Maya government and a world distinctly unfriendly to the Maya that their people still exist through the very gendered nature of their performed and internal identities. Rigoberta Menchu Tum is, perhaps, the most well-known Maya woman outside of Guatemala; and throughout much of her activist and political life has relied on the use of indigenous *traje* as an overt political statement regarding body politics and the production or ownership of a feminine Maya identity (Ehlers 2000: 19. Nelson 1994, 1999).\(^\text{19}\)

Writing first in 1981, and cited here in the new 2015 edition, bell hooks\(^\text{20}\) challenged western, white feminists to extend their understanding of what constituted “feminist” ideas, and the ways in which repression could be expressed by the eradication of suppressed groups’ internal understandings of themselves and their own identities in favour of a western, white feminist ideal (hooks 2015: 121-124). hooks asserts that while feminism is centred in a white, western

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\(^{19}\)While appropriate to mention Menchu Tum, this thesis limits engagement with her work as the women with whom I worked had limited awareness of Menchu and regarded much of her work as unrelated to their own work and struggle around identity as they come from distinct regions of Guatemala which have had disparate experiences of colonialism from conquest through to the modern era.

\(^{20}\)bell hooks intentionally chooses not to capitalise the first letter of either her forename or her surname in her publications, I am choosing to cite her as she prefers her name to be used in professional contexts.
experience, it cannot claim to represent the liberation of all women. To seek liberation for all women, feminism must accept an intersectional understanding of the intersections of gender, race, class and nationality (hooks 1981: 157). Today it is Q’eqchi’ women who visually represent Q’eqchi’ culture in public spaces in the Ladino world, and women whose daily lives in the community define the life cycle and work cycle of the junkab’al and through that it is women whose daily action becomes resistance; whose very identities become radical.

Butler states, “The body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pre-given cultural relations. But neither do embodied selves pre-exist the cultural conventions which essentially signify bodies” (Butler 1988: 526). If this is true, then we cannot deny the power and meaning present in the production and use of clothing which publicly proclaims a Maya identity, and we cannot uproot that identity from a web of ancestors stretching back into pre-Hispanic times. Referring to the production and wearing of traje, one interviewee emphasised the importance of both in Q’eqchi’ life, saying, “Because this way we will not lose what our ancestors left us, and if we stop weaving, we will lose what our grandmothers taught us.” Another interviewee, an older woman, said, “You used to go to market and look out and know who the women from the aldeas were. All in white.” The same woman emphasised that the integration of machine-woven huipils into common use limited her ability to identify with other rural women visually. The loss of her ability to integrate with a visible public identity impacted her deeply.

Thinkers such as Gayatri Spivak further challenge the way that we (western academics) think about the voices of those living on the periphery of our world. Spivak expands our definition of the non-western as “other” and the assumptions that westernised understandings of identity, value and rights were understandings that should be embraced across the world (Spivak 1988). Spivak pushes those who think about gender to engage not simply with the western academic history of gender studies, but also with individual people and their personal understandings of who they are--what sits at the core of their identities (Spivak 1988).

Kistler’s work in San Juan Chamelco, referred to earlier, provides a basis for understanding gendered roles in Q’eqchi’ society as integral to the functioning of communities as units made up of junkab’al’eb’. Q’eqchi’ families and towns are integrated communities, in which the actions of each individual are essential to the continuation of the communities’ identity and future (Kistler 2010a: 412). In this context, women’s role as “bearers of the culture” places in their hands a responsibility to their entire communities to carry forward their unique identity as Q’eqchi’ Maya.
In the face of ongoing suppression—violent, economic, and social—this role becomes deeply politicised, and the ways in which women view themselves and their lives has the potential to impact the future of the Q’eqchi’. We cannot ignore how Q’eqchi’ individuals, families, and communities situate themselves in a tapestry of Q’eqchi’ identity and history. For the Q’eqchi’ people and women, the link to a shared Q’eqchi’ past and ancestors is integral to their identity today. People are not simply living out their own lives; they are becoming a part of a culture and network that extends into the distant past and future.

**RABIN AJAW**

Guatemala’s indigenous beauty pageant, *Rabin Ajaw*, held every year since 1971, ostensibly celebrates the beauty and cultural diversity of Maya women across Guatemala. Founded during the civil war and titled “*Reina Indígena Nacional,*” the competition was modelled after a tradition of the Cobán annual fair, which began in 1936 to model indigenous clothing to a majority Ladino and Guatemalan-German audience. In 1960, the first “*India Bonita Cobanera*” was crowned, and the tradition began its imitation of western beauty pageants blended with indigenous tradition and values that continues today. Called at the time “*Rabin Cobán,*” or “Daughter of Cobán,” the title coexisted with “*Princesa Tezulutlan,*” which was a beauty competition including all communities in the Alta Verapaz—not just Cobán or Q’eqchi’, but Poqomchi and even Quiché women. In 1969, local teacher and organiser Marco Aurelio Alonso invited women from across Guatemala to compete, turning a local beauty pageant into *Rabin Ajaw*: daughter of the ruler. In its early years *Rabin Ajaw* was heavily supported and even funded by the Guatemalan government, which sought to use the nationalisation of the regional pageant as a demonstration of their commitment to indigenous rights, and was very quickly co-opted by indigenous groups themselves. Early *Rabin Ajaw* title holders used the position to call out the human rights abuses committed by the Guatemalan government and to take public stands when other women and communities could not (Field interviews *Rabin Ajaw* competitors Elena Toj, Margarita Beb, Yolanda Tul, August 2016).

Since then, *Rabin Ajaw* has evolved into a pageant that includes activities designed to prove linguistic, cultural, and historical knowledge, and today serves an important role in formalising and publicising Maya identity both internally to Guatemala and in an international context.

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21 A false commitment, as the pageant was used as a ruse to cover ongoing human rights abuses against the indigenous peoples of Guatemala.
sphere. The women who advance through the pageant system to *Rabin Ajaw* are considered exemplary Maya women. Each of Guatemala’s twenty-two departments has the right to send an indigenous woman, who is selected in a series of internal pageants, as a representative to compete. Each major town or municipality holds a pageant and selects a winner and runner-up. Those “princesses” then compete in a departmental pageant, and the winner then travels to Cobán to compete for the title of *Rabin Ajaw*. Competing in the local township competitions, and the state or department level, and in *Rabin Ajaw* itself, is considered a great honour for both the women and their communities. The women, their families, and their communities are responsible for the expense of the *traje* from her language group for ceremonial and daily wear. This can include jewellery, fireworks, candles, and offerings. Communities are also responsible for her travel and accommodation while she is competing, and to support her in person should she advance, meaning that the more successful a candidate is, the more a community invests in her success. To win, the women must demonstrate an ability to function in the Ladino/Spanish world while understanding Maya identity and demonstrating their own identities via *traje*, dancing, history, and advocacy.

When one attends the local Cobán, Chamelco, and Carchá competitions (as well as other pageants such as Princesa Tezulutlan, to select the representative from Alta Verapaz to *Rabin Ajaw*) the value that communities place on their representatives becomes clear. At the Cobán competition in 2016, over forty people travelled in a bus hired by one community to support their candidate by lighting ceremonial candles and standing as she performed a ritual on stage. Another community had printed a seven-foot tall portrait of their contestant and dutifully held it high above their seats for the entirety of the competition (field notes 2016). *CREOMPAZ*, Cobán’s military base, sponsors a contestant each year—with young men contributing portions of their annual military salary to demonstrate the base’s commitment to the local community.

The contestants and winners of each of these pageants, up to and including the newly elected *Rabin Ajaw* each year, are seen as representatives not only of themselves and their language communities, but also of their entire linguistic groups within and outside the Maya world. Their gendered performance as Maya women of different heritages reflect the strength

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22 The San Juan Chamelco, Carchá and Cobán contestants all wear *pich’i’il*.
23 The tension in this action is evident, as the *CREOMPAZ* base is the subject of frequent protests in Cobán as the identity of 513 people found in mass graves in 2014 are slowly uncovered, and survivors of torture on the base have claimed several other mass grave sites remain buried under newly constructed concrete homes which the military claims cannot be torn down or removed at this juncture because of the cost of construction (Henderson, Nolin and Peccerelli 2014).
of the Mayan identity of the entire department. In a very overt sense, *Rabin Ajaw* is a demonstration of the strength of the link between a gendered feminine identity and the Maya communities in Guatemala. The winners of each pageant, particularly the departmental pageants and *Rabin Ajaw*, become, by default, experts on and representatives of indigeneity in Guatemala. During my fieldwork three of my translators and two of my interviewees were current or former contestants. On two occasions, when community members learned of my translators’ success in *Rabin Ajaw* to the title of *Princesa Tezulutlan*, our access to the communities suddenly widened. My translators’ acceptance of my work was viewed as authoritative by community leaders. Success in the pageant can be life-changing, as former winners often become the first people in their families to attend university, travel abroad, and work routinely with international aid and development organisations. Winning a departmental pageant, or even a larger municipal city pageant, is considered sufficient proof of a woman’s knowledge of indigenous language and culture to take jobs in the cultural ministry of the Guatemalan government, or even the indigenous language academies (field notes 2016).

Former contestants I encountered held leadership positions in *FEDECOVERA*, had worked with *USAID*, and led local protest movements for water rights—roles inaccessible to most women.

Having a representative from a community win a municipal or departmental pageant is a sign to the broader Maya community of the strength of Maya values and heritage in that community. Although the woman herself is the representative, winning the pageant is indicative of the environment in which she grew and learned how to be a Maya woman. Communities with large Ladino populations are rarely represented in the pageant, and contestants from Ladino or blended communities such as San Bartolomé de Fray are widely considered to be at a disadvantage since they will have “memorised” rather than “grown” with the values they have to represent.24 Having a representative win *Rabin Ajaw* empowers the community from which she comes to publicly embrace an identity as “pure” Q’eqchi’, Mam, or Kaqchikel, etc., Maya town. For communities facing influxes of Ladino immigration, or dealing with external economic forces such as palm oil production or open pit mining, having a woman win *Rabin Ajaw* also means gaining a voice on both the national and international stage, as *Rabin Ajaw* and the runners-up are invited to speak with Guatemala’s president, and often travel to represent Guatemala’s indigenous peoples across both North and South America and even to Europe. *Rabin Ajaw* thus becomes an amplifier for the voices of those whom Spivak would consider “subaltern” in the Guatemalan context and allows women to co-opt

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24 Interview with Elena Toj June 2016. She is the 2002 winner of *Rabin Cobán*. 
spaces and ideas once owned by non-indigenous people. The winner of Rabin Ajaw is given this access expressly as an indigenous woman, and it is through the power her gender affords her as a representative of “Mayaness” that she can expand that representation onto an international stage.

Winning Rabin Ajaw can have a positive impact on a family and community for decades, as it is a title a woman carries for life. Many winners of the different pageants leading up to Rabin Ajaw, and the Rabin Ajaw herself, are afforded lifelong opportunities. These include university scholarships and easier access to paid work outside of their community, than other women typically have. Winners are often invited back to participate in Rabin Ajaw as honoured guests or judges, and are seen as experts on their history, culture and people throughout their lives. The most recent winner from San Juan Chamelco was gifted a house by the community and is often called upon to represent San Juan Chamelco at national events (field notes July 2016 Rabin Ajaw competition).

The Rabin Ajaw, and conglomerate pageants, also act as a space in which community rivalries play out. Amalia Gue financed her youngest sister, Carmela, to compete in Rabin Ajaw twice. This involved using income from IFAM to outfit and train Carmela, as well as hiring a bus from Samac to bring supporters of her family into Cobán for the Rabin Cobán evening.

The respect and space that the Rabin Ajaw pageant is given in Guatemala, and in Cobán as an outgrowth of Cobanero traditions, is a demonstration of the value that Q’eqchi’ people, and other Maya people, place on women as the source or root of the ability to perpetuate and understand Maya traditions. Although men participate in Rabin Ajaw as organisers and judges on panels, they do not and cannot hold the same power and authority as the women on judging panels who were once successful competitors themselves. Men may evaluate the cultural traditions that the women represent; however, they are not viewed as able to represent those values in the same ways that women can both within the public and the private spheres.

Rabin Ajaw thus plays both a macro and a micro role in delineating who is and is not “Maya,” within Guatemala at large, and within the communities themselves, including who does and does not have the right to Maya history, culture, and identity, and to what degree.

CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSION

Gender in this context, and the gendered identities of Q’eqchi’ Maya women, become innately politicised. Women as the public representatives of indigenous culture, the physical mothers of those born into the culture, and the bearers of the culture’s values, meaning, and language into
the next generation become the front line in fighting the process of colonisation. This conceptualisation of women as those who are most responsible for the continuation of Q’eqchi’ culture from one generation to the next adds a layer of complexity to the governmental and NGO campaigns throughout Guatemala’s highlands for girls to attend Spanish-language school. The academic and economic independence of women becomes a threat to not only the male identity (Ladino or Q’eqchi’) but also the identity of the Q’eqchi’ politic as a whole. For women to enter Ladino life is for them to complicate their indigenous identities, and for women to lose their indigenous identities is for a community to lose its indigenous identity. For many women with university-level education or professional jobs, the daily use of Q’eqchi’ traje then becomes a form of coded communication that they are able to both engage in the western world, achieve a Spanish language education, and still identify publicly as Maya women. Wearing handmade rather than machine-woven traje is particularly important for women who are intentionally living in the border space between Ladino/Q’eqchi’, Mayan/Spanish, Catholic/Protestant, or Indigenous/Hispanic worlds. Indigenous women who enter professional spaces will almost exclusively wear traje, and Ladino women working in indigenous spaces will often wear traje at important events as a sign of respect.

This creates an interesting juxtaposition of power, as men hold the economic and political power in Q’eqchi’ communities, but the identities, histories, and heritages that drive political representation and the creation of communities, are held exclusively by women. In many senses men and women come to agreements as groups as to how and why communities should or should not take action or engage in specific activities. As one of my interviewees stated regarding the resettlement of a community after the civil war:

When we decided to come back, a meeting was held of everyone. Men and women agreed and then we decided that we wanted to be here, and to come back to our homes. We all wanted to be here, men and women, and that’s how the community rose a second time.

Without men, women would have no access to traditional Ladino power structures such as cooperative councils, mayorships, and government measures, and without women, indigenous men would lose access to the public, visibility of indigeneity that exists through women’s traje. It is women who create and protect—generation to generation—a connection between a modern Q’eqchi’ individual and a Mayan heritage, ancestry, and tradition that differentiates them from the urban and rural poor in the southern half of Guatemala and across
the rest of Central America. For the Q’eqchi’, this link across time with their Q’eqchi’ ancestors serve as a defining pillar of identity, not only separating the Q’eqchi’ from other Maya groups, but also creating a sense of unity, both geographically and temporally, in the face of oppression and attempted cultural extermination. The complete domination of the Q’eqchi’ and other Maya cultures becomes a process of dominating, or co-opting, Q’eqchi’ and other Maya women.

Both the weaving (production) and wearing (use) of the huipils are feminine acts. Beyond this, the very act of weaving is an extension and expression of cultural femininity, just as corn planting is an extension of cultural masculinity. Weaving is an act that in its very doing further feminises the individual engaging in the act, as does giving birth, and such can become essential to the personhood of the woman involved. Denise Arnold provides an excellent example of this in her work on the Qaqachaka weavers of Bolivia, where she argues that skill in textile production is associated with the life stages of young women; and even more importantly; that the textiles produced are themselves closely linked to the biological lived realities of the women who weave them (Arnold 1997; 113-118). In the Alta Verapaz this correlates with the fact that for a woman to be truly considered a master weaver or proper teacher, she had to be an older woman, of an age at which she could be expected to have grandchildren.

Another factor is that for women weaving can also, depending on the era and quality of the textiles, symbolise a level of economic independence from the coffee cooperative and male relatives. Many of the unmarried and non-mother women living in Samac are master weavers and rely on the textiles they produce and sell for an income. The older a woman weaver is, and the longer she has woven, the more “expert” her opinion on matters of weaving becomes.

The impact that textile production and the use of traje has on power relations between genders in Q’eqchi’ culture cannot be dismissed. The public nature of women’s lived indigenous identities is exemplified in the ways that winners of Rabin Ajaw can serve as ambassadors of their communities to Guatemala and the wider world; for women an identity often repressed can in a small number of cases become an identity that provides power and access. Through textile production individual Q’eqchi’ women can gain access to economic income and even international markets (see chapter five) in a way that men rarely can. In the hands of women indigeneity can open doors rather than close them.

Every woman I was introduced to as an expert on Q’eqchi’ tradition was either a master weaver who had taught a large number of other women to weave, or a winning participant at
some level of the *Rabin Ajaw* pageant series. Whether or not women interested in Q’eqchi’ heritage were more likely to learn to weave than other women, and whether or not women weavers were simply exposed to more Q’eqchi’ heritage through the process of learning to weave, remains unclear. However, during the vast majority of my interviews, older weavers were often referred to as “grandmothers,” or “teachers.” When I asked questions that the women interviewed did not know answers to, they would recommend that I talk with a master weaver, grandmother, or teacher.

As representatives of femininity and guardians of Q’eqchi’ identity, women—particularly weavers—are valued voices in understanding the important role that digital and photographic repatriation can play in the Q’eqchi’ and pan-Maya movement of recovering lost heritage and history. The connections that women understand, or perceive, between themselves and weavers from previous generations through museum textiles or images thereof become links that the Q’eqchi’ pueblo (or community) as a whole understands as existing between themselves and ancestors.
Chapter Four: “Nuestro Traje:” *Picb’il* textiles of the Q’eqchi’

When midnight came, the Sun could bear the darkness no more and he began to move. *Ixb’alam* woke, and as he spoke, he became a man. He told *Ixb’alam* what he felt for her, and why he had lied about the hunting and how he had helped her garden flourish. The sun begged *Ixb’alam* to escape with him, but she paused. “My father has only one daughter. Who will care for him? He will not let me go.”

*The Sun* begged. But *Ixb’alam* told him, “my father is a great hunter.”

“He will not know where to look for you,” insisted the sun. “I will be day, and you will be night. He will not know to look into the stars for you after the sun has set.”

But *Ixb’alam* was nervous. So she crept into the main part of the house and found her father’s blowgun. Taking it, she gathered up the chili powder sitting by the fire, and she ruined the lens of her father’s blowgun with chili powder. Which is why women love to eat so much chili today.

Guatemalan *traje*, or indigenous Maya dress, continues to be an important part of contemporary Maya culture and pan-Maya activism. *Traje* is most commonly worn by women, as men’s use of *traje* has been in decline since the nineteenth century.\(^1\) While there is limited evidence regarding textile production, use, and wear in the pre-Hispanic period, we do know that the ancient Maya used back strap looms as women weaving are depicted in figures and on vases (Halperin 2008: 112). While textiles themselves do not preserve well in the hot, wet climate of the region, impressions of textiles have been found in archaeological digs, including at major sites such as Rio Azul and Chichin Itza (Carlsen 1986: 147 and 1987: Lothrop 1992). We do know that indigenous *traje* has played a significant role in the production and continuation of indigenous identity in Guatemala since at least the seventeenth century and can posit that textiles and textile production played an important role in pre-classic, classic and post classic Maya society (Shapiro & Lieb 2010).\(^2\)

Today in Guatemala, as throughout much of Guatemala’s post-colonial history, weaving practices and *traje* can be used to identify a woman’s linguistic, cultural, and even geographic background. *Huipils*, *cortes* (blouses and skirts), belts, and headdresses are

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\(^1\)See the first chapter on the history in the region for more details.

\(^2\)For a more in-depth discussion of pre-hispanic textiles (especially sheer textiles) refer to Joy Mahler Lothrop’s work on the finds from the Cenote of Sacrifice at Chichin Itza (1992) and Domenici and Sanchez Valenzuela’s 2017 work *Archaeological context and conservation issues*. In *PreColumbian Textile Conference VII*. L. Bjerregaard and A. Peters (eds).
produced by or for women, and worn by women (and in some communities; men)\textsuperscript{3} from specific cultural backgrounds in Guatemala. Clothing and textile production make up an important part of cultural, social, and political dialogue in one of Central America’s most diverse nations.

While most cortes are woven on floor looms by men (field notes 2016, Dickson & Littrel 1998: 74)\textsuperscript{4} huipils (also known as p’ot in many Maya languages, including Q’eqchi’) are either produced on back strap looms, or made of imported fabric from China and Taiwan.\textsuperscript{5} As we have seen, while it is becoming somewhat fashionable for women to wear huipils from outside their linguistic or geographic region, both as a stylistic choice and as a Pan-Mayan political statement, most huipils are still produced, marketed, and worn in their regions of origin by women for whom those garments hold significance as (what I refer to as) “identity-sharing garments.”

\textsuperscript{3}Notably communities in the Lake Atitlan area.

\textsuperscript{4}Through interviews with a variety of local cortes vendors I learned that more and more cortes are being imported. However, there remain a few men in the Alta Verapaz who weave cortes. They primarily live in San Cristobal, but there is at least one weaver in San Juan Chamelco, although at the time of my fieldwork he was not weaving because of a broken leg sustained in a motorcycle accident.

\textsuperscript{5}This fact is well documented, although I independently confirmed it by interviewing a variety of shop owners and markets stall vendors of the imported huipil fabric, most of whom purchased textiles from Taiwan. During these conversations, I found a number of shop owners who either knew or were learning Chinese in order to better communicate with their own vendors in Taiwan and mainland China.
Each *huipil* style is able to communicate not only the geographic region to which it belongs, but also the language most likely spoken by the woman who wove it and one who wears it. For many different Maya groups, the figures woven into the pattern of the *huipils* hold an ontological, mythical, or spiritual significance. As identity garments, these *huipils* can speak in one way to the members of the community from which they originate, in another to other Guatemalans, and in a third to an international audience. The diverse style and range of *huipils* include the thick, sometimes wool *huipils* from Cotzal in the Ixil-speaking region to the heavily brocaded rayon and cotton *huipils* woven by Pqomchi speaking people from Tactic, among dozens of other styles.

*Picb'il* is one of the traditional *huipils* of the Q’eqchi’ speaking municipal centres of the Alta Verapaz: Cobán, San Pedro Carchá, and San Juan Chamelco. All of the traditional textiles associated with this region are sheer or gauze weaves and include *picb'il*, *tzot* (both sheer textiles woven with the same thread), and between three and four “*calada*” styles (some partial gauze, some sheer) woven with what many weavers in the region call “grueso,” or fat thread.\(^6\) White is the traditional colour of the regional *huipils*, but in the last seventy-five years, with the introduction of colour-

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\(^6\) The term ‘fat’ is used here specifically as the weavers also use Q’eqchi’ and Spanish terms for ‘wide’, ‘big’, ‘broad’, and ‘large’. Within the academic canon ‘course’ is more likely to be used.
fast chemical dyes as well as the importation of mass-produced lace-style fabrics from China and Taiwan for textile production, many women have been weaving and wearing *calada huipils* in multiple colours. Coloured embroidery on the sleeves and collars of the *huipils* have also become increasingly popular, particularly in the communities surrounding the municipality of San Juan Chamelco. The women of the highland communities are more likely to wear handwoven textiles than the women of the low-lying regions surrounding the centre of the Q’eqchi’ world.

While there are a variety of traditional *huipil* styles, *picb’il* is considered the most traditional of the *huipils* for the region. Many people identify *tzot* as being an older style than *picb’il*, worn for important events: weddings, baptisms, christenings, funerals, burials, etc. *Picb’il* is considered not only the most traditional of garments, but also the most desirable and of the highest value. This is intriguing, as often the way women voiced the value of *picb’il* as a traditional textile was the recognition or endorsement of *picb’il* as a garment rooted in Q’eqchi’ tradition through its age and the number of years that it has been woven and used, while *tzot* (despite being an older tradition) was less valued than *picb’il*. Placing *picb’il* textiles in the context of the Cobán region, I draw upon both the interviews completed for my fieldwork and the national indigenous beauty pageant *Rabin Ajaw*, which, as already discussed, is widely considered to be a space in which the most authentic indigenous dress of each region is used and represented. In my interview data, almost all of the women in the Cobán and Carchá regions identified *picb’il* as “*lo más tradicional*” (“the most traditional”) of the Cobanero textiles, with only women from San Juan Chamelco calling *tzot* the oldest traditional textile and *picb’il* the most recent traditional textile. Because San Juan Chamelco, or even the nearby village Chamil, appears to have been the seat of local power prior to the arrival of the Spanish in the region, people living in this area believe themselves to be the most

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*In some isolated communities *tzot* is still used as a burial garment, but it has become increasingly rare.*
authentic by virtue of living in the oldest Q’eqchi’ communities today often considered the spiritual centre of Q’eqchi’ life. Cobán, a centre established by the Spanish, is considered the current and colonial seat of power in the region and the centre of modern Q’eqchi’ life. According to local lore, the communities above San Juan Chamelco and Chamil firmly believe that they were among the last of the Q’eqchi’, and indeed the entire Maya world, to be conquered.

During the course of my interviews, I discovered that the weavers were quite discerning when it came to identifying which textiles from my photo booklets were *picb’il*, as the 27th, 28th and 29th photos in my pattern booklet were universally described to me as not being of *picb’il* textiles, despite being identified using the same terminology as *picb’il* textiles by the museums where they held. These textiles were of far less interest to the women than the *picb’il* textiles. This is not because they were less historic than the *picb’il* ones, but because they were perceived as being less historically significant in constructing a narrative about weaving and Q’eqchi’ identity, which has the perception of *picb’il* as “the traditional textile” at its hub.

*Picb’il* textiles are the only *huipils* woven by the women who compete to represent Cobán, San Juan Chamelco, and San Pedro Carchá. *Picb’il huipils* are those worn in the local beauty pageants in which representatives for each municipality to go take part in the *Rabin Ajaw* pageant (as discussed in chapter three) are selected. One of the criteria for winning any of the beauty pageants within the *Rabin Ajaw* group is the perception that the women competing represents the most authentic version of their indigenous people. For representatives competing in *Rabin Ajaw* at Cobán, the ability of a woman to state that she wove her *huipil* as a part of her *traje* has (in at least one instance) proved very helpful to that competitor (Field notes July 2016 *Rabin Ajaw* competition). Conversely, wearing machine-woven *traje* or bringing in modern accessories are predictable ways for a woman to put herself at a disadvantage. It remains unclear where this emphasis on hand woven textiles comes from—whether it be Maya groups, local German elites or the Guatemalan government. What is clear today being that, since the 1980s, the Q’eqchi’ have co-opted the standard, internalised it, and melded it to a Q’eqchi’ and Maya understanding of the world, and as a tool for expressing Maya identity within local, national and international spaces.

The original purpose of the focus on authenticity may be lost, but its modern usage within *Rabin Ajaw* is maintaining and saving traditional practices and knowledge in the face of “development.” The fact that *Rabin Ajaw* has been held in Cobán since its inception, and as a result controlled to a significant extent by the Q’eqchi’ people, adds to the authority that the
pageant claims to have in stating what is and is not traditional Q’eqchi’ Maya clothing, ceremony, etc.

**Picb’il, the Cobanera and the Process of Weaving**

*Picb’il* is identifiable from a distance, allowing anyone to identify a Q’eqchi’ woman as such upon sight if she is wearing her *traje*. The *huipil* falls outside the *corte*, meaning that the visual outline of a Q’eqchi’ woman includes a triangular skirt, with a gauzy blouse falling in such a way that it appears longer around the arms than around the centre of the waist. Most women sew the sleeves quite tightly, so that the blouse clings at the elbow despite being a rectangular, unshaped textile. The silhouette is, locally, quite identifiable as that of a Maya woman, and uniquely that of a Cobanera. When being photographed for *Rabin Ajaw*, contestants from the Alta Verapaz almost always pose in a partial silhouette, ensuring that the images of the Q’eqchi’ woman includes her “shape” in *traje*.

Dolls of these women are often either grinding corn for tortillas or weaving, indicating that, while many Q’eqchi’ women do not weave, “Q’eqchi’ woman” is still synonymous with “weaver.” *Huipils* are sized according to height, with longer panels woven for taller women. The openness of the garment allows women to wear the same *huipils* throughout her life, including periods of pregnancy and breastfeeding, without needing to resize.

Defined by its construction, *picb’il* is a single heddle woven textile produced on a back strap loom, with cotton thread number 21 or 22, the smallest thread available on the market in the region. They are a plain weave textile with widely spaced warp and weft and the design is laid in using a supplementary weft thread. The small gauge of the thread necessitates that production follow a specific process, unique to *picb’il*. In *picb’il* weaving the loom is loaded, and the weaving process is similar to many other single-weft back strap weaving techniques. However, in order to ensure that the threads do not snap during production, weavers process
the thread prior to setting up their looms by creating a *nixtamal*, or tortilla dough, specifically for the thread and soaking or coating the threads in this mixture prior to setting up the loom. *Nixtamal* is a substance that plays an important role in the Q’eqchi’ telling of the legend of the Moon and the Sun. Generally, in the legend *Ix b’alam ke*, the Moon, trips the Sun by throwing *nixtamal* onto his path and making the ground sticky (as can be seen in the chapter headings). For other Maya groups, the *nixtamal* comes from the cooking space, but for the Q’eqchi’ it is further proof of the Moon’s role as a Maya woman and weaver; she has the *nixtamal* at hand as she sits outside her house weaving by the path because she is a *picb’il* weaver. This not only further embeds her identity into her weaving, but also roots the practice of *picb’il* as a textile into the distant past of the Maya. Some weavers simply water down *nixtamal* they have made to cook tortillas, others soak old tortillas that did not get eaten in water before grinding them back into dough and mixing that with water, but for all weavers the process of making *nixtamal* for a loom mirrors the process of making *nixtamal* for tortillas. One weaver described the process as “feeding the loom,” going on to point out to me that I would not leave a child or a chicken hungry if I wanted them to “grow well.”

During the weaving process a *picb’il* loom cannot be used if it is too damp or too warm outside, lest the fine threads break. One part of mastering the process of weaving *picb’il* is learning to tell if and when a loom needs to be “re-fed,” with the *nixtamal* mixture painted across the threads of the loom to strengthen them. This ongoing bath in corn or tortilla dough, makes *picb’il* looms extremely susceptible to being destroyed by insects or animals, which are attracted to the corn, and then chew through the threads.⁸ It also means that when a *huipil* is finished it has a very stiff, almost starched quality to it until it has been thoroughly washed by the weaver. One informant outside of San Pedro Carchá explained that the textile is not finished until it has been cleaned, because as long as the fibre maintains the stiffness of the corn mixture, it is still in many ways “on the loom,” even if the sticks that make up the loom itself have been removed and are being used to make a second or third panel for the garment. Most weavers do not wash panels of fabric until the entire garment is complete.

Some weavers, if pressed for time to finish a garment, may weave on cold or wet days by lining embers up from the fire underneath the length of the threads of the loom to keep them from getting too wet to weave—although this practice is risky and often leads to threads

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⁸One of the reasons that animals might chew through threads could be a “bad heart” or failure to negotiate with the *tzuultaq’a* in your region (who then sends insects as punishment). *Picb’il* weaving can be particularly prone to potential negative encounters in the spiritual realm, since the threads are far more likely to be damaged by animals or insects than other threads. The reverse of this is that a successful garment production means that you are in good standing spiritually within your geographic space and sense.
breaking because they are too dry. *Picb’il huipils* take, on average, five to eight weeks to complete, depending on the length of the *huipil* panels requested and the density of the patterning. None of the women I spoke to were willing to weave at night. Even with the introduction of relatively reliable electric lighting in all but one of the communities where I worked, women referred to weaving in the evening as being “unlucky.” It was because she wove at night that the maiden who became the moon was spirited away, and weavers will joke that if you weave at night then the sun might come by and steal you, or the moon might see and become jealous. On a more practical front, the evening is the only portion of the day when men and women interact in the same space. Weaving is a distinctly female activity, and as men do not bring male labour to the home, women do not engage in female labour in a shared gender space either.

The production of one average-sized *huipil* takes one pound of the number 21 or 22 cotton thread, which can be purchased locally from one of two shops owned by members of the same family: one in San Juan Chamelco and one in Tactic. The thread costs 25 Quetzales, or $3.25 per pound. While that sum seems insignificant, for a family whose annual income (on average) sits between $168 per year to $350 per year, that cost can be prohibitive. Many

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*Figure 4.7: Picb’il loom in process.*

*Source: Photograph Callie Vandewiele, Illustration of photograph Cornelis Drost. 2018. Copyright held by Callie Vandewiele*

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9San Juan Chamelco and Tactic are both major market towns for Q’eqchi’ and Pocomchi speaking people.

10Oxfam 2015.
weavers are only able to purchase thread for a new huipil or textile project once they have sold the last huipil they produced. Women who purchase textiles regularly often buy the thread up front, as they know it is a significant cost to their weavers.

All of the textiles woven traditionally in the Alta Verapaz are produced on single, double or triple heddle back strap looms. The double and triple heddle textiles are the calada or basket-style weaves, some plain and others with patterns woven into them. The single heddle back strap loom is used to weave picb’il and is one of the simplest looms still used today. Above (fig 4.7) is an image of a complete picb’il single heddle loom demonstrating the setup and construction of the loom.

As one of the simplest forms of back strap weaving, it is likely that the textiles produced on these looms, particularly cotton textiles, share some characteristics with the sheer textiles produced and used by the ancient Maya. None of the components of these particular looms were introduced by the Spanish, meaning that, while we have no evidence as to what patterns or designs ancient Maya peoples preferred, the garments produced on these looms technologically match the garments they would have been able to produce. As of yet unpublished research conducted by Dr Cara Tremain at the University of Illinois identifying sheer textiles depicted on pre-classic and classic Maya vases, demonstrates that, whether or not the Maya wove picb’il specifically, the use of sheer textiles does indeed extend into an ancient Mayan past, in the form of garments worn by both women and men.\footnote{Her analysis using UV and microscope analysis of paint degradation and application indicates that the textile on this, and a handful of other vase images, were intentionally painted to appear sheer (personal correspondence 2018).}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure4.8.png}
\caption{Maya Vase illustrating sheer textile. Source: Photo: American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) online catalogue Photo Illustration: Callie Vandewiele 2018}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure4.9.png}
\caption{In this depiction we can see a distinct intentional outline of the body underneath the sheer textile.}
\end{figure}
This connection to ancient sheer textiles adds weight to the widely held belief among weavers of *picb’il* that this tradition is something that they share with both recent and distant ancestors. As per the discussion on kinship groups being formed through shared labour and life in Q’eqchi’ regions, the shared physical experience of weaving is part of what ties Q’eqchi’ women to their ancestors. The physical experience of weaving is particularly visceral and present.

Back strap looms require the weaver to be not only the person weaving, but also a part of the loom itself, providing the tension necessary to produce a textile. The weaver adds tension to the warp threads by putting pressure on the loom using her hips and back. As seen in the photo to the right, Maya weavers sit low to the ground, on a stool or small mat, with the loom belt wrapped around their lower backs. In the Alta Verapaz, most women sit on small stools while they weave, which relieves some of the pressure from the legs, but still places the textile at, more or less, a forty-five-degree angle to the floor.

Work on the biomechanics of activity and the study of archaeological remains suggest that an activity that involves repetition and pressure, such as weaving using a back strap loom, has a physiological impact on the body of the weaver. It is almost certain that women who weave regularly develop muscle and posture changes related to their weaving activity, and quite likely that the markers of those changes remain in the skeletal structure of the body long after death. Many weavers talk about experiencing back pain after using a loom for too long. This means that a weaver uses the entirety of her body in the weaving process to a degree that results in semi-permanent or permanent physiological changes. The importance of the physical aspect of weaving became apparent early on, during my fieldwork. In identifying weavers, I learned to ask if women had ever woven, rather than if they knew how to weave, as unless a woman was actively a weaver, or had stopped weaving very late in life due to old age, she would not be identified to me as a weaver, but rather as someone who used to know how to weave.
That the physical experience of weaving extends to a change in the body emboldens the argument that weaving is an intrinsically embodied practice. Judith Butler, when talking about embodied identities, discusses the ability of engaging the body in certain activities and presentations that enmesh the individual within a specific expected social role (1999). The embodiment of weaving in turn permanently impacts the physiology of the weaver. She becomes a part of her loom not just while she is weaving, but in every aspect of her life. Ontologically, this blends with the Q’eqchi’ understanding of individual beings that includes work and care objects as a part of the individual. If a loom, and the textiles produced on that loom, become (even temporarily) a part of the weaver or creator, it makes perfect sense within a Q’eqchi’ context that the body of the weaver would change physiologically in response to the activity of weaving and the objects being produced, at the same time that the spiritual being is changed by and connected to the object on another plane.

Learning to Weave

As a part of my fieldwork, I accepted an offer from Margarita Poou to learn how to weave alongside her seventeen-year-old niece, Ana. Although the offer was potentially made in jest, once it became clear that I was earnest in my acceptance of it, Margarita set a date for us to go and get the necessary components for a loom in the market town of Tactic. I purchased all the supplies for my loom with Margarita’s help from a vendor she knew well in the market, and then arranged to buy thread for my various projects directly from Margarita herself. Learning to weave, particularly doing so alongside Ana, gave me a window into the ways in which women learn and teach weaving, as well as a better understanding of the personal relationships between students and teachers.

While most women reported learning to weave from a direct family member or in-law, there are a small number of women who serve as “hubs” for communities of weavers. These women teach a large number of non-relative women to weave. Usually, these women have a direct market connection, or are the daughters or granddaughters of women who served as hubs in previous generations. Three of the four women “hubs” whom I interviewed talked about textile production in a much more ontologically complex way than the average picb’il weaver in the Alta Verapaz. These women all lived in Q’eqchi’ monolingual communities and were

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12 Pseudonym used Ana is under 18.
13 It is not uncommon for one woman with the ability to travel to a market town and the capital to purchase thread for herself and to sell to other women in her community.
far more likely than other weavers to talk about the spiritual aspects of weaving, such as having your “heart right” to keep insects from destroying your work. These weavers were also more likely to use terms such as “feed the thread” to describe the *nixtamal* process and, when asked, to tell me the story of the moon and sun: all four women I identified as hubs gave exceptionally detailed renditions that included lists of the figures that *Ixb’alam Ke* wove into her textiles. These women were also far more likely to be repositories of knowledge and information about the histories of their own communities than other women of similar ages.

During the course of my fieldwork, I conducted a mini survey asking each interviewee who taught her how to weave, and what their relationship to that teacher was. I found that, while most weavers learned to weave from their mothers (46.9%), most of the women who had learned from unrelated weavers (23.8%) had learned from Rosario Coy, and that many women with older sisters learned not from their mother directly but from a sister who had (8.1%). With a few exceptions, weavers learned to weave within their own *junkab’als*—women they lived in close conjunction with and with whom they shared close kinship ties through shared living or through marriage.

Learning to weave is a process that can take anywhere from weeks to years. Both Ana and I started our first looms using industrially spun cotton thread commonly used for *calada huipils* in the Alta Verapaz called *alemán* (German) locally. It is sturdy, difficult to break, and comparatively thick. Learning to weave, like weaving itself, is an activity that fits into a day in
the spaces left unfilled by other activities. While learning to weave, we were also critiqued on our ability to make tortillas, given children to babysit, asked to help out with household chores, shelling corn, or picking coffee. In other words, we were also learning the norms of how Margarita kept and managed her household.

Weaving students, in some respects, have a similar, if less intense, relationship with their weaving teacher as young women do with their mothers-in-law. A young woman will have been taught how to manage a household, cook, clean, what objects are taken to market, where and when etc., but is expected to re-learn to do these things in the way that her mother-in-law does. When she is older, and has children of her own, she can blend both systems, but not in the early days of a marriage. In the same way, a weaving student learns a great deal more from her weaving teacher than simply how to weave. For women learning to weave from in-laws, weaving then becomes one of the many skills they expect to learn, or relearn, as they move from one household, or junkab'al, to another.

“Weaver” is a role that spans a woman’s entire life. Whether young and unmarried, married with children, never married, an old grandmother, or a widow, weavers share an identity predicated on the possession and use of the knowledge inherent in weaving, but deeply rooted into the physical aspect of weaving itself.

Weaving provides younger women with a way to tap into social networks outside of blood or kinship ties. Although many women learn to weave or teach weaving within the network of their junkab'al or the eb’junkab’al of their blood relatives, weaving does provide an opportunity for women to approach a neighbour or distant relative and create a relationship that in some ways mimics that of the bond between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. While learning to weave, women are expected to spend a great deal of time with their teacher to help prepare food, clean, and generally be a part of the household during the hours that they are there. Very few weavers will weave all day long, or even in long blocks of time. Instead, weaving is interspersed throughout the day, filling otherwise idle gaps of time. As kinship relationships in Q’eqchi’ society are centred on time spent living and working together, women who teach and learn to weave develop close quasi-kinship bonds.

As Q’eqchi’ kinship units (the eb’junkab’al) are established through shared work and action, in sharing the work of a weaving teacher’s junkab’al, the weaving student integrates into that kinship unit. While the integration is temporary and almost superficial, the lasting impact on personal relationships and community politics runs deep. Rosario Coy (QanaRux) is referred to as many women in her village, with whom she shares no biological or kinship ties apart from having taught those women to weave, as “our grandmother.”
Her granddaughter, Marta,\textsuperscript{14} who has carried on Rosario’s commitment to teaching any woman interested to weave, is referred to as an aunt, or a sister, by all her former students and some of their children. It is not typical to refer to women who fall outside of one’s own junkab’al with familial terms so this is a unique extension between weavers and their students, and the relationships between non-relative teachers and weaving students creates unique ties between kinship groups who are otherwise unrelated (see weaving genealogy chart in chapter five on page 119).

During the interviews, I discovered that the terminology women use to talk about the value of picb’il and weaving is shared by teachers and students, if two sisters learn from two different teachers, they will talk about the value of weaving in different ways. Picb’il enhances community bonds, and allows women to build shared identities, form community alliances, and reinforce ideas of traditional and economic value around textiles.

One of the values transferred between weaving teacher and student are the ways in which weavers think about the various values associated with the different patterns woven into textiles during construction. Picb’il weavers learn patterns through rote memorisation, reproducing the same pattern with the guidance of their teacher, over and over until they can reproduce it themselves. The patterns are taught using a counting system, and the numbers five, eight, and thirteen\textsuperscript{15} were (in my limited observations) used repeatedly when odd or even numbers were required. While I was working with Margarita, the first pattern that Ana and I learned was the puntito, which we reproduced on scarves several times before moving onto pato (duck), a slightly modified version of puntito, but with a neck and head. Ana progressed much more quickly than I did, as she essentially moved into Margarita’s house for days at a time, whereas I was still completing interviews in two other communities and could only spend between two and three days per week at the house, and of course, even on those days, weaving was an intermittent activity.

Ana had the added advantage of having grown up around weavers. Similarly, the four-year-old niece of Margarita, Rosie, was always underfoot and often imitated weaving or helped wind thread (usually ruining it) whenever the opportunity presented itself. Often Margarita would let Rosie stand next to her, or even sit on her lap while she was weaving non-picb’il garments,\textsuperscript{16} and play with the threads. Growing up with that access to weaving means that

\textsuperscript{14}Pseudonym used at her request.

\textsuperscript{15}Ontologically important numbers to the Q’eqchi’.

\textsuperscript{16}The picb’il was too delicate.
Rosie will approach learning to weave with the nearly innate knowledge of how something works that comes with lifelong exposure.

Upon completion, most weavers take their first woven object, under the guidance of their weaving teacher, to the Calvary Church in Cobán or Chamelco and leave it as an offering to a saint of their choosing. The saint is then meant to bless them with the ability to weave well and the opportunity to sell what they weave in markets for good prices. It is not a dissimilar process to the offerings of maize, cacao, and other food objects to the tzuxtlaq’ a before a corn planting ceremony.

**Textile patterns**

In this section I present pattern identification images that were taken from the museum textiles and contemporary textiles in the field and in personal collections\(^\text{17}\) of Guatemalan textiles, many of which were used in the textile patterns booklet (as shown in Appendix C) and used during field interviews. The encounters between weavers and these images constituted a part of the digital repatriation project that I carried out. The data presented in this section, and in tables 4.1 and 4.2 comes directly from the transcriptions of my taped interviews and interview notes as weavers encountered the textile pattern booklet. For weavers the range of images present on *picb’il* textiles was significant, and while most weavers did not spontaneously comment on the ontological nature of each design, a handful of my informants (mostly Rosario’s students) went to great lengths to ensure that I understood not only the names and identifications of each pattern but also their individual significance.

I worked with weavers in all three municipal areas—Cobán, San Juan Chamelco, and San Pedro Carchá—to identify each of the textile patterns and the meaning behind them. Most of the women I interviewed were able to weave between six and ten patterns and identify by name and with confidence around twelve patterns. The women who had learned through Rosario Coy were most able to talk about the significance behind the patterns that they wove and the meaning conveyed by those patterns in the textiles.

*Picb’il* patterns were identified by interviewees as belonging to the specific region within the Alta Verapaz (Cobán, Carchá, or Chamelco) based not on the specific patterns woven, but on the style in which the patterns were woven into the textile. The weavers in and around Cobán weave very small figures in tight rows; those in San Pedro Carchá weave very

\(^{17}\)Textiles owned by individuals who are collectors not affiliated with museums, most notably those of Kathleen Vitale and Seth Hempstead.
tall figures, so that a huipil only has space for three or four rows of pattern across each side of the garment. The figures coming from San Juan Chamelco are between Cobán and Carchá in size, and more likely to be surrounded by what I refer to as “filling” figures, points, lines or rings—sitting between more complex figures and used to balance the tension in the weft. There is no specialist terminology for the idea of a filling figure in local discourse on textiles. Women simply commonly blend patterns: always putting a star on a deer’s back for example or placing a puntito between figures with upraised arms. While the figure serves an important purpose in the structure of the textile, it is talked about as a traditional part of the patterning by local weavers.

The designs themselves proved to be recognisable across the three geographic regions, and weavers within each region are capable of imitating the stylistic choices of the other regions. Style imitation occurs across the Pan-Maya world, but also locally as a result of broader fashion themes and a desire to diversify a wardrobe while continuing to wear traje on a daily basis.

**Ontological Significance**

Within Q’eqchi’ ontology, that objects, people, animals, and the supernatural bleed back and forth into one another (and away from one another) over the course of a lifetime lends special relevance to objects used heavily in life. As the objects depicted on picb’il textiles exist in museum collections and market spaces, this means that the women themselves are also present to some degree with the object throughout its life. These textiles are inherently a part of the woman who created them, and thus inherently Q’eqchi’ themselves. This “Q’eqchi’ness” is an aspect of the object that does not fade or disappear over time, meaning that the object itself is a part of the Q’eqchi’ collective on both the physical and supernatural plane.

It is not surprising, then, that the patterns woven onto Q’eqchi’ textiles are also of ontological significance. The phrase that all weavers interviewed used (in Spanish) to refer to the process of in-laying designs was plasmar, “to shape.” Pairing this with how weavers refer to textiles “growing” as they are woven, we can see that weavers think of the patterns they weave into textiles as designs that they shape through the process of growth. The language roots the textile production process within an organic framework; as the textile will have a kind of life when it is complete, it makes sense to understand its creation as an organic process
governed by women, the sources of life (see also Drasart 2007 for comparative work on Andean weavers ‘breathing life’ into textiles). 18

This understanding of a process of ‘making’ as being similar to or even organic in its own nature is supported by theoretical work done by Tim Ingold in 2000. Ingold asks researchers to see the ‘…movement as truly generative of the object rather than merely revelatory of an object that is already present,’ (2000; 346). Ingold posits then that understanding the creation of objects as an act of growth allows for a better understanding of material culture and material production. In the case of Q’eqchi’ Maya weavers this narrative of growth, and the underlying assumption that the loom and textile objects have forms of ‘selves’ can be compared with the Kuna woodcarvers of Panama, where the same verb (sopet) is used for the production of wooden figures, canoes and other carved objects as is used for ‘growth’ or ‘gestation’, implying a link between the process of ‘growing’ and ‘making.’ (Hallam & Ingold 2014; 92-93).

It makes sense then that the patterns that the women shape into the ‘growing’ textiles are, for the most part, images that master weaver Rosario Coy refers to as los eternos (the eternals), which she identifies as objects or animals that make up universal, or eternal, aspects of Q’eqchi’ life. In Rosario’s mind, eternal aspects were experienced by Q’eqchi’ ancestors a thousand years ago and will be experienced by Q’eqchi’ descendants a thousand years from now and non-eternal patterns as being only a part of the experience of some but not all Q’eqchi’ people. Rosario understands that many aspects of Q’eqchi’ life are “not eternal” by her definition. Eternal objects include ducks, but do not include chickens, for example; deer but not horses. For her, non-eternal things are only experienced by certain generations based on the exact point in time in which they live. The vast majority of the weavers referred to these patterns (eternal and non-eternal) in both the Q’eqchi’ and the Spanish language, and many of the objects shaped into textiles have their own ontological and spiritual significance for the Q’eqchi’ people. The more “eternal” an object (e.g., corn, butterfly, hummingbird) the deeper its ontological significance (see meaning chart beginning on page 102) and the more concrete the spiritual life of the object.

Nearly all the weavers grouped the textiles into two categories: “known” and “lost.” Many historical textiles fell into the category of “known,” as the weavers still held the

18Although I have limited fluency in Q’eqchi’, it is clear that there is importance in language shifts between Q’eqchi’ and Spanish in weaving practice. I can state that, during my fieldwork, it became clear that the Q’eqchi’ words used for weaving and weaving processes are more organic in nature than the Spanish equivalents. The more direct the translation, the more likely the word is to be organic in nature. “To feed” versus “to paint” for the Nixtamal coating, “to shape” as the descriptive term of the pattern work, “hungry” versus “dry,” etc.
knowledge needed to produce these textiles, and a few contemporary textiles were identified as “lost” in communities where those patterns were no longer woven, even if they were woven by picb’il weavers in nearby towns.

Below is the table of the textile patterns by the picb’il weavers I interviewed using my photo booklets. Many of these patterns can appear alone or with other patterns, and some (like the hummingbird/colibri/tz’unun) never appear unless present with another specific pattern, for example corn plant/milpa/k’al: the hummingbird on the corn/el colibrí sobre la milpaltz’unun chi ru li k’al, which will be elucidated in a second table. The remainder of patterns are as likely to appear in conjunction with other patterns as they are independently.

None of these definitions or histories can be considered exhaustive of Q’eqchi’ culture; however, they can be considered representative of the ways in which women who weave think and talk about the patterns that they produce. I have ordered the textiles in these tables in the same order that my weaving teacher, Margarita Poou, informed me she would teach beginning weavers each one. As a result, the textiles are ordered (with a few exceptions) by degree of complexity of construction while honouring the rationale of my informants in their presentation. Contemporary and historic patterns are mixed in this ordering, as that was not of import to my interviewees when discussing textile pattern meaning: rather they focused on the ontological significance of these patterns and their root in the Maya cosmovision.

**TEXTILE PATTERNS WOVEN ALONE:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Pattern (English/Spanish/Q’eqchi’)</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Point/puntito/ru’uj (Contemporary textile)</td>
<td>This is the first pattern that many women learned to weave (followed by “duck,” the second most common first pattern) and serves as filler pattern, which reset the weft around figures, such as deer, that may offset it. In some textiles, this can be used to represent smoke, sometimes called “seed,” although most weavers identified the two patterns as being distinct. There are a series of variations on ‘point’ the most significant being “Planet/planeta/ruuchich’och” Planet is occasionally affiliated with “star,” but most often referred to as simply “planet” with no other significance given. Structurally, the planet is the same pattern as the point, but a little bit larger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seed/semilla/iyaj</td>
<td>Compared most often to the <em>calabaza</em> seed, which is used to make <em>pepita</em> (ground roasted pumpkin seeds) and affiliated with women’s gardens rather than men’s <em>milpa</em> plots. This pattern is very similar to <em>puntito</em>, except that seeds are often connected to one another or laid out in a diamond pattern rather than in a simple row.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Contemporary textile)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Seed/semilla/iyaj" /></td>
<td>Photo Callie Vandewiele 2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ring/anillo/matq’ab’</th>
<th>A handful of women associated the ring with marriage, but most simply noted that rings were “pretty.” Two weavers associated the ring with the idea of eternity, but no other weavers did.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Historic textile Pitt Rivers Object 1946.6.54)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Ring/anillo/matq’ab’" /></td>
<td>Photo Callie Vandewiele 2016. Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>8</th>
<th>Symbolises the number eight (8) and the idea of eternity. Eight as a number has no specific significance to the Q’eqchi’ (five and thirteen are very important), but eternity as a measure of time represents an interconnectedness of being from beginning to end.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Contemporary textile)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image3" alt="8" /></td>
<td>Photo Callie Vandewiele 2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>X or Four cardinal points/puntos cardinales/xkaxakuutil li ruuchich’och’</th>
<th>The four cardinal points are important in Q’eqchi’ spiritual practice and belief. Five is a significant number, as it includes North, South, East, West and the Heart—or centre. In representing the cardinal points, women are representing this partially incomplete figure, as well as laying out a pattern that is used ceremonially with coloured sawdust or candles to bless new homes or ask for the permission of a <em>tzuultaq’a</em> for corn planting or to ask for a blessing for a new venture or textile.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Historic textile Pitt Rivers Object 1946.6.54)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image4" alt="X or Four cardinal points/puntos cardinales/xkaxakuutil li ruuchich’och’" /></td>
<td>Photo Callie Vandewiele 2016. Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dog footprint/pato de perro/ruq ‘tzi’

(Contemporary textile)

Women identified dog footprints as being signs that dogs were present in a household. Dogs, like chickens and ducks, occupy a place in Q’eqchi’ language grammar that ties them into concepts of personhood, as the conjugation for possession is the same as the one for bodily parts or immediate family members such as parents or children. Kockelman (2003) argues that the construction of language around individual and community allows for us to understand specific household essentials in Q’eqchi’ life as essential to the production of a fully human Q’eqchi’ individual. Within the weaving communities, I did not encounter a single home with fewer than two or three dogs, which were viewed as very much essential to the home and family.

Woman/mujer/ixq

(Contemporary textile)

Represents Q’eqchi’ women in traje. For a subset of weavers, it represents the self: A Q’eqchi’ weaver and mother. Often depicted in conjunction with the symbol for men.

Man/hombre/winq

(Historic textile Pitt Rivers Object 1946.6.54)

Represents Q’eqchi’ men. Men play an important role as members of Q’eqchi’ families (junkab’al) and for many women these figures symbolise their husbands, brothers and sons. This figure is often depicted in conjunction with the symbol for women.

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19Every woman with social status or in a leadership role had a few dogs, and at least one special or favoured dog. These were either specific breeds purchased from vendors in Cobán, or clearly well trained dogs. Amalia kept a German Shepherd mix which she tied inside the garden to ensure no one would steal and Margarita Poou had a mutt she had taught to beg, sit, lie down, roll over, and fetch.
<p>| <strong>Star/estrellal/chahim</strong> (Contemporary textile) | Stars were identified by several women as being an important part of Q’eqchi’ personal life, with one weaver noting that “…every person has a star when they are born. There are as many stars as people.” All weavers talked about the movement of the stars, and the connection between the stars and the earth (which was vague), and the impact of the movement of the stars on people and animals—although this idea may have been imported from Spanish concepts of astrology. |
| <strong>Pacaya/hoja de pacayalk’ib</strong> (Contemporary textile) | The pacaya leaf (<em>Chamaedorea tepejilote</em>), like the harp pattern, was deeply affiliated with the Q’eqchi’ past and celebrations. Today, pacaya leaves and fruit are linked to celebrations of saints’ days, festivals, and Easter. The bitter flavour of the pacaya (usually consumed by being fried in egg) is considered to be a treat, and the food is connected to the Q’eqchi’ people. Almost all the weavers explained to me that pacaya leaves used to be the only decoration materials available for their ancestors, and that today the most important local celebrations utilise pacaya leaves as the main form of decoration. |
| <strong>Corn plant/milpalk’al</strong> (Historic textile: Museum Object number 3-28120 Hearst Museum) | The corn plant is the most important plant in both Q’eqchi’ daily life and ontology. Human being are, according to myth, made from corn, corn makes up the bulk sustenance food and the annual rotational planting, and care for and harvest of the <em>milpa</em>, or cornfield, is the central identifying activity of male life in Q’eqchi’ communities. Corn plants are the only full plants exhibited on <em>picb’il</em> textiles, and whenever weavers would identify corn plants, they would ensure that I understood the importance and value of <em>li k’al</em>. Corn and its cultivation tie directly into the value communities place on having enough land to farm adequately, and the connection between success for a Q’eqchi’ man and the ability to rent or own a patch of land to cultivate corn, even if he lives in Guatemala City or further away. |
| <strong>Rooster/gallo/tzo’xul</strong> (Contemporary textile) | Identified as an important part of a household, but not as important as a hen or duck. Seen walking in a <em>milpa</em> field in this example. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Big eyed bird/pájaro caminando con ojo</th>
<th>Unidentified bird, but with a wide-open eye.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Contemporary textile)</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Duck/pato/patux</th>
<th>The duck is identified as a part of a household, something living near the house that women own and care for. QanaRux included the duck when she listed the “universal things” that defined Q’eqchi’ experience.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Contemporary textile)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incense burner/incensario/sensaar Or Pineapple/piñal/ch’op</th>
<th>This pattern was identified by different weavers in different communities as either an incense burner or a pineapple.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Historic textile: Museum Object number 3-28122 Hearst Museum)</td>
<td>The incense burner is like the traditional clay incense burners used in Catholic and Mayan ceremonies and sold in the Cobán market for between ten and thirty Quetzales ($1.10-$3.30).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The pineapple is a fruit affiliated very loosely with the warmer “summer” months of March and April.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Photo Callie Vandewiele 2018

Source Phoebe Hearst Museum.
| **Butterfly/mariposa/peepem**  
(Contemporary textile) | Butterflies, like hummingbirds, can cross lines between different planes of existence, and are sometimes seen as harbingers of the supernatural, if not direct messengers themselves. Santa María in particular is filled with butterflies, something several weavers informed me was proof of how close to the *monte*, or natural world, the community remained. |
<table>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Photo Callie Vandewiele 2018</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| **Deer/venado/kej**  
(Contemporary textile) | Deer, like butterflies, serve as evidence of the life tied into the natural world around communities. There are very few deer remaining in the Alta Verapaz of Guatemala, and seeing a deer is a significant event in a day,\(^{20}\) indicative of good luck. Deer were portrayed as having once been plentiful in *el tiempo de los antepasados* and were regarded in the same temporal sense as harps and pacaya leaves; importantly associated with people living in pre-Hispanic times. The deer plays an important role in the myth of *Ixb’alam ke*. |
| Photo Callie Vandewiele 2018 | |
| **Harp/harpa/arp**  
(Contemporary textile) | The harp was perceived by many weavers as representing Q’eqchi’ celebrations of the past. Most weavers compared the harp to the marimba and told me that today the marimba is used in traditional celebrations, but that in the past it would have been the harp and harp players. Many women equated the presence of the harp on a textile as a specific reference to ancestors: *antepasados* or *abuelos de los abuelos* (grandparents of grandparents). |
| Photo Callie Vandewiele 2018 | |
| **Comb/peine/xiyab’**  
(Contemporary textile) | An object used by all Q’eqchi’ women in their daily lives. This object had no specific ontological significance according to the weavers but was identified universally as a part of everyday life. |
| Photo Callie Vandewiele 2018 | |

\(^{20}\)There was one day in Santa María when we saw a deer, which was hugely exciting to both the informant we were with and my translator, as they considered a deer sighting to be good luck. My translator proceeded to tell every other person we encountered that day about seeing the deer, which was viewed more or less universally as a very rare and lucky event.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spider/aranya/am</th>
<th>Spiders are associated with weavers, because they also weave, but do not seem to hold any other significant role.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Contemporary textile)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.jpg" alt="Spider aranya/am" /></td>
<td>Photo Callie Vandewiele 2018.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crab/cangrejo/tap</th>
<th>Crabs, as the one water-dwelling animal used in <em>picb'il</em> textile design, represent both the ocean, and for women in the more rural communities, the animals of the sea who gathered together <em>Ixb'alam ke's</em> blood after her father accidentally killed her over the sea. They were unable to find all of her blood, so some remained in the sea, which is why the sea moves with the moon. The placement of crabs signifies all marine animals, which are a good food item that is no longer really available, and the connection between modern weavers and the mythical <em>Ixb'alam</em>.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Contemporary textile)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image2.jpg" alt="Crab cangrejo/tap" /></td>
<td>Photo Callie Vandewiele 2018.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corral/corral/koral</th>
<th>A design that turns the style of the <em>huipil</em> from horizontal rows of patterns into diagonal ones. Represents the fencing around a Q'eqchi’ house or houses, in which chickens, ducks and other household animals are contained and where children play. This corral pattern encloses crabs.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Contemporary textile)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image3.jpg" alt="Corral corral/koral" /></td>
<td>Photo Callie Vandewiele 2018.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An arc can be construed as representing a river, road, or mountain, although the vast majority of women most often linked it with the mountains in and around their communities. Mountains serve as the geographic roots of Q’eqchi’ memory and identity and are also the home of the Q’eqchi’ tzuulta’qa, who connect the modern Q’eqchi’ to both the spiritual realms and the non-temporally synced pasts and futures that they have access too. It was the tzuultaq’a that led Aj Po’op B’atz to lead the Q’eqchi’ during the sixteenth century and avoid bloody conquest and helped the Q’eqchi’ keep the Alta Verapaz independent until more or less the nineteenth century. Mountains surround and ground Q’eqchi’ people both physically and spiritually. In placing the arc on textiles, Q’eqchi’ weavers are re-enacting the physical and spiritual grounding in the geography that surrounds them.

This pattern, again, depicts an object introduced in the colonial period, meaning that it cannot be an object experienced by all Q’eqchi’ people across time. I have only encountered this pattern in one community, a coffee cooperative in the Cobán region, where coffee and cardamom make up the cash crops that provide the community with income and livelihood. The pattern is used as a corral, surrounding other patterns or filling spaces in an empty garment. In this example, the coffee pattern surrounds a star motif.

Other terms, for example, animalito or xul, (animal), were used to describe groups of figures or figures that women could not quite identify specifically but knew were animals of some kind. For xul this included horses, deer, spiders, and crabs. In this sense when women were identifying patterns as animals, despite having limited specificity, they retained ontological significance as animals are seen as affiliated with or belonging to tzuultaq’a, the mountain spirits, capable of doing the spirits’ bidding as well as acting independently. If, for example, someone does not properly recognise the contribution of the mountain spirit to the process of planting corn, bugs will consume their corn. The term animalitos carries a lot of emotional weight; it can be seen as either exceptionally positive or exceptionally negative, and the way one uses it can identify it both within and outside of the community as affiliated to a greater or lesser degree with the Q’eqchi’ community and spiritual life. Other terms, for example, animalito or xul, (animal), were used to describe groups of figures or figures that women could not quite identify specifically but knew were animals of some kind. For xul this included horses, deer, spiders, and crabs. In this sense when women were identifying patterns as animals, despite having limited specificity, they retained ontological significance as animals are seen as affiliated with or belonging to tzuultaq’a, the mountain spirits, capable of doing the spirits’ bidding as well as acting independently. If, for example, someone does not properly recognise the contribution of the mountain spirit to the process of planting corn, bugs will consume their corn. The term animalitos carries a lot of emotional weight; it can be seen as either exceptionally positive or exceptionally negative, and the way one uses it can identify it both within and outside of the community as affiliated to a greater or lesser degree with the Q’eqchi’ community and spiritual life. Other terms, for example, animalito or xul, (animal), were used to describe groups of figures or figures that women could not quite identify specifically but knew were animals of some kind. For xul this included horses, deer, spiders, and crabs. In this sense when women were identifying patterns as animals, despite having limited specificity, they retained ontological significance as animals are seen as affiliated with or belonging to tzuultaq’a, the mountain spirits, capable of doing the spirits’ bidding as well as acting independently. If, for example, someone does not properly recognise the contribution of the mountain spirit to the process of planting corn, bugs will consume their corn. The term animalitos carries a lot of emotional weight; it can be seen as either exceptionally positive or exceptionally negative, and the way one uses it can identify it both within and outside of the community as affiliated to a greater or lesser degree with the Q’eqchi’ community and spiritual life. Interestingly, while

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21See Richard Wilson’s work (Wilson, R. 1991 & 1995) for confirmation of this spiritual practice.
the Spanish term *animalito* is a diminutive, the Q’eqchi’ term (and the English translation thereof) is simply *xul* (animal), rather than *china xul* (little animal).

**TEXTILE PATTERNS WOVEN IN CONJUNCTION:**

While many patterns can be mixed, the selection below are patterns that weavers differentiated as either being significant in their being woven together, or (as in the case of the man on the horse) only ever appearing jointly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Man and woman holding hands/ hombre y mujer/li winq ut li ixq</td>
<td>When men and women were depicted hand in hand (rather than in single rows of each gender), weavers consistently pointed to this as an example of a unit working together for the betterment of both, and an image of a more idealised community where each “does their part.” No historic textiles demonstrate men and women in conjunction; however, the stylistic choice is quite common now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hummingbird on corn plant /el colibrí sobre la milpa/ tz’unun chi ru li k’al</td>
<td>The hummingbird on the corn plant represents the supernatural world (as represented by the hummingbird) joining the essence of the human world (as represented by the corn). This pattern is popular in both historic museum textiles and contemporary textiles. Hummingbirds are capable of accessing both the human world and the spirit world. In Maya and Q’eqchi’-specific legends, they communicate and travel between the worlds, aid human protagonists facing supernatural challenges, and are associated strongly with planes of existence not accessible to humans. The presence of hummingbirds is seen as portentous of both good and bad supernatural guidance or interference.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Man on horse/caballero/winq ut li kawaay

(Contemporary textile)

Photo Callie Vandewiele 2018

Usually described simply as a man on a horse, although some of the older women in Samac and Santa María identified this figure as an Aleman, or German, and affiliated it with the German plantation owners of Samac from the 1880s-1930s, using the image as a segue into a conversation about the history of the cooperative. Weavers always informed me that horses were used before cars for transportation, but that the people in las comunidades usually did not have access to horses. This is an interesting deviation from the group of “eternals” Rosario Coy identified as being the images used by weavers.22

There were a handful of instances when particular interviewees, or their family members, would pick out a particular set or combination of patterns in a textile and explain the characters, as well as their placement and groupings; however, I was unable to confirm broader agreement on interpretations of specific combinations of meanings and patterns, and therefore unable to include them in the overview of pattern symbols.

It should be noted that a few weavers are now using printed patterns to produce objects intended for sale at the International Folk Arts Market in Santa Fe (to be discussed in chapter five). Although no weavers produce these printed patterns—they are instead produced by Olga Reich, who primarily uses them as designs to ensure that the products delivered to IFAM each year fit the specifications that she advertises (see chapter five).

Many of the women who weave exclusively for IFAM can only list three to six patterns that they weave regularly or know how to weave without guidance from a more skilled weaver. In comparison, older weavers and weavers in communities where IFAM has not had an impact can weave on average eight to twelve patterns and recognise over fifteen by name. The patterns preferred by IFAM weavers are star, duck, arc, triangle, circle, and corral. These patterns are all heavily requested by Amalia when she is placing orders for the following year’s IFAM, and appear in textile plans or mock-ups produced by Olga Reich and used as guides for weavers producing objects (Interview Amalia Gue June 2016).

22 There is potential work to be done exploring the introduction of post-Spanish arrival objects in textile patterning (notably the horse, coffee plant, and the chicken), and looking at what they may represent in the textiles. The horse in particular served as a symbol of power from the time of conquest, but my interviewees heavily equated it with German finca owners and a close sense of the personal past oppression of their families on those fincas.
TEXTILES TELLING STORIES

During one of my very early meetings with Don Francisco Ca’al,23 the president of the Samac Coffee Cooperative, as we went through the textile pattern booklet I explained to him my aim to present to the comité de la cooperativa (governing board of the cooperative) my research project and talked him through the materials I had available and the structure of the interviews. Don Ca’al, was mostly unimpressed by the images of historic textiles but latched onto the following image:

![Textile Illustration](image)

*Figure 4.11: Textile illustration of patterns translated and recreated digitally from a photocopy annotated and returned to me by Don Ca’al.*

*Source: Photograph: Hearst Museum Online Database
Museum Textile: Hearst Museum Object Number 3-28122
Illustration recreated by Callie Vandewiele 2018.*

Don Ca’al, considered locally to be a community authority due to his position as cooperativa president despite being only thirty-six years old, explained in great detail that this textile was depicting a Maya sacrificial offering. The figures on the bottom row are incense burners; the dots rising from them are smoke. Above them are “rings,” and above them are larger incense burners sending even more smoke higher up. These images of smoke then went

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23Don Ca’al has since died in a robbery in the city, which occurred in early spring 2017.
through another set of rings, which he identified as cave openings, as they were directly underneath *arco*, which can signify either mountains or rivers. He specifically identified them as mountains with springs or streams and informed me that this meant they were *ixq tzuultaq’a*, or female mountain spirits. Above the mountain is the image of a hummingbird, often associated with spirituality and the realms inaccessible to people. For him, the presence of the hummingbird atop the mountain was what made the patterns on this particular textile inarguably a representation of a specific spiritual act, and an important part of Q’eqchi’ life.

My own experiences as an observer to Q’eqchi’ spiritual practice confirm this. As a part of my fieldwork I was honoured to witness a series of ceremonies in and around funerals in which Catholic and Q’eqchi’ spiritual practices were mixed. These included the use of incense, the four cardinal points, consumption of *cacao* and in one case the ritual slaughter of a chicken. Furthermore, informants detailed to me on many occasions the importance of caves and mountain crevices to access the *tzuultaq’a* and to carry out day to day and annual ceremonies involving incense, candles and prayer.

The ways in which community and cultural leaders, such as Don Ca’al, view and interpret museum textiles is another way in which communities (beyond weavers) can think about their importance. The textiles themselves were significant to Don Ca’al in ways they were not to the weavers. For weavers, textiles are direct avenues for learning from grandmothers and great-grandmothers. But Don Ca’al read the textile as one might read a text. Don Ca’al demonstrated that for men textiles hold significant value, if in slightly different ways than for women and that male elders too can access some of the information contained in textiles, although they cannot renew that knowledge. For him, the textile was an avenue for connecting his spirituality with the spirituality of Q’eqchi’ people who had lived generations ago, and a confirmation that, in continuing to practice his Q’eqchi’ spirituality, he was part of a larger tapestry of political resistance; more precisely, through the refusal to conform to Spanish and Guatemalan government cultural norms.

Don Ca’al’s strong emotional reaction to this textile is an indication of the ways in which other Q’eqchi’ people may think about and connect to the ontological significance of the symbols in *picb’il* textiles. As garments which are closely linked to identity, *picb’il* textiles are significant to the communities as garments in and of themselves. The designs in the textiles add another layer of symbolism to these garments, and another layer of meaning to the people who wear them and to the people outside of the communities who see these garments.
That significance also allows garments to be interpreted by Q’eqchi’ people, as well as by other Maya people, as telling a particular story about Mayan history and identity. Having that history told in a textile, which Don Ca’al read and identified as a historic document, adds veracity to it; as he repeatedly told me, “Our grandparents practiced these ceremonies, that is why we practice them.” Using the textile photograph I had brought to the community as evidence in a narrative about a personal, communal, and national past, Don Ca’al filled in the gaps he perceived to connect that textile and what was depicted on it to the life of his own community. The museum textile, imbued with identity and authority, gave him the authority to claim a particular heritage in a particular way. It is that power, and that construction of heritage, that gives Maya textiles in museums immense potential for community use in creating heritage, asserting identity, and fomenting political will.

QanaRux (Grandmother Rosario) embodies the innate sense, in the Q’eqchi’ world, that textiles are more than simply objects created by a cottage industry. Picb’il production and use is rooted in a Q’eqchi’ way of living, it is integral to the production of new kinship ties, and furthermore has ontological value. The patterns woven into the fabric are spiritually significant and tie modern Q’eqchi’ women to the ancient Maya through Maya stories and legends that have survived over hundreds of years.

Picb’il weaving is an integral way in which Q’eqchi’ women participate in the production of an identity that foregrounds the Q’eqchi’ experience as the central experience in the Q’eqchi’ world, and not simply an addendum to the Spanish and Ladino experience of conquest. The use of images that form an integral part of Q’eqchi’ cosmovision within textiles not only endows the textiles with spiritual meaning, but it grounds the weaving practice into a cultural tradition understood by those who practice it to be pre-Hispanic in nature. The endurance of these patterns and their spiritual meanings serve as an anchor in the minds of weavers and community elders affirming the power of textiles to reinvigorate cultural and ontological knowledge.

With the blowgun ruined, Ixb’alam and The Sun set out, running quietly through the night towards the sea. The Sun promised Ixb’alam that once they reached the ocean they could fly across the waves, and they would be safe. But Ixb’alam worried, and kept looking over her shoulder into the night.

Thinking her father’s blowgun was ruined, they ran away. But her father awoke. Seeing that his lens was ruined, he called across to his brother’s house, as they lived nearby. They were junkab’al. And he asked his brother to help him find his daughter. The moon and the sun ran and ran and ran, but her father caught them as they were starting to cross the sea. And he shot his daughter from far away—but he was a great hunter and did not miss. As she died, her blood fell into the waves and the sun wept and wept as he watched her blood disappear into the sea.

One of the most striking aspects of picb’il textile weaving today, in comparison to other traditional Maya textiles from Guatemala, is the very recent breadth and impact of an international market on textile production. A combination of the limited number of picb’il weavers, the isolation of the Alta Verapaz, and the unusual style of the textile has not only opened the door for weavers to market picb’il garments in the same way as traditional huipils elsewhere in Guatemala, Mexico and Belize, but also created a lucrative and often problematic doorway for intermediaries marketing of picb’il textiles in the United States and Japan¹ These markets produce a minimum of forty thousand US dollars² in gross total sales each year that I am able to identify and confirm, although the figure may be much higher. In a region where an average family of more than six members, with access to land and either a cardamom or coffee crop, typically earns under two thousand US dollars per year,³ the potential income from sales of textiles on international textile markets is significant.

In this chapter I look at the history and development of the local and international markets for picb’il textiles through the 20th century. I begin with local production for local

¹In comparison to other traditional Maya textiles, it is simple in colour scheme and often advertised by English language sellers as “elegant.”
²Calculating the potential income from textiles per year was tricky. I was able to acquire sales sheets from the booth that Olga Reich runs at the International Folk Arts Market in Santa Fe as well as detailed sales records from the cooperative, Hijas de Aj Po’op B’atz. Pairing this data with the estimates that women gave me on the number of textiles they sold to outside buyers and average prices, I am confident that this is the minimum sale total for textiles going into international markets.
consumption in the pre-1950 era, when weaving production dropped off due to the introduction of machine woven lace *huipils*. During this era, women that did weave produced *picb’il huipils* primarily for their own use, although they did occasionally sell these textiles to specialised collectors including academics and museum collectors. Next, I will look at the impact of Guatemala’s civil war (1963-1996) on *picb’il* production, carefully detailing the period from 1980 to 1984 when the primary *picb’il* weaving communities of the Alta Verapaz faced direct genocidal violence and textile production became a lifeline and a form of resistance through the development of a small relationship based market between a particularly influential weaver and a local aristocrat.

In the period after Guatemala’s peace accords were signed, I look at the increasing presence of international buyers not only in the Alta Verapaz, but through direct access that several community members have to a major international market. It is here that I address questions of the agency of cooperatives versus that of individuals and the role that ‘western’ intermediaries continue to play in *picb’il* production in the Alta Verapaz. Finally, the chapter addresses how this transformation is changing the relationship between weavers and textile production, and how these changes may filter out into changes in the ways that women interact with or think about museum textiles.

**HOME PRODUCTION AND IMPORTED TEXTILES 1930-1950**

Prior to the mid-1940s, there is very little evidence that a textile market existed for the traditional *picb’il* huipils of the Alta Verapaz outside the communities in which the textiles were woven and worn. Far more women would have woven their own *huipils* during this period than today, as attested both by ethnographic observers (O’Neal 1947) and the oral history of today’s community. Most of my informants—interviewees as well local Cobaneros and Chamelqueños—shared the statement that “all the women would weave their *huipils*.” One interviewee from the community of Campat told me repeatedly, “All our grandmothers were weavers, they all wove their *huipils* for their families. No one needed to buy *huipils*.” For her, weaving served as a connection between herself and more traditional Q’eqchi’ women of an imagined past; however, it also served to cement a community and regional narrative according to which textile production was once a household act, and textile products were not perceived to be a part of a household’s capital-based income production as they are today. Juanita Chen’s understanding of *picb’il* outside the monetary sphere places a tension around the growing narrative among younger weavers of textile production as a tool for economic empowerment
and the bolstering of family income. Combined, they demonstrate the community’s ability to imagine and reimagine the role of textile production as it changes in relation to each new generation of weavers. In an interview with ninety-one-year-old weaver Juanita Chen,4 I asked where her mother and grandmother sold the textiles they wove when she was a child, and she repeatedly stated that they did not sell the textiles:

We wove for ourselves. All the women wore the white *picb’i’il*, everyone. With our *cortes*. And we braided ribbons into our hair. You could go to the market in Cobán and see all the women of the *pueblo*5 because they all had white *huipils*, blue *cortes*, and a ribbon in their braided hair.

Both informants delineated the distinct difference between themselves and historic textile producers via the development of textile production from a household staple for personal clothing to a small cottage industry whose role is more economic than cultural, while emphasising a shared identity as Q’eqchi’ women through their roles as weavers.

Juanita’s recollection is backed up by the memories of Isabella and Rosalia Xol (names used with permission), both in their mid-eighties living outside Cobán, who spoke about “*los huipils de los chinos*” (“the *huipils* of the Chinese”) that they started wearing in their teens, and how it became harder to pick out the women of the village because everyone began to wear coloured lace rather than the traditional white. From the early 20th century, imported textiles from Chinese textile mills gradually pervaded the Guatemalan textile markets, beginning in urban centres and moving out to smaller and smaller communities over time. The Xol sisters recall that these machine-made fabrics were favoured by women living in the cities, becoming a staple in the Alta Verapaz only around the 1940s, as also documented by O’Neale (1947). With the introduction of imported textiles and the production of *huipils* across Guatemala, O’Neale also noted a decreased availability of thread available for purchase across the highlands (not simply in the Cobán region), as well as a decrease in the number of women weaving and selling traditional *huipils* in the local markets during this time period.

Whereas in the cities the adoption of imported fabrics may have reflected benign ‘fashion trends,’ in the highlands this transformation in the textile industry was part of a broader suppression of Maya autonomy and included textiles as a political medium for domination and conscious resistance for generations to come. Several of my interviewees in the cooperative of

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4Named with her permission
5Many informants used the term *pueblo* or *pueblo Q’eqchi* to speak about the Q’eqchi’ “community” or “people.”
Samac told stories of their grandmothers being forced to buy imported textiles for *huipils* as the German landowner, Gustav Helmreich (who owned and controlled the farm on which the community resided from approximately 1890-1935), viewed home textile production through weaving as the theft of productive hours that could be spent working on projects and crops for the plantation. The Poou Coy family talked about how their great-grandmother had been punished for weaving, and that one of the reasons that the current matriarch learned to weave in middle age, during the Guatemalan Civil War, was to regain what had been taken from her maternal grandmother by the Germans. She then taught her daughters to weave in order to reclaim a part of her Q’eqchi’ identity and own an intangible part of her heritage.

**THE COLLECTORS’ MARKET, GENOCIDE AND RESISTANCE 1950-1980: DOÑA LESLIE HEMPSTEAD & QANA ROSARIO KOY**

Guatemalan textile production in the Alta Verapaz as a whole saw a slow but marked decline between the 1950s and 1970s. Textiles continued to be valued within communities and used in daily, ceremonial, and religious dress. Throughout some regions, including the Alta Verapaz, small artisan markets encouraged the sale and regional export of a limited number of textiles. It was at one such market that Doña Leslie Hempstead first met QanaRux (Doña Rosario Coy) in the 1970s. The wife of a British soldier she met shortly after WWII, and a member of Cobán’s German/Guatemalan elite through marriage, Leslie was known locally for her appreciation of art, culture, and textiles, and had (according to Rosario) never seen any *huipils* like those Rosario was vending. Leslie stopped and said hello and mentioned to Rosario that if she were ever coming into Cobán to sell textiles again, she should stop at the family house and let Leslie have the first opportunity to buy. Over the course of the next six or seven years, the women developed a friendship through this market-based relationship, which would reshape the nature of weaving and community in the Alta Verapaz.

Doña Leslie Hempstead was a discerning and selective textile buyer. She was knowledgeable about many of the textile traditions in Guatemala and had grown up with textile collecting as her mother (born in 1880, half-German, half-Irish) was one of the first serious textile collectors in Guatemala, and the first in the Alta Verapaz. Remembering her mother in a recorded interview in 2009, Leslie noted that her mother “…loved the Indian things,” a

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*Most Q’eqchi’ people have a Q’eqchi’ name, but use the ‘Spanish version’ of that name when interacting with Spanish speakers: Rosario -- Rux, Adela -- Del, Jesus -- Chus, etc.*

*Leslie’s mother married into a prominent German-Guatemalan coffee producing family.*
Perhaps subconscious nod to the difficult relationships between textile collectors and textile producers in a complex colonial space such as Guatemala in the 1900s (Endangered Threads Documentaries: Interview 2006, Published 2016). When Hempstead started purchasing Rosario’s huipils, she did so out of both interest in the textile style and recognition that the Santa María textiles were among the finest examples of picb’il that she had encountered.

During the 1970s, a few years after Doña Leslie moved to Cobán permanently, development of the textile market and arts in Guatemala was deeply impacted by the increasing presence of a military dictatorship, which would continue until the mid-1990s. As the concept of women-driven artisan, or artist co-ops were gaining traction throughout other portions of the developed world, weavers in Guatemala were continuing to see their trade deeply impacted by a civil war in which all signs of indigenous identity faced suppression (Kinzer & Schlesinger 2000).

As seen in the first chapter, in the early 1980s, the civil war took a dark turn when targeted, ethnic violence erupted into full-blown genocide. The increasing levels of violence left large swathes of the country extremely isolated. Entire communities were devastated by massacres or physically destroyed with the residents left as refugees, hiding in the mountains, or emigrating to Mexico. Many Maya found themselves the unwilling residents of internment camps labelled “model villages.” This cultural devastation was occurring at the same historical juncture that saw the advent of microloans, community cooperatives, and indigenous arts and folk crafts in the international market.

NGOs working in Guatemala focused on ongoing violence instead of economic development or outreach for women (Interview CEDEPCA historian Guatemala City). Although local communities were forced to focus on survival, they continued to preserve cultural heritage. Decades were lost, however in the development of an international market for Guatemalan indigenous arts. By the height of the civil war, the majority of aid organisations and NGOs operating in Guatemala were protestant religious organisations (especially Presbyterian organisations) permitted there because of President Ríos Montt’s evangelical roots and beliefs. Very few of these organisers focused on more than basic aid or human rights watch activities (Interview CEDEPCA historian April 2016).

It was during this period that the genocide most acutely affected the weaving communities outside of Cobán, as seen in chapter two of this thesis. Importantly, when the residents of Santa María were living in the “model village” of Samac, Rosario continued her friendship with Leslie, who bought more and more textiles each year. The more isolated the community became, the more textiles Leslie purchased, and the more textiles Leslie purchased,
the more women Rosario taught to weave. By the mid-1980s, Rosario was teaching weaving to her daughters, daughters-in-law, cousins, neighbours, and any woman who came to her and asked. She was not only selling her and her family’s huipils to Leslie, but also bringing textiles that were produced by all of her students. Between them, Rosario and Leslie created a market for picb’il huipils, and also for curtains, table runners, and tablecloths; objects that had not existed—at least not to that extent—in the years prior to the genocide or any time in recent Mayan history.

A large number of weavers can trace how they learned to weave back to Rosario Coy. Paired with the women who learned from other teachers, but also with access to Leslie’s market, over sixty women who otherwise would likely not have become picb’il textile weavers did so because of the introduction of a textile market outside Cobán in the 1980s. The chart in figures 5.1 (fold out) and 5.2) demonstrate a weaving heritage tree, tying together weavers in the textile communities outside Cobán based on who taught them to weave, and thus demonstrating the extraordinary impact of Rosario Coy’s relationship with Leslie.

There is no doubt, particularly in the mind of Rosario—who regarded Doña Leslie as a good and genuine friend up to the point of Leslie’s death—that the support Leslie provided not only allowed Rosario’s family to survive the genocide, but also gave Rosario the power to financially support other women in the continuation of a cultural tradition at a time when Maya women were devalued to the point of being slaughtered.

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The following figure on the insert (5.1) provides a tree of ‘weaving genealogy’ demonstrating the origin of weaving in the community of Santa María, and the pathway through which each of the women represented learned to weave. This chart demonstrates the impact that a few influential weaving teachers can have on the spread of the acquisition of picb’il weaving within a community. Notably this chart demonstrates the number of women who learned to weave from Rosario or one of her first or second-generation students (a total of at least 31.8%, or around one third, of current picb’il weavers); thus showing her impact on picb’il in the region. Figure 5.2 provides a timeline demonstrating that Rosario was most active as a direct-teacher during the height of Guatemala’s Civil War, when Doña Leslie was purchasing picb’il exclusively from Rosario Coy and providing a market for women in the communities to supplement their income. Paired, the two provide a visual demonstration of the impact that Rosario and Leslie’s friendship had on picb’il production in the Alta Verapaz during the 1980s and into the present day.

*Some pseudonyms used.*
There is also no doubt that Leslie Hempstead, as a relative of the Dieseldorff family, gained her wealth, position in Guatemalan society, and influence through the direct and generations-long exploitation of Q’eqchi’ people by German and Hispanic-descendant Guatemalans. Leslie’s family, still living in Cobán today, remains in contact with Rosario and her family. The friendship and memories shared by Leslie and Rosario bridged a social, linguistic, and economic gap not normally crossed in Guatemala, and highlights the complexity of individual relationships in colonial and postcolonial spaces.

It is clear from the later interviews, and conversations with her family in 2016, that Leslie was very aware that her involvement in the textile market and the local politics had ramifications within weaving communities. However, her loyalty to Rosario—based on friendship—fell squarely into the model of junkab’al within the Alta Verapaz. It also

Figure 5.2 Scatter plot of weaving knowledge acquisition from 1950-present day.

![Figure 5.2 Scatter plot of weaving knowledge acquisition from 1950-present day.](image-url)
sufficiently mirrored other German/Ladino/Maya interactions such that, while she had a significant impact on the production of picb’il, her impact seems to have strengthened Rosario’s position within her own community, rather than fracturing it. As seen below, whether this is due to luck, timing, intent, or the nature of the relationship itself and its close mirroring to kinship relationships in Q’eqchi culture, I cannot say. What is clear is that Leslie’s fondness for Santa María and her connection to Rosario was in fact rooted in genuine friendship and that in being relationship-driven, the increased market opportunity strengthened, rather than weakened, community ties.

THE COLLECTORS’ MARKET

After the women of Santa María were allowed to resettle their community QanaRux and Doña Leslie slowly lost contact, and as the cooperative was re-established, Leslie’s textile purchases tapered off and eventually stopped. Talking with Rosario, and listening to old recorded interviews from Leslie, it is unclear why. Leslie claims Rosario simply stopped visiting, and Rosario claims that Leslie was no longer interested in textile purchases. The women retained a high level of respect for and interest in each other, but neither was quite able to articulate how and why they fell out of touch.¹ From an outsider’s perspective, age and health seem to have played a significant role, with Doña Leslie never travelling to Santa María, as Rosario slowly cut back on her visits to Cobán as she cared for her ill husband after a serious stroke until his death, and then struggled with the long walk out of Santa María to the nearest minibus in and out of Cobán. Rosario, when asked about Leslie, always remembered her fondly; in a 2007 interview, Leslie joked with the interviewer that Rosario had abandoned her, before going on to indicate that she is the godmother of at least one of Rosario’s grandchildren.

At the time of her death in 2009, Doña Leslie had amassed perhaps the largest single collection of contemporary picb’il textiles anywhere in the world, a collection her son (and heir) has been working to find a home. Referring to the Q’eqchi’ people she lived among and around repeatedly as “Indians,” Doña Leslie documented the history of each textile she collected fastidiously, noting the weaver’s name and age, price paid for it and patterns woven into the textile. This paradoxical juxtaposition highlights, in many ways, the impossibility of

¹In a 2008 interview with Leslie, she asked me to inquire as to Rosario’s health and family and to stop in later that month to let her know how Rosario was and that I had passed on greetings to her. That same year, Rosario was surprised but pleased to learn Leslie was still alive and responded to the news by informing me that Leslie was a “buena persona”: high praise in the Alta Verapaz, where encountering a good and genuine person outside of your own community is considered somewhat rare.
removing ourselves from our social context of origin in any complete way. Leslie cared a great deal for Rosario and her family yet continued to exist in a stratified society where Rosario’s poverty and status as an indigenous person remained a defining characteristic in the world in which Doña Leslie lived.

While an attempt at the impossible—setting aside the enormous social, political, and cultural implications of modern Guatemala and acknowledging the complicated web of German/Guatemalan/Ladino/Q’eqchi’ relationships of twentieth-century Cobán—Leslie and Rosario’s relationship seems to have been fundamentally a friendship. Their relationship, paired with the relationship between Amalia Gue and Olga Reich, can be viewed as microcosms for the complex social dynamics of the German migration to the Alta Verapaz. This can include the dynamics between the illegitimate children of German settlers, their “legitimate” German children, the indigenous people who have served as near-slaves on the German plantations, and the Ladino Guatemalan government which, for much of that historical period, was happy to ignore the Alta Verapaz whenever possible.

Doña Leslie’s impact on the community remains clear through her engendering of a market that drove textile production to new heights and possibly played a significant role in the survival of this tradition in the outlying communities of Cobán. Despite this clear economic motivator, interviews and conversations with Rosario indicate that picb’il weaving is, for her, far more than simply an economic activity. Rosario talks about weaving as though it is a part of not only her individual identity, but also the identity of all women in the Q’eqchi’ world. Rosario refers to looms as having life and the patterns she “shapes” into textiles as representing “the internal” consistency in Q’eqchi’ life.

Santa María is where the weaving comes from. When I was young my grandmother grew cotton in the valley where it is flat, and the ancestors came here because it was a place where the cotton grew and they felled the forest when they came here to build our aldea where we could be Q’eqchi’. Santa María is where the looms are, where all the women weave.

Rosario enmeshes the ontological value of the community’s location with the reputation that the community has for textile production. This reputation was one it earned in large part because of the sheer number of women whom Rosario taught to weave. By tying the

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2The German-Guatemalan textile marketer who introduced the cooperative to the International Folk Arts Market in Santa Fe and sells picb’il garments in a high-end fashion shop in Antigua Guatemala. To be explained in the forthcoming section “IFAM.”
strong sense of identity that Rosario feels in respect to weaving as a part of her Q’eqchi’
personhood to the clear and undeniable role that textile production as a cottage industry played
in her family’s economic and financial survival during the war years she emphasises the
important role of textile production in the past and the present. For the women in these
communities, where weaving was first actively suppressed by German plantation owners
beginning in the late 1880s and then again (albeit less directly during the genocide of the
1980s), a renewed sense of Q’eqchi’ identity was consolidated through re-enacting weaving as
a path to feminine Q’eqchi’ personhood. This led to a conflation of personhood and identity
through the act of weaving.

1990 - 2015

In the mid-1990s, during and shortly after the signing of Guatemala’s peace accords, the market
for picb’il textiles outside of the Q’eqchi’ region appears to have been limited. Tomoko
Ishikawa, a Japanese textile expert and long-time Guatemalan resident, recalls finding picb’il
textiles as far south as the market town of Chichicastenango, and even occasionally in
Guatemala City, but also recounting the process of slowly seeing fewer and fewer and fewer
of the Cobanero blancos in the larger market towns. By the end of the decade, Ishikawa was
travelling to and from the Alta Verapaz, looking to identify textile weavers who wove picb’il,
as she was unable to find the textile further south and was curious as to whether the decline
was due to a lack of market or fewer women weaving. During this time, Leslie was no longer
regularly purchasing textiles, and while weavers were selling locally to women in Cobán, there
was not yet even a limited export market. With fewer textiles being produced at this time, fewer
were sold, and as fewer were sold, buyers like Ishikawa were forced either to abandon
the textile or seek out their own connections and relationships with weavers.

Since then, as will be discussed later, significant changes have occurred in the textile
market and in the communities due to the introduction of this market. In the late 1990s, the
cooperative of Samac applied for the first of four Peace Corps volunteers, whom they would
host from 2002 until 2010.³ Peace Corps projects included the installation of solar panels,
development of an ecotourism project, and the foundation of the first picb’il weaving
cooperative in the Alta Verapaz: Ixb’alam Ke, in 2004. Originally made up of twenty six
women from both Samac and Santa María, Concepción Coy was the first president and co-

³Of these I have been able to talk extensively with two: Jonathan Tharin, who married Concepción Coy, and
Andrew McAfee. The other two I have been unable to contact.
organiser along with Peace Corps volunteer Jonathan Tharin. The foundation of this cooperative was one of the goals listed in the community’s application for a long-term Peace Corps presence, and one of the first major successes of that post. With the assistance of the Peace Corps, the community was able to secure a grant of approximately five thousand US dollars, which was used to purchase loom supplies and seek out market opportunities in Guatemala City and Antigua (field notes 2009). Concepción and Jonathan did most of the initial research work in Guatemala City and Cobán and were able to establish working relationships with a series of tourist shops in Antigua Guatemala, notably in well-established venues such as El Colibri (focused on providing income for war widows through weaving) and Casa de Los Gigantes (owned by a long-time resident and artisanal vendor originally from the United States). After Tharin’s stint in the Peace Corps ended, Ixb’alam Ke continued to receive support from two Peace Corps successors, including Andrew McAfee, who introduced me to the community in 2008.

At the time of my first introduction to Ixb’alam Ke and the coffee cooperative in Samac in 2008, followed by my own extensive visits in 2009, the weaving cooperative was still run communally, and Amalia Gue, the matriarch of a local weaving family and community leader, had just been elected its third president. The cooperative was receiving some outside recognition for the textiles produced, including a short documentary film produced by Kathleen Vitale, a featured mini chapter in a book eventually published in 2015 by Deborah Chandler, who also featured the group on her website, Cloth Roads. “Textile tours” organised at Amalia Gue’s house for visitors from the United States coming to tour textile production sites, purchase textiles, and learn about Guatemala’s rich textile tradition provided another source of income.

This increased publicity coincided with market-driven innovation in the products of weavers in the Alta Verapaz, and slowly opened the textile market to outside buyers. Although traditional huipils sold less well than napkins, table runners, shawls, and scarves, all of which were more versatile for buyers and less time-intensive for weavers, with the support of Chandler, some of these objects began to pop up on websites affiliated with organisations supporting Guatemalan weavers and to trickle into the international market. Weavers who had once only woven for themselves, or to sell locally within kinship networks, were able to gain access to a wider market. My field research suggests that, as individual weavers gained access to outside markets, they introduced members of their own junkab’aleb’ to outside buyers, or

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4The two married in 2007 and now live in Florida.
5Original article to be found at: https://www.clothroads.com/one-strong-woman-heads-weaving-coop-in-guatemala/
purchased objects from friends and neighbours to sell to those buyers later. Increased prices, such as scarves listed online at between $60 and $80 per scarf (as compared to $15-$20 in the community), did not necessarily lead to an increased economic return per object for weavers, who reported being able to sell scarves for only Q125-Q150 (or approximately $20-$28), depending on the buyer, barely more than the cost of a single *huipil* panel in the local market. In terms of a real wage, a *huipil* sells for around Q350 (or $45) and takes between four and six weeks to produce if a woman weaves five or more hours per day, meaning that these weavers are earning less than one US Dollar per day of labour, not including the cost of the thread (approximately Q20 or $2.20 per *huipil*). It was during this time period that weavers in San Juan Chamelco, connected to *Ixb’alam Ke* through a community health worker named Margarita Beb, began founding *Hijas de Aj Po’op B’atz*, an independent weaving cooperative for *picb’il* and *calada*-style weavers of the San Juan Chamelco region that was fully established by 2012.

By my return to Guatemala in the spring of 2016, the original weaving cooperative of *Ixb’alam Ke* had dissolved and been rebuilt as a small business run by weaver and community leader Amalia Gue. In the wake of this fracturing several other local cooperatives had been set up, some successfully, others not, to fill the gap as not all of the weavers I interviewed were willing to work with Amalia or associate themselves with *Ixb’alam Ke*. While women were hesitant to state the reason why *Ixb’alam Ke* has fractured and increasingly fewer women are willing to work with Amalia, many of the weavers I interviewed in Santa María implied that Amalia had commissioned textiles or taken textiles to vend at an international arts market and promised to pay them upon her return. As many women do not read or write, and Amalia tracks purchases, sales, and debts in a single lined notebook, it is difficult to resolve debts and payments. It is worth noting that none of the women who claim Amalia owes them money are members of her *junkab’al*. The more vulnerable and disconnected women in Samac are particularly likely to claim Amalia owes them money; specifically, widows or women without the security of a cooperative membership or social standing. Amalia does work with a local Q’eqchi’ accountant in the municipal centre who was somewhat unforthcoming during our meeting but insinuated that many of the conflicts Amalia has with local weavers in Samac and outstanding balances may have more to do with her lack of a formal education and limited mathematical skills than with any intention to specifically cheat her neighbours or fellow

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6Formalised membership into La Cooperativa Samac brings with it not only social status and security, but also the ability to help make collective decisions.
Weavers. The relationship between Amalia and IFAM (as established via a local German/Guatemalan woman named Olga Reich) is a more business focused relationship than that between QanaRux and Doña Leslie. Weavers working with Rosario to vend to Leslie could rely on a relationship-based model of sales which meshed well with the structure of a junkab’al. The relationship that Amalia has with Olga relies on a capitalistic business model, and as a result is less trusted by community members, lacks the stability that social ties provided between Rosario and Leslie, and has become divisive rather than sustainable.

Throughout this period, weavers remained in contact with Tomoko Ishikawa (see page 122) who has learned to weave a style of picb’il in an aldea of San Pedro Carchá. Ishikawa continues to try to locate markets for cooperatives in Japan, but her work has failed to secure a regular space in which picb’il can be sold, although she has managed several exhibitions of picb’il in Tokyo (most recently in October 2017). Ishikawa introduced the weavers in San Juan Chamelco to Aiko Gray, a Japanese-American textile expert who leads annual “textile treks” through Guatemala with a two-day stop in Cobán. Ishikawa, like many of the weavers I worked with and the foreigners living and working long-term in Guatemala, was suspicious of the motives of interlopers and nervous of the impact that other foreigners she had seen come and go over the years might have on the community.

**INDIGENOUS ARTS IN SANTA FE: THE INTERNATIONAL FOLK ARTS MARKET (IFAM)**

The International Folk Arts Market (IFAM) in Santa Fe New Mexico, is an outdoor market for indigenous craftspeople that hosts between one hundred and fifty and one hundred and eighty artists each year. Approximately one-third of the artists each year are new artists. On average, the fair brings in just under twenty thousand visitors and is held on the plazas between the major museums in New Mexico, at a site known as “Museum Hill.” All the museums, including the New Mexico Folk Art Museum, are open for the duration of the event. Artists are invited to attend a special reception and early booth opening the Friday evening before the fair. Tickets for supporters of the market are US $275.00 per person, and the event offers “meet and greets” with “your favourite artists,” as well as the opportunity to participate in an auction of specially produced items and shop the IFAM stalls, before the event opens to the general public with tickets costing $15.00 per person, including a park and ride service to the site. As a part of my field research, I spent two days at IFAM, primarily with the Guatemalan Weavers in the
The *Ixb’alam Ke* booth: Amalia Gue from Samac, and Maria,7 a representative from FEDECOVERA sent on behalf of the weavers in Santa María. I did not attend the opening evening event due to the high cost/low trade off in terms of data that could be collected. Amalia was unwilling to talk about booth sales with me during or after the event, even in spaces where Olga was not present; Maria, however, told me that the majority of their sales during IFAM occurred during this “pre-event” opening.8

IFAM makes it expressly clear in the application process that vendors may not sell objects that have not been previously approved by the fair committee, and that vendors are not allowed to renegotiate prices once the fair has begun until after three in the afternoon on the Sunday the fair ends. Despite this, most of the vendors I observed were willing to barter back and forth over the cost of items, and many were selling personal items, jewellery, hats, etc. upon request that were clearly not a part of their advertised booth fare. Both Amalia and Maria participated in a long standing IFAM tradition and “swapped” items they had brought to the fair in exchange for items from other vendors.

Cobán weavers first attended IFAM after Olga Reich met Amalia Gue and the women of Samac in 2009 through the marketing work done on behalf of *Ixb’alam Ke* by Jonathan Tharin and the documentary produced by Endangered Threads. By 2010 Reich had leveraged a booth for the cooperative at the International Folk Art Market.9 IFAM brings in gross total sales of between two and a half and three million US dollars per year. They boast nearly twenty thousand ticketed visitors to the folk arts market each year and mobilise an army of over two thousand volunteers to run the event. It is estimated that the event brings in over ten million US dollars in local business to the Santa Fe area each year and produces nearly a quarter of a million dollars in sales taxes for the state of New Mexico from booth sales alone. In 2015, the most recent year for which data is available, 173 artists from fifty-seven countries attended IFAM, each earning a take-home cheque averaging twenty thousand dollars per booth—an amount above and beyond their cost of attendance, which includes transportation, room and board, a small booth fee, and ten percent of their sales. The organisers of IFAM also claim that the event is structured to allow artists to take home ninety percent of the money that their

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7 Pseudonym selected by her and used at her request, “Maria” was an employee of FEDECOVERA sent to represent weavers from the cooperatives and better understand Olga’s impact on the access to IFAM.
8 In addition to visiting the booths multiple times each day of the fair, I also arranged a meal with both Amalia and Maria after the fair before they travelled back to Guatemala in order to have informal conversations about their experience at the Folk Art Market.
9 https://www.folkartalliance.org/artist/amalia-gue/.
individual sales generate each year. Both Amalia and Olga have attended under the banner of *Ixb’alam Ke*, ostensibly as representatives of the community each year between 2010 and 2017.

*Picb’il* objects (purchased from women in the communities for between Q100 and Q350 (US $12-$45) were selling at IFAM for between US $50 and US $450. Amalia and Olga both had personal items in addition to the *picb’il* for sale, ranging from small handmade dolls wearing traditional *traje* to large sections of the traditional Cobanero skirt, or *corte*. The most expensive object for sale was a long lace-like nightgown made from *picb’il* Olga was vending for $850. Maria, having noticed by late afternoon Saturday that, in her estimation, Amalia and Olga were both concentrating on selling objects from their respective markets and communities (Olga from her personal shop in Antigua and Amalia from Samac), changed from her *corte* to jeans, cut the *corte* into four sections, stitched them into skirts overnight, and then sold those skirts to offset the costs accrued by the cooperative in Santa María to send her to Santa Fe.

Between 2010 and 2016 (I suspect mid-2012 based on personal accounts), a conflict around access to markets, misuse of grant funds, and control of the *Ixb’alam Ke* dissolved the original cooperative. Amalia Gue retains control of the new cooperative (formed after the collapse of the original *Ixb’alam Ke*) and continues to work closely with Olga Reich to attend IFAM each year. Cooperative elections are no longer held as *Ixb’alam Ke* functions more as a family business with cooperative elements than a true cooperative. As has already been indicated in chapter two, many ex-members of the original weaving cooperative are now members of two other groups. The first is an auxiliary cooperative to the coffee and land cooperative, Samac, and the other another business-style group, run by Margarita Poou, a cousin of Amalia with whom she had a significant falling out in 2015. In the same year, the weaving community in Santa María sought to cut ties with Amalia and build a direct relationship with Olga Reich in order to sell their products directly to Reich, and to sidestep Gue and her mini cooperative. A variety of cooperative members in Santa María reported that they had never received payment for products they sent to be sold in Santa Fe in 2014, and the local assumption was that the products had been sold, and Amalia had simply taken the money. This claim is difficult to verify.

10[https://www.folkartalliance.org/events-programs/international-folk-art-market-santa-fe/what-is-the-market/#](https://www.folkartalliance.org/events-programs/international-folk-art-market-santa-fe/what-is-the-market/#)
11US $8.50 & US $47.00.
12The conflict between the two representatives, Amalia and Maria, was palpable throughout the course of the event.
13There are three Margarita Poou’s in the community. Fifty-four-year-old Margarita Poou, a master weaver and daughter of Clara Coy, and thirty-six-year-old Margarita Poou, founder of the second business style cooperative who is Amalia’s cousin, and a Margarita Poou who does not weave and married into the community sometime in the mid-2010s.
Olga continues to bring Amalia to IFAM each year, as well as to market her own indigo-dyed textiles and textiles produced by Santa Maríia weavers, which she purchases at a bulk rate and sells at market prices as products of Amalia’s cooperative both at IFAM in Santa Fe and in a personal shop she owns and runs in Antigua, Guatemala. As an intermediary Olga provides an important link between the weavers in the Alta Verapaz, and a major international market which accounts for the vast majority of their non-local sales. As are many intermediary relationships, this one is complicated. Olga relies on Amalia for access to the community, and Amalia relies on Olga for access to international markets. The balance between fair trade, ensuring that all parties earn an income and avoiding exploitation is a difficult and contentious one which the community struggles with. Olga’s role as a vendor for textiles fits less neatly into the Q’eqchi’ kinship structure of the junkab’al than did Doña Leslie’s relationship with QanaRux. Olga views herself as a business woman and Amalia as a gatekeeper to picb’il producers. There is less space in her understanding of the relationship for community inclusion than in previous examples.

On July 9, 2016, I arrived in Santa Fe to attend the thirteenth annual IFAM, hosted and run that year by the International Folk Art Alliance in conjunction with the New Mexico Folk Art Museum. Since 2010, when Olga first brought Amalia to IFAM, weavers who have vended through Olga and Amalia earn an average of between $12 and $40 per object sold. As stated, the booth as a whole brings in, on average, somewhere between US $19,000 and US $25,000 in sales each year to the community, with most annual sales exceeding US $30,000. Ten percent of that figure is paid directly out to the International Folk Art Alliance (IFAA) as a fee for the hiring of the booth at the fair. Olga Reich takes another 20%, plus the cost of all her travel and accommodation. Amalia’s travel and accommodation expenses are also covered from the net sales.14 During repeated home visits and interviews, I was unable to garner from Amalia as to what happened with any overage; whether she paid it out to weavers (highly unlikely according to other sources in the community) or, more likely—given that Amalia embarks on an expansion of her home upon each return—if it was money she kept more or less as “payment” for maintaining her relationship with Olga and attending IFAM each year.

14Conversations with Amalia Gue, Margarita Ca’al, & two other weavers who do not wish to be identified by name.
COMMUNITY DIVISIONS

The impact that IFAM has had both on the continuation and development of weaving in the communities of Samac and Santa María has been profound. In addition to being credited by the weaving communities as the reason that the Ixb’alam Ke cooperative dissolved, nearly twenty women—particularly women under the age of twenty-five—have learned to weave over the last six years expressly to vend at the market in Santa Fe. A handful of these women cannot and do not weave traditional textiles such as huipils, but instead specialise in western garments, napkins, table runners, etc.

The degree to which picb’il patterns (see chapter four) are impacted by Olga’s design work is unclear. Many of them (duck, star, arc) appear in traditional huipils across the Alta Verapaz. The difference in pattern placement, size, and style between the objects produced for IFAM and those produced to sell locally is, however, significant (Field notes 2009, 2016 & 2017). Since Olga began working with the women in Samac in 2010, picb’il weavers have simultaneously increased the number of objects that they produce for sale, while decreasing the number of patterns utilised, but have also expanded the variety of lengths and widths of textiles produced (Interview, Amalia Gue, June 2016. Interview Margarita Xol, April 2016). Members of Amalia’s family are currently able to weave textiles up to six metres in length, which are sold in bulk to Olga for garment production. While women did historically produce tablecloths for Leslie Hempstead, Leslie stated in a 2007 interview with Kathleen Vitale that she was “quite sure” that, prior to her ordering tablecloths from Rosario Coy, women weaving picb’il textiles had produced only huipils. Textiles measuring six metres in length have required a significant re-thinking of the structure of the textile, the setup of the loom, and the dynamics involved in producing them without breaking the thread or losing the tension during the process.

Women weaving textiles for IFAM follow the pattern guides produced and distributed by Olga.15 This is in stark contrast to traditional textile weaving, where women memorise designs as they learn them, and measurements are calculations based on the length of a woman’s loom or a huipil that she already owns. While the membership of the cooperative, Ixb’alam Ke, comprises women of a variety of ages and skill levels, Amalia’s current weaving group consists of mostly women, aged twenty-five and younger, who learned to weave specifically to vend at

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15I have, to date, been unable to acquire copies of these patterns. A few weavers have shown me copies, but all have been both very possessive of the guides, afraid I will sell or give them to other weaving groups, or worried that if Olga finds out they are sharing information they will be cut out of the market and lose the source of income.
IFAM. They are members of Amalia’s direct family or have close kinship ties to Amalia or her sisters. While Amalia will buy textiles from women outside this group if she comes up short for IFAM at the end of June, she exclusively gives commissioned work to those she considers loyal to her, and purchases textiles from weavers outside San Juan Chamelco who have no connection to Samac, without indicating that she is purchasing textiles primarily to vend in the United States (Interview, Amalia Gue, June 2016. Interview Margarita Xol, April 2016).

This loyalty to kinship or teaching lines feeds into the ongoing conflict in and around textile markets in Samac and Santa María. Access to the textile market has become part of pre-existing feuds between families or community groups. Despite being exacerbated by the presence of the textile market in IFAM, the textile market and Olga Reich are not wholly responsible for the divisions in the community. However, it does appear that Reich uses those divisions to her advantage, maintaining a tight control over the textile sales and working hard to keep her sources secret as she sells in Antigua, Guatemala City, and outside the country. Simultaneously, she pits textile groups against each other to provide lower costs on bulk textile materials and to ensure that the narrative of a single, organised cooperative does not fade or fall apart in the international spotlight provided by IFAM (Interview, Amalia Gue, June 2016. Interview Margarita Xol, April 2016). As all the weavers who have access to IFAM through Reich, there is a vested interest among the less advantaged groups to still retain a “public” image of cooperation rather than to lose the little access to the market that they already have. Amalia Gue in particular demonstrated a savvy understanding of the importance of images in marketing, as she allowed me only to take photographs of her in traditional clothing, handwoven by herself, and refused to allow me to photograph her in a newly constructed concrete home, instead moving our meeting to a wooden shack, with a packed earth floor used for corn drying and storage.

In 2015 the women’s committee in Santa María approached FEDECOVERA, which advises and represents cooperatives through the Alta Verapaz, and asked them to contact Olga and work with the cooperative on building a relationship between Santa María and Olga, to help Santa María continue sending textiles to Santa Fe, but independently. Olga agreed to take a representative from Santa María to IFAM, but made it clear that she would continue to work directly with Amalia on bringing products to vend, and that the women in Santa María would be responsible for deciding what to produce, bring, and vend without her guidance (personal

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Within the small tightly-woven communities there are a series of long-standing family feuds; the Sacrab family (closely allied with Amalia) has a well-known disagreement with the Ca’al family. Weavers affiliated with the Sacrab family will have little to do with weavers affiliated with the Ca’al family, and vice versa.
interview FEDECOVERA staff member ‘Maria’\textsuperscript{17} July 2016). Santa María was unable to secure a visa for any cooperative members, so a staff member from FEDECOVERA, Maria, attended the fair as a representative of the Santa María Cooperative.

It became obvious during the IFAM event that Olga’s involvement in coordinating the presence of the Samac/Santa María weavers in Santa Fe extended to the application process, and to her role as a translator (Amalia does not speak English) in the booth during the two days of the fair; serving as a gatekeeper to the event for the women in the communities, but leaving much of the actual work of the fair to Amalia. This is in sharp contrast with what women in the communities believe occurs, which is that Olga essentially runs the booth and manages the sales.

The main long-term advantage that IFAM seems to provide to vendors is the opportunity for vendors to network directly with bulk buyers, something that neither Maria nor Amalia have access to, as Olga still serves as the contact point through which all potential connections passed. As the sole English speaker at the booth, and the sole fluent Spanish speaker, her presence allowed Amalia and Maria better access to vendors and visitors--but that access came at the price of control. I observed Maria secretly slipping the Santa María cooperative phone number to a few wholesalers to whom Olga had given a direct email address and stressed that she (Olga) was the best and only contact for anyone wanting to buy *picb’il* textiles.

The difference between the relationship Leslie Hempstead had with the community of weavers and that which Olga is developing is that Leslie simply purchased textiles for her personal collection, or to give as gifts. She was not, according to her son Seth, involved in the textile trade or market. Olga, on the other hand, runs a business based on the sale of *picb’il* textiles in Antigua, at IFAM and through a variety of “fair trade” textile markets such as Cloth Roads. Leslie’s relationship with Rosario was rooted in both a personal interest in the textiles and the strong personal connection between the women. What Olga and Amalia seem to share is a business relationship. Olga shares more direct heritage with the weavers than Leslie: Leslie was of European heritage whereas Olga has at least one Q’eqchi’ grandmother, although she never identifies herself as Q’eqchi’ in any way. Leslie also lived out the majority of her life in Cobán and spoke Q’eqchi’ to at least a conversational degree, while Olga travels to Cobán a few times a year and has never made an effort to learn Q’eqchi’, although she speaks English and Spanish fluently and German passably. Reich may share more direct ancestry with the weavers of the Alta Verapaz, but Hempstead purchased textiles and formed friendships more

\textsuperscript{17}Pseudonym used at request.
in line with the Q’eqchi’ values of junkab’al: creating a community and then supporting the women she knew well in a way that allowed them to then support their own families and eb’junkab’al.

It is likely that many of the community divisions currently experienced around access to international markets are divisions that may have been avoided in the past when weavers better understood their social obligations and expectations within the kinship model, one that no longer serves to govern community access to markets or resources through Olga.

NETWORKS

After the end of IFAM 2016, I arranged to meet independently with both Amalia and Maria. Olga declined a conversation with me. Amalia and I had dinner with the family of her youngest son’s godmother, Alicia Castro Chicol. Amalia had given birth to her youngest son (Francis) while attending IFAM in 2013 after obscuring her pregnancy from Olga and US border control. A long-time fair volunteer, Alicia, and her family fundraised for the hospital costs of the birth, cared for Amalia, and got the baby a US passport. Alicia is a US citizen married to a Guatemalan and has fostered a close relationship with Amalia over the course of the last four years. She and her family have helped Amalia develop connections with a variety of stores in the downtown Santa Fe area and host her for a few days after each IFAM so that she can drop off consignment items at each of the stores as well as collect payments from the previous year. Amalia did not share the fact of this relationship with Maria and refused to take any of Maria’s textiles to the vendors and stores in Santa Fe.

Upon their return to Guatemala, it became apparent that Amalia was willing to do whatever was necessary to undermine FEDECOVERA’s involvement in IFAM and even campaigned successfully to have Maria fired from her position at FEDECOVERA. While the details of personal and community politics are difficult to parse, this demonstrates Amalia’s ability to navigate and manipulate people in a variety of contexts. Olga and Amalia have been accepted to attend IFAM 2018 but had lower booth sales in 2017 than at any point in the last few years. This was countered by Amalia being featured as one of the long-standing vendors in much of the marketing that the fair has introduced in 2017. The complicated relationship between Amalia, Olga, and IFAM provides a window into not only the developing textile community in the Alta Verapaz of Guatemala, but also the developing awareness that Amalia and other women have of the platform that serves as a gateway between their culture and the global market.
On more than one occasion, when I was taking photographs, Amalia, and the women she worked with insured that my photographs featured older, wood board houses with thatched roofs and packed dirt floors rather than the new cement block houses with cement floors that many of the families in Samac and Santa María are building. Amalia was also very cautious about the interview that she (eventually) agreed to give on tape, focusing on the narrative of the cooperative that Olga has curated with IFAM and her own identity as a weaver within the context of IFAM and the global market.

Amalia’s savvy understanding of not only the value of picb’il as an art form and identity garment but also the interplay between the wealth in the west, and the very real poverty of Guatemala being presented in a way that was acceptable to purchasers, was evident. Her ability to control her image, both oral and visual, as a part of a marketing strategy has remained evident in all the interactions I have had with Amalia in which she perceived herself to being recorded in any way.

Since the end of my fieldwork in September of 2016, Amalia Gue was invited (along with Maryland resident Pamela Deakin Kirlin) to market textiles at an artist’s market in Peru called Tinkuy in November 2017, but I have been unable to confirm if Amalia attended or not. Kirlin is working with her sister and a church group in the US to further open up market connections in the United States for weavers in both Samac and San Juan Chamelco. The degree to which Kirlin’s market opportunities are fair trade, or Kirlin understands the complex relationships between weavers and the conflicts that have occurred in the Alta Verapaz over textile weaving in the last decade, remains unclear.

**Textile Market Today**

During a short trip back to the field in the summer of 2017, I was able to observe first-hand the impact of increased economic instability on textile weaving in the Alta Verapaz. The president of the Coffee Cooperative in Samac was murdered in an armed robbery in March of 2017, and in the upheaval that followed the coffee cooperative produced a bad batch of coffee, as it was not harvested in time. This bad crop led to the dissolution of a long-standing coffee buying contract that the community held with an Italian buyer. Following the loss of the contract, the price of coffee families were then able to gain for their crop dropped, and with it the anticipated annual income of all the families who were members of the cooperative. With increased

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18A textile enthusiast and missionary. Attempts to contact her have as of yet been fruitless.
financial instability, there was a marked increase in the number of young women learning to weave, so that the cooperative itself organised a class and bought loom parts for twenty-two young women who had previously been uninterested in textile production as an economic activity.

One of my informants sheepishly told me that when her husband broke his ankle and could not work, he had learned to weave so that they could bring in a little more money to supplement the lost income while they waited for his ankle to heal so that he could go back to work on the coffee harvest. Both the increase in weaving during times of economic instability and the ability and willingness of men to participate in a traditionally female-gendered task demonstrate the value that textile production has as an income generator for families and communities.

One cannot argue, by any stretch of the imagination, that the Q’eqchi’ weavers of the Alta Verapaz have more economic and political power than the tourists and visitors who purchase the textiles that they weave, but pretending that the lack of a western education and the insistence on an identity that predisposes them to monolingualism in Q’eqchi’ means that they are in any way naïve is equally a mistake. The market space made available by IFAM expands the border-space between the Q’eqchi’ world and the western world. It opens up new venues and ways in which individuals can interact and provides new benefits and challenges to Q’eqchi’ women navigating the ever-present battle between what is labelled by outsiders as “modernity” and “development” and a culture and history that they have protected while fighting to modernise on their own terms for, quite literally, generations. Western exceptionalism, particularly European and American exceptionalism, predispose the westerners in the border-space of interaction with the Q’eqchi’ world to view and treat the Q’eqchi’ people as being on a path to modernisation, and to assume that the eventual goal of Q’eqchi’ society is economic, linguistic, and social integration with the global north. As many authors have pointed out, indigeneity serves a limited purpose in terms of allowing for “accepted diversity” in a global capitalist society, but only within the confines that indigenous identity does not challenge the core tenets of global capitalism (see Federici 2012).

**IMPACT OF INCOME**

One of the challenges for people like Amalia and Olga, and one of the questions that researchers may pursue further, is the impact of the influx of capital from spaces like IFAM into communities. This includes the ways in which indigenous groups, like the Q’eqchi’, respond
to increasingly diverse attempts to “modernise” (for lack of a better word) those groups and
peoples whose existence and ontologies do not mesh with the ongoing goals of capital
development and wealth concentration. This forces us to challenge our own preconceptions of
what resistance looks like and what its successful outcome is.

Many of Rosario’s granddaughters, particularly Josefina Quiix de Coy, use the same
words and terms to talk about textiles and weaving as Rosario—words that tie textile production
tightly to an identity rooted in a Maya past, while simultaneously relying on textile production
as an income supplement and source of independence. In contrast, few of the women
interviewed who were neither blood relatives of Rosario nor members of her extended
junkab’al would refer to textiles or looms as directly holding life, or as defining characteristics
of the community. Other women talked about the textiles, upon completion, as having specific
value in the ways in which Q’eqchi’ people identified themselves. But more often, they talked
about the economic benefits of weaving, the struggle to find a market for the textiles, and the
difficulty of managing relationships between their cooperative, the Samac Cooperative,
Ixb’alam Ke, and FEDECOVERA, the cost of thread, etc. This distinct difference, including in
many cases an ambivalence, in the ways in which women spoke about picb’il textiles and
picb’il weaving indicates that there is a strong link between the ability to market the textile and
the economic independence weaving can bring, and as a new and evolving ontological
connection to the practice of weaving. For some women weaving is integrally connected to
their identities as Q’eqchi’ women. To other women it is simply one of many ways they are
able to generate small amounts of family income, and to many women it is both.

It is undeniable that the additional family income provided by textile sales in the
international market has a significant impact on the lives of the weavers who produce those
textiles and on the communities in which they are woven as an added source of economic power
and independence. For many of my informants, income from textile production was the only
family income over which they had power or control. Women reported using this income to
improve the quality of their weaving products with the purchase of new loom parts or better
quality thread, to subsidise family expenses such as food and clothing and their own
participation in community education projects for women, and (above all) to provide their
children with access to education.

While public education is provided in Guatemala by the central government, many rural
schools lack supplies, classrooms, and even teachers. For students aiming to get an education
beyond the sixth grade, it is almost necessary to enrol in a private (usually religious) institution
or to earn a scholarship at government-funded specialised school. For weavers the added
income from textile production often makes the difference between a child being able to attend a public school or a private school. For many families, sending more than one child to a private school is impossible, and several women will chip in to pay for the education of an oldest son or daughter, who is then expected to use that education to the benefit of the junkab’al.

This use of weaving funds to help a child better incorporate into the non-Q’eqchi’ Ladino world through Ladino, western, education is, for many Q’eqchi’ women, simply an extension of what the Q’eqchi’ people have done for centuries: using integration into the external culture where necessary as a way to continue supporting el pueblo Q’eqchi’. For indigenous women, their culture is far from static and unchanging. In contrast to the elite ideal of indigenous Guatemalan culture, the integration of non-Mayan ideas and things into a Maya way of life does not decrease the “Mayan-ness” of the people—it simply increases the “Mayan-ness” of the ideas or objects—new or old. As long as the community keeps its identity separate from the outside world, and young people continue to speak Q’eqchi,’ the pueblo simply evolves. What is important is that these changes are driven internally rather than externally, as what “is Q’eqchi’” must be defined by people who are themselves Q’eqchi’.

Therefore, the arrival of an international market and the shift of textile production from a sustenance act to a cottage industry does not reduce the authenticity of the objects as Q’eqchi’ objects, it simply means that the Q’eqchi’ weavers of today have expanded or changed the ways in which they live and identify as weavers compared to their grandmothers or ancestors.
Chapter Six: Our Grandmothers’ Huipils: Museums as Time Capsules.

The sun sat by the sea and wept. He could not live without the moon. So he asked the dragonflies and the hummingbirds and the crabs and all the animals to help him find the blood of the moon. And so they did. Bringing it from all across the sea, and it filled thirteen jars. The sun found a man living near the sea and begged him to keep the jars for two weeks. He promised to return for them. But while he was away the jars began to shake and to move and to make noise and the man and his wife were afraid. When the sun returned they told him he could not keep his jars by their home, and they asked him what was in the jars. The Sun told them there was nothing--and began throwing the jars one by one, into the sea.

On June 18th of 2016 Margarita Beb, a weaver and community leader in San Juan Chamelco, accompanied me to the Ixchel Museum in Guatemala City—the premier textile museum in the nation. When we entered the gallery on contemporary Maya textiles, she stopped in front of a loom set up with a mannequin in traditional traje from Totonicapán and exclaimed: “The threads! They have them wrong. It’s tangled—no weaver would leave it like that!”

We spent the next three hours exhaustively going through each and every textile and loom display in the museum. Margarita was enthralled, excited and disappointed all at once. For her, the potential of the museum was evident, as were its shortcomings. In the Ixchel Museum Margarita encountered indigenous traje and tradition on display in (quite literally) vaulted halls. She also experienced first-hand racism. What drew her attention most of all was a collection of clay whorls and spinning apparatuses. Pulling me physically to the display case and pointing at the signage, Margarita said:

My mother remembered her grandmother spinning. But in a little bowl, she would pick the cotton from the trees and pull it till it was thin and fine, my mother would sometimes pick it clean for her before she sat and twisted it. But I never knew how, as she died before I was born and my mother was too young to learn. Do women do this? Are there women who can spin? Or is this all old? From before?

For Margarita the Ixchel Museum did not only have the potential to display Guatemalan textiles to a wide audience, it also held clues to a past that she craved a connection with, and to skills whose loss she actively mourned. Although she would not state it in these terms due to lack of access to academic education, she understood that the museum was a space of

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19We were interrupted once by a museum staffer who believed Margarita did not have a ticket for entrance due to her indigenous dress.
knowledge retention and production. Margarita’s encounter can be compared to the 1989 encounter of the Tlingit Elders with patrimonial objects at the Portland Art Museum. Writing about the elder’s response to objects, Clifford states “...they seemed only to see them as aides-memoires, occasions for the telling of stories and the singing of songs” (1997: 189). While Margarita did not ‘sing songs’ her encounter with objects in the Ixchel Museum served as an opportunity to engage with her own past as a Maya woman; and to imagine the past lives of her grandmother and great-grandmother.

Margarita’s encounter with the Ixchel museum also shifted the way that she spoke about, and engaged with, the photographs of museum textiles in my booklets. The encounter cemented her desire to gain better access to museum textiles in Guatemala and beyond, as she expressed during our long-ride back to Cobán:

Yes, the textile belongs to the museum, but it is our traje. People pay and the museum earns money off the traje of the indigenous. We don’t have los huipils de nuestras abuelas (the huipils of our grandmothers’) because our houses are very poor, nothing lasts when the women work and work and wear things out and the rain gets in. It’s not that we don’t want them. We cannot keep such things and the museum can, in their grand building in la ciudad.20 There should be some benefit to the communities. To the weavers. We should at least know where our traje is.

Other instances of visual repatriation also demonstrate the sense of loss a community can feel regarding not only historical objects, but ways of life defined by those objects. Notably the visual repatriation of fifty-eight photographs taken by Alfred Haddon in the Purari Delta area of Gulf Province, Papua New Guinea, by Joshua Bell in the late 1990s. Bell noted that community members encountering these photographs incorporated them into their personal histories, vocally distanced themselves from an indigenous past or even cried at the encounter between themselves and these lost ancestors (Bouquet 2008; Bell 2003). Margarita’s encounter with actual objects strengthened her emotional connection to the photographs and the visual repatriation process.

Technology, in some cases however, provides not only alternatives to repatriation, but also increases access to these kinds of encounters and can give museums that are navigating complex politicised issues a venue for engaging with communities. Museums, long accustomed to engagement with indigenous source communities must also remember that there are

20La ciudad’ is a common term in the highlands for Guatemala City and carries a great deal of meaning about the disparate lives of Ladino urbanites and Indigenous rural peoples. In using the term ‘la ciudad’ instead of Guatemala City, Margarita is making a statement about income, access and opportunity.
communities such as Margarita’s, who are only now becoming aware of their historical contributions to museum collections. In these instances, it serves both museums and communities well to be able to draw from the long history of museums and communities engaging in productive dialogue with results ranging from small repatriations (see the Glasgow Ghost Dance Shirt (O’Neill 2006; 112) to major changes in national laws such as the 1990 passing of The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) or Australia’s Previous Possessions, New Obligations policy, enacted in 1993.

This awareness of the successful history between museums and source communities is integral to continuing the process of decolonising museum spaces and honouring the mission and history of the museum as institution. In my own fieldwork the use of photos in facilitating encounters between weavers and textiles proved valuable; with one weaver stating:

Tell the museums that we are glad that our grandmothers’ huipils are there. That they have not been lost. That our traje is important and that our communities have not been forgotten. Tell them that, but I am a little sad. My mother was a weaver and she never knew her traje was being seen by people so far away. That they knew who the Q’eqchi’ were.

Throughout this, and other conversations, I was reminded that repatriation practices such as physical encounters, virtual repatriation, and recognition of expertise continue to hold a great deal of value for local communities. Although the three practices may overlap, there is value in understanding the process and benefits of each practice individually as relates to my fieldwork. My own fieldwork bridged two of the three:

**Physical encounters** occur when interactions between members of a source community and an object are facilitated. Physical encounters include museum visits, funding and resources dedicated to research, exchanges between museums and source communities, educational outreach with youth (including access to objects and relevant knowledge), and the loaning of objects to museums in indigenous or local communities. They can also include the use of museum objects in the ceremonies for which they were originally intended, and the blessing of, or communication with, objects for the first time since collection. At the MAA some members of Blackfoot communities have been able to ceremonially "smudge" when viewing culturally-significant objects. The smoke from tobacco or sweet grass is used to purify the space and maintain the life of the object, which then remains in the museum’s collection.

**Recognition of expertise** occurs when museums and academics hand over the ability to serve as an expert on objects and histories to the communities from which the objects
originate. This can be facilitated through cooperative research that relies on the expertise of locals, incorporating their knowledge into the institutional recognition of the development and politicisation of regimes of knowledge. While not particularly effective if practice on its own, acknowledgement of other spheres of knowledge and the fallibility of western academia can provide grounding for indigenous and local communities to reclaim expertise and knowledge production power that has been stripped from them. A more effective strategy can include co-publications with members of source communities and museums proactively approaching community experts during the development of educational museum displays.

**Virtual/Visual repatriation** relies on technological advances that allow for access to objects and knowledge contained within objects if the actual object itself cannot be moved or repatriated. Methodologies for engaging in virtual repatriation include moulding and recasting objects, 3D printing of objects, and video and photographs. It can include both direct delivery of such virtual or visual representations to communities (as in my case) and/or their presentation on a public or password-accessible web page. Visual or virtual repatriation is most effective in situations where the object itself is not the source of value for the community, but rather serves as an important example or representation of the past, or tool for education about the past.

These three strategies can overlap, playing off each other. For example, both visual/virtual repatriation and physical encounters can facilitate a recognition of expertise between the researcher and the community member. The institution benefits the institution encounters knowledge and histories of objects it might previously been unaware of. This is seen in the second chapter on methodology. My own field research (as previously stated) relied on both visual repatriation and recognition of community expertise. I used museum objects through photographs to create a research environment dependent on encounters between community members and objects produced by similar or the same communities in the past, and found great interest and value in facilitating such encounters.

**Weavers encountering museum textiles**

The photographic repatriation I engaged in emerged organically from my field research. As detailed in chapter two, I had planned on using photographs of historic *picb’il* textiles as interview aids in understanding the evolution of the textile tradition over the last century; but found that these photograph booklets (see Appendix C for an example) soon shifted from
interview aids to being core elements in my research. Weavers encountering the historic textile photographs engaged directly with the photographs as time capsules connecting them in a direct way to past weavers, with whom they shared a cultural and even kinship heritage.

Despite the fact that there is a local history museum inside of Cobán’s city hall, only around half of my informants were aware of what museums were or might be as institutions. Most of these informants categorised museums as places which “kept history.” These informants were aware that museums existed in Guatemala City and internationally but had no personal experience of museums. Only four of my informants had ever been inside a museum; Amalia Gue, Clara Coy (mother of Concepcion who lives in Florida), Rosy Sacrab (who had won a scholarship to attend an indigenous youth leadership programme in Spain), and Amalia’s oldest daughter; Delia Gue who had been to the Ixchel Museum with Olga and Amalia as part of an exhibition. Other informant’s were aware of the existence of museums, yet more as an ill-defined concept than as an actual institution.

The words of one weaver in Samac echo many of the responses I received when I asked weavers “Did you know that there are Picb’il textiles in museums?” as she highlighted the value of the textiles to her as a confirmation that past-weavers wove and wore similar *traje* to contemporary ones, and as inspiration for her own weaving practice.

I did not know that old *huipils* were stored anywhere until now that you are showing me, and I am learning. I like the old huipils and this one (indicates pattern image) catches my attention and I know that I could weave these patterns this way because they are joined together here. It is important and I am happy that you have shown us what our grandmothers did, what they wove.

When asked “What do you think about them (*picb’il* textiles) being in a museum?” weavers emphasised several things: first the value of the telling of the Q’eqchi’ history to the outside world using textiles

It is important to have a space where they are real, and not forgotten. In the same way it is important to be able to have another place where you can see all the weaving and thus you do not lose the essence of the *tejidos*. A place where people know who we are because of our *traje*.

And another informant:

Well for me it tells me the information that is in the museum is very necessary for example maybe another person from somewhere else can go there—in the museums to see our *traje*
and to read our story of the Q'eqchi’, what it says and not lose
the knowledge of who we are and that we are still here.

Secondly interviewees focused on the ability of Q’eqchi’ community members to gain
access to their own histories and cultural identities. Women who emphasised this engaged
particularly with the perception of ongoing cultural loss and the role that museums could play
in reconnecting future generations with the tools necessary to rebuild their heritage:

It's good that the huipils are there. For me it’s important because
we have lost so much of what it means to be Q’eqchi’ and we
lose more every time a grandmother or grandfather dies and our
children are going to need to know more about who the Q’eqchi
‘are someday.

And another informant:

I think it is very important that this story, these huipils, stay in
the museum because maybe someone from the community can
go and find a story we have forgotten there and can bring the
history back to the community and tell other people so that they
can continue to live our culture. For me, maybe, I think that we
cannot lose weaving because it is very important to me because
in that sense I'm valuing myself.

Finally, weavers looked at the potential that ongoing access to museum textiles had to
allow them to regain lost knowledge of textile production and to reacquire historic textile
patterns that had disappeared from the communities over the course of the second half of the
twentieth century:

We know how to weave, but for example if there are some
patterns that I do not know in these pictures, I can learn them
because the work they did is good. I am glad that they saved the
huipils and if I knew the people in the museums, I could go up
to them and ask them to give me a copy of all the pictures, so
that I could learn them so more people can also learn. It’s nice
because if they had not saved it now it would be lost, but they
still are very far away and we did not know about them, but they
have it (the huipils) saved and that's nice even if it is far away
and we did not know.

And another informant:

I do not know what to think for sure since until now we had only
heard that many years ago they made these huipils finer than the
ones we weave today. I did not think that we could see their old
huipils, I thought that they were gone long ago. But if there are more pictures like these, ones we can hold in our hands, we can learn. Maybe getting thread this fine will be hard, since our thread is thicker, but what we weave is not very different than what our grandmothers’ wove and we can learn again.

For many of the weavers to whom I showed historic textile photographs their interest in historic textiles, and relearning historic patterns was far from merely academic. With the permission of curators and museum staff, I left high quality photographs of those textiles included in my photo booklets in the communities where I conducted interviews. The weavers were thrilled to have seen patterns and textile forms that were new to them or of which they had vague memories, but even more so to own physical copies of those photographs, which they then used to recreate museum textiles or to integrate the patterns on museum textiles into contemporary pieces (as seen in figures 6.1 and 6.2).

The patterns, once re-learned, I discovered on my visit to Guatemala in 2017, were treated as any other pattern known to the weaver. Weavers integrated historic patterns into contemporary weaving by imitating them exactly—creating a garment that mirrored the original (as can be seen in the example on the upper right). Weavers even incorporated patterns into other textile styles, as can be seen in the example in figure 6.1, where a weaver has incorporated the corn plant from a historic picb’’il textile featuring corn plants, puntitos, and strutting roosters into a blue calada textile featuring simply the corn plants, a ring pattern, and the calada styling. The blending of
styles and patterns (all within the Q’eqchi’ tradition of weaving) emphasised the flexibility that weavers displayed in accessing the heritage inherent in the historic textiles. Heritage textiles and historic patterns became part and parcel of ongoing textile innovation. This blending demonstrated evolution and change although many weavers talked about cultural traditions as being “eternal” and “unchanging”.

This emphasis on the value of textiles as tools used to access intangible heritage via preserved knowledge points to the dual role of textiles as tangible heritage in the form of day-to-day clothing and intangible heritage in the form of knowledge and highlighted the practical value of my photographic repatriation to community members.

As one weaver stated during my follow up visit when I returned to visit Santa María one year after I had initially left:

Yes, QanaRux always commented on the people buying our textiles, she said that they kept huipils in other places, and that these old huipils were like gold since they are our work. The weaving lives in the women, and what is life for us if one day we stop doing what lives within us? It is like ceasing to exist. She always said that because our tejido is life for us, the huipils have great value and we cannot lose them or forget them.

The relationships that weavers have with museum textiles is therefore complicated; extending from a lack of access even to information or knowledge about them all the way to highly valuing those collections and experiencing intense frustration at a lack of access highlights the value and potential in digital and virtual repatriation as new tools for museums to engage with local communities. The quotes cited above reflect the experience of Yup’ik elders encountering objects and photographs at the former Berlin Museum fur Volkerkunde with researcher Ann Fienup-Riordan, with one participant stating ‘If pictures of the things we saw here were seen by our descendants, it might help to reunite the people. And our descendants might begin to believe in themselves and their culture’ (Fienup-Riordan 2003: 37). Fienup-Riordan’s work when compared to mine demonstrate the wealth of potential avenues for visual or virtual repatriation both in and outside of the physical space of the museum and their value to disparate cultures facing disparate challenges.

From my own perspective as an ‘activist researcher’ (see Chapter two), the facilitation of these encounters and the knowledge both discovered and produced through that facilitation creates value in the research work. In addition to contributing to the canon of academic knowledge, enhancing access to that canon has in and of itself been the catalyst for the most
exciting elements of my own research. It also encouraged me to reflect on my own participation as a researcher and collector as a bridge between museums and communities, placing myself inside the tradition I was engaging with through study. As an activist researcher I also served to extend Clifford’s ‘Contact Zone’ (1997). By bringing photographs of museum objects into communities I created an enmeshment of spaces and allowed for dialogue between the museum and the source community; with myself as the initiator in both spaces.

**Early Collectors of *píc'b'il* Textiles**

Judging by the Peabody Museum at Harvard and the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford, collection of Mayan textiles appears to have begun in the mid-1880s and continued in earnest throughout the 1920s as attested orally to me during research conducted with museums containing major Maya Textile Collections (research notes 2009-2014). While contemporary collections have been maintained, the pace at which textiles are added to museum collections has slowed considerably since the 1960s. Many museum collections seem to coincide with or rely on the work of individual researchers or academics who conducted fieldwork or travelled throughout Central America, whether these researchers were anthropologists or not. Museum catalogue tags across the United States from the turn of the twentieth century list names of collectors who may have been ornithologists or archaeologists and, as an auxiliary to their own academic work, collected anthropologic or ethnographic objects for their universities and museums while travelling (Ibid).

The Phoebe Hearst Museum at the University of Berkeley contains a collection of Guatemalan textiles gathered between the turn of the nineteenth century up to the to the present day. This collection contains prime examples of this early collection method, as the bulk of the museum’s earlier Mayan textiles were collected by Lila M. O’Neale and Gustav Eisen (Personal research Hearst Museum 2009, Hearst Museum database 2016).

Born in 1847, Eisen had an academic career that spanned over a half a century, and almost as many subjects. At varying points in his career, he studied malaria, winemaking, and the Holy Grail, and he even corresponded with Charles Darwin, publishing a book on the growth and development of vegetable mould (Radcliff & Fidler 2000: 1). Eisen’s travels focused on the Americas, and over the course of his career he spent almost two full years in Guatemala (Radcliff & Fidler 2000: 1; Eisen 1903, 231). A large number of the nineteenth century Central American artefacts at the Hearst Museum are tagged as having been collected
by Eisen. In 1993 “Maya Textiles of Guatemala: The Gustavus A. Eisen Collection 1902” was written by Margot Blum Schevill and published by University of Texas Press, detailing the work Eisen did in Guatemala and the textile collection he helped establish (Schevill 1993: 19-21).

However, the publications that originally came out of Eisen’s work in Central America, and Guatemala, rarely mention people, culture, or the production of the artefacts he was so fastidiously purchasing and shipping back to California. Writing in 1903 for the Bulletin of the American Geographical Society—in the only article he published on his travels in Guatemala—Eisen describes the local geography and weather patterns in great detail, but only mentions the population in passing, as a reference to the ongoing deforestation of the cloud forests of the Alta Verapaz (Eisen 1903: 241-246).

Eisen was the quintessential nineteenth-century explorer-academic, venturing forth from the safe confines of “home” within “society” to the wild, where he collected and brought back information and objects. The presence, let alone agency, of the people who inhabited the land where he travelled is so minimised in the documentation of his experience as to seem non-existent. Erased by virtue of not being documented, their presence is felt only through the objects that Eisen collected and then donated to various museums. The *huipils*, *cortes*, pots, and figurines tell the neglected story of not only the objects’ purchase, but also their careful and expert production. Museum curators, working with the Eisen objects, can tell the stories of the people Eisen neglected better than he ever thought to, by situating the objects geographically in their home regions and piecing together narratives to guide museum visitors and researchers.

Little is known about Lila O’Neale’s life relative to Eisen’s, which is typical for women researchers of the time. Long fascinated by textile arts, she taught secondary school until 1926, when she enrolled at University of California, Berkeley to pursue graduate work in “household arts” at the age of forty. From there, she began a career as an anthropologist studying the textile arts of Native American peoples from Peru to Arizona. O’Neale published her thesis in 1929, and the collection tags in the Hearst Museum, as well as her own publication of a monograph in 1947, tell us that she then spent another fifteen to twenty years travelling, collecting, and conducting research throughout Central and South America (personal interview, Vital 2011). O’Neale, too, played the role of intrepid observer, coming from outside of the communities to verify and codify information; however, travelling and researching independently in the 1920s and 1930s, her status as a woman and near-outsider in the academic community would have influenced her research practices and experience. Working at a time when women in her field
were rare, O’Neale demonstrated an ability to think beyond the narrow confines of what was expected for her gender, and her success ostensibly provided her with access to female spaces in Maya contexts that male anthropologists would struggle to gain even today.

Unlike the work of Eisen and other early collectors and researchers, O’Neale’s published monograph of her time in Central America openly relies on the work she did with individuals and communities. O’Neale’s documentation of textile production is detailed, extensive, and unrivalled even today. Despite this commitment to textiles, there is a stark absence in her writing of personal details about the individuals she worked with. Despite this, the work-centric nature of her research indicates a shift from the viewpoint of researchers like Eisen. Eisen wrote directly about the potential benefit of Guatemala to western exploitation while O’Neale concentrated on local work and culture.

The story told by those objects she collected demonstrates the gap between research and museum processes at the time from accession to storage to display and interpretation. Even as museums enhanced the documentation Eisen provided, and opened a greater window into the lives of the Maya in Guatemala in the late nineteenth century, those same mechanical processes, the ‘museuming’ of the objects, if you will, replete with limitations shrouded much of O’Neale’s work.21 A huipil collected in the Cobán area by O’Neale in the mid-1930s and still in the museum’s collection today is accompanied by a catalogue card that can only be described as typical by the museum standards at the time.22

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21The discrepancy between O’Neal’s monograph and the museum tags on the objects she collected present the interesting potential of reconstructing the data she collected using her monograph to re-describe the textile objects she collected.

22Personal notes from researching the collections of the Hearst Museum in 2009 and 2010.
Having examined this particular textile, I can state with confidence that the method of collection and categorisation of objects created a framework that both expanded and limited the value of the information gathered. While O’Neale provides far more information than her predecessors, Eisen included, the museum card describes this object as “factory woven.” Based on an inspection of the garment, and documentation found in the monograph, I believe it resembles the work and patterns of master weavers of *picb’il* in the Alta Verapaz (including descriptions of those textiles written by O’Neale) more than it does any machine-woven textiles of the era. An image of the item in question (as drawn from the museum catalogue) is provided below.

![Figure 6.4: Museum object number 3-28126 at the Hearst Museum at the University of California Berkeley. Source: Hearst Museum Database. Copyright held by the Hearst Museum](image)

To use the Hearst Museum in California as an example of the evolution from this early collection and documentation to integrated community driven collection and object display I can compare O’Neale’s textile collection in the museum’s storage in to their 2008 exhibition “Traje de la Vida: Mayan Textiles of Guatemala.”

When curator Margot Blum Schevill organised a display of Guatemalan Textiles in 2008, the emphasis was on creating an exhibition that demonstrated the importance of these textiles and exploring the cultures that created them. Documentary filmmakers shot hours of footage throughout the highlands; mini bios and photographs were collected for the weavers of each of the modern textiles on display, and while a nod was given to early Hearst collectors such as O’Neale and Eisen, it was made clear to visitors of this new exhibit that the museum sought to build connections and understanding with source communities. What was on display was far more than a collection—it was a bridge between the museum and the spaces from which
the museum objects originated. Nowhere was this more clearly demonstrated than in the extensive community outreach done over the course of several years in Guatemala with Maya weavers as groundwork for the exhibit itself. With this exhibit the Hearst not only opened historical collections to contemporary weavers, but invited those weavers to contribute to the museum’s new collections and knowledge base—and in doing so opening the door a little wider between museum and source community.

**MUSEUM OBJECTS AND THEIR HOMES: TRACING CHANGE**

During the early nineteenth century, when museums were becoming institutionalised in universities and public spaces as venues for public education (Bouquet 1992), James Smithson (whose bequest funded the Smithsonian Institution in the United States) said that his goal was to create an institution “...for the increase and diffusion of knowledge...” (Smithson 1826: 4). In stating this, he was one of the first to publicly articulate the idea of the museum as an intermediary space between the academic elite and the general public, the goal of which was not only to collect, categorise, and classify the world, but to present that compilation to the European and American peoples as an accurate representation of the world. As education became more accessible, museums indeed became a front-of-house, showcasing the academy to the public. They served as spaces where academic knowledge, objects of research, and the general public could interact (Hooper-Greenwell 1992). Inherently politicised, Hooper-Greenwell argues that museums played a pivotal role in the institutionalisation and presentation of knowledge from a particular worldview, one that has historically centred European and American narratives of the world (1992; 100-110).

The heroisation of the “explorer” and “gentlemen scientists” who were travelling the world to document and manage it found a ready outlet in the museum. In romanticising, heroising and masculinising science, archaeology, geography, etc., museums and their objects were situated in a specific colonised telling of the way that the world worked, as well as offering a gendered telling of that world. “Other” people were consistently understood according to a European and patriarchal framework (Hooper-Greenwell 1992; 193).

Museum collectors, curators, and managers produced a narrative of European modernity equalling global modernity with the objects they collected and displayed. Cultural

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23 None of the textiles featured in the exhibit were from the Alta Verapaz, and none of the communities in which I work had been involved in this museum exhibition.

24 Personal notes from researching the collections of the Hearst Museum in 2009 and 2010.
development meant, in the minds of many during the Victorian era and well into the twentieth century, “cultural evolution”: a temporal and inexorable move towards European culture and lifestyle. To this end, documenting “disappearing” cultures was simply the act of preserving the present as history for future generations who would be more “civilised” than their ancestors had once been. The act of creating museums with the objects from other cultures could, in this context, even be viewed as an act of charity carried out for the benefit of “lesser” peoples, documenting what they had been so that when they arrived at what was perceived as the inevitable end point of westernised lifestyle, they could appreciate what they were in comparison (Hooper-Greenwell 1992). This philosophical ideal was, despite its problematic roots, a double-edged resource; because in preserving the objects of other cultures in a colonial way, these early collections laid groundwork for future museums and museum ethnographers to engage with source communities around decolonisation and the opening of resource rich collections to people seeking to bolster their own community heritage. Museums, precisely because of the wealth of resource they hold in the form of objects, can become ‘restorative agents’ in the decolonization process as seen in the ‘Pasifika Styles’ exhibition at the Cambridge MAA (Herle 2008).

As seen from the work of researchers such as Clifford, Henare and others, today museums provide spaces to reflect on academic practice itself and on the production of knowledge through material culture and history and can prove to be productive and important spaces of encounter. Museums and their objects thus become ripe for troubling ideas about knowledge ownership, as well as places rich with opportunities for cross-cultural learning. Material culture, when used as a bridge between museum and source communities, allows for “one-off” cultural encounters to become ongoing ones.

As producers of knowledge (Hooper-Greenwell 1992) museums can endow non-academic experts or indigenous peoples with the ability to share knowledge in the academic sphere by inviting them as participants and knowledge creators (Clifford 1997) into a space designed for research. By inviting individuals from source communities to museums as expert researchers, or repatriating objects to those communities, museums can begin to decolonise the Academy. Decentralising expertise allows for a broader engagement with museum objects and the creation of the museum as a more cooperative cultural education space. In this way my research builds directly on the research of others by continuing this process in a small sense, by connecting indigenous Q’eqchi’ weavers with Q’eqchi’ textiles held in museum collections.
MUSEUM OBJECTS ACROSS TEMPORAL DISTANCE

The process of opening museum collections via the Internet, outreach, or research is a process of troubling traditional conceptions of museum objects and their roles. With the inclusion of indigenous voices in the display of indigenous objects, there are inherent ontological concerns with the continued use of museums as institutions for the collection and perpetuation of knowledge. “Truth,” in a Foucauldian sense, is produced, not discovered. Information and its collection, understanding, and distribution becomes a highly institutionalised process governed by whichever social groups happen to be dominant as that sphere of knowledge is being constructed. Thus, as seen in Hooper-Greenhill’s work referenced in chapter two, museums, universities, schools, newspapers, etc., participate as institutions in this process, and the collectors and codifiers of those objects are in turn producing the knowledge they claim to have “learned” (Foucault 1972; Hooper-Greenhill 1992). Furthermore, those objects create a metaphorical space in which source communities and museum ethnographers are able to trouble ideas of ownership, knowledge, and history through actual, or visual/virtual encounters with objects (Clifford 1997). The ownership of Q’eqchi’ textiles as a part of Q’eqchi’ culture becomes a politicised practice of knowledge production.

Researchers such as Amiria Henare (2009) have grappled with this evolution of the museum and opened windows into new ways of thinking about museum projects. Henare conducted research on Maori artefacts that had been collected around the turn of the nineteenth century by Scottish settlers or visitors and ended up in academic museums in Scotland. She also looked, more briefly, at Scottish artefacts in historical museums in New Zealand, and how the two sets of objects served as an established connection between Scotland and New Zealand. Basing her theoretical grounding in the work of Arjun Appadurai (1986), Henare places the value of objects in the social environments in which they exist and between the people negotiating their value at very specific intersections of time, place, and social structures. Henare posits that museum objects have a particular value insofar as they serve as a bridge across spatial and temporal distance. These objects—Scottish and Maori in Scotland and New Zealand respectively—not only tell a story of migration and colonisation, but also create a sense of realism about ancestors, real or perceived. The descendants of the individuals involved in those initial cultural encounters can re-experience them in small ways via those objects. For example, holding a spoon from Angus, or handling a bark cloth skirt from what is now Christchurch, can connect people in real ways to the past. In this way, museum collections can illustrate historical and contemporary links binding two communities or locations together.
(Henare 2009). On a more powerful note, these objects can facilitate action by bringing together people whose families have not interacted for generations, and by creating a space in which the typical narratives of conquest are challenged.

Using Gadamer’s work on time and hermeneutics, we can understand that our own conceptions of history in the west need to be fluid and dynamic. To understand the present, one must understand the past; “Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted.” (Gadamer 2006: 297). The further step of ontologically believing that the past can actively (and with agency) change the present is not, then, a great leap. If we broaden our perception of time, we are able to begin to think about museums not only as time capsules; but rather as dynamic spaces in which objects are able to actively shrink the passage of time allowing for communication to occur across what are, in other spaces, great distances. Pairing this with an understanding of objects as being integrally part of their owner/makers as posited by Q’eqchi’ ontology; then museums do indeed have a pivotal role to play in the redevelopment of heritage through encounter.

**MUSEUMS AS BORDER SPACES WITHIN TIME**

Today, many researchers and museums are themselves problematizing and addressing the history of the museum as an institution, as they move forward. Museums have become time capsules which serve as physical reminders that the colonial project is far from over. Researchers and curators are challenged to find new ways to think about the museum-as-project and museum-as-research-space, which are cognisant of social responsibility to create a more just world, without losing the opportunity for research and knowledge production that museums hold as, literally, warehouses of the past (Fromm 2016). The collection and historic management of objects can tell as much of a story as the object itself. Repatriation, re-appropriation and re-education become contentious political battlefields for both the communities from which museum objects have been collected and the academic communities of the West where these museums (for the most part) exist.

As henare pointed out (2009: 14) museums and their objects provide a window into the creation of a particular narrative of history, one which can in turn be understood from the diverse perspective of the creators of the museum, the museum as an institution, individuals outside of the culture that created the museum, the objects themselves, and the descendants of those who originally created the object (Ibid: 7). Henare notes that “[m]ateriality is integral to
human existence” (Ibid: 6) and justifies connections between the past and contemporary communities through the idea that the material objects are integral to how we are and who we are. We as a species and as individuals cannot and would not exist without material culture, and that material culture can tell the story of human interactions and vice versa. For the Q’eqchi’ weavers of the Alta Verapaz that material culture can take on meaning far beyond that of simply objects. It becomes a bridge to the past, and the presence of a physical heritage allows for the reproduction of a lost metaphysical heritage.

In this thesis the connection that Henare posits is grounded in the ontology of the Q’eqchi’ people with whom I worked. As noted by Kockelman (2011: 440), Q’eqchi’ ontological understandings of both human and object existence point to an intermingling of owner, maker, and object. Objects, in the same way as people, can exist within one or more spiritual realms at any given time, and the relationships that people have to objects (and vice versa) in each of these varying realms are important. This blending of selfhood, existence, and spirituality allows contemporary weavers to form what they understand not as tenuous potential links to the past, but as real connections across time with dead weavers who lived years or even generations before them. The shared experience of being Q’eqchi’, and existence within the Q’eqchi’ understanding of the world, gives these weavers and experts, such as Don Ca’al, particular access to a connection with their ancestors and allows knowledge or information to be passed through time.

For many of the weavers I interviewed, objects in museums belonged to the entity or individual who had purchased the textile, even if it were an overseas institution. However, the process of creating the textile is knowledge that is owned, collectively, by the community of Q’eqchi’ weavers. Ownership of knowledge, for the weavers, is in the collective sense. Weavers spoke of teaching their daughters to weave as a part of a very-real ‘inheritance’. The lodging of this concept of ownership with the community of artisans ensures both the continuity of the art form, as it cannot be curtailed, but also gives individual women the agency to claim partial intellectual ownership in their own craft through the right not only of production, but via heritage as a weaver.

For the Q’eqchi’, Henare’s concept of “temporal collapse,” where individuals can interact with one another across time through objects (2009: 8-10) makes perfect sense. For her it is only natural to assume that the “strings” she uses to trace objects from one owner to another, and to tie those owners, creators, collectors and museums together, exist (Ibid: 9). In

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25 Including the geographic relationship of both the person and the object.
fact, from a less Eurocentric and a more Q’eqchi’-centric understanding of time and objects, the connections between these objects are in fact far more than simple strings. A part of the object itself, which exists outside our very limited understanding of time, is simultaneously in the past, present, and future. Objects, from this perspective, remain active agents even in inactive settings such as museum collections. They can be used not only to tell a story about the past, but also to quite literally connect to and learn from individuals whose temporal existence does not directly coincide with those living today. As my weaving teacher, stated:

I can learn from my grandmothers’ grandmother if I have her *huipil*. Because if I have her *huipil* I can see how she wove and I can weave in the same way as she is teaching me.

From a museological perspective, this presents a variety of challenges. By blending the contemporary and the historic, the message that an object can tell a western audience, whose conceptions of objects and time will remain rooted in western thought, can be problematised. The object extends the didactic encounter from the place where the textile was purchased into the present, forcing the curator, community, and weaver to engage with not only the day-to-day experience of people from the time and place at which the textile was collected, but also the continuing experience of the Q’eqchi’ people. In this sense, the museum can be imagined almost as a “border space.” Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, writing in 1992, push anthropologists and other researchers to expand and soften our understanding of what defines the end of one space and the beginning of another. By “fragmenting” space, they claim that we have “…enabled the power of topography to conceal successfully the topography of power” (Gupta & Ferguson 1992: 8) In order to move beyond that, we need to think more broadly about how spaces are formed, disappear, and made fluid. This concept draws heavily on Clifford’s identification of the museum as a ‘contact zone’ (1997; 192) Clifford notes that “…centers become borders crossed by objects and makers…” (204) before engaging with the fact that museums must navigate not only their histories, but also their expected and anticipated audiences. I prefer the term ‘border space’ as I believe museums to be not only contact zones where objects and people encounter one another, but rather as active and continuously present spaces of encounter.

Allowing a border space to expand beyond the simple definition of a line between “self” and “other,” “one” and “two,” makes it a space of encounter. Museums, as spaces of encounter between the colonised other, the academic institution, and the general public are border spaces. From a decolonising perspective, border spaces can serve both to prop up and enforce the
existing power structure. As spaces of encounter, they can also become spaces in which the hegemonic worldview is challenged. In pursuit of authenticity, museums-as-border-spaces then provide renewed authority and power to the voices of source communities.

Expanding our understanding of what a border space is, and acknowledging the fracturing of clear geographic lines, opens our eyes to a world where borders are continuously shifting. When dealing with museum objects—particularly the Q’eqchi’ textiles I have worked with—adding a temporal angle to the concept of border space can enhance our understanding of the way that border spaces exist to people whose ontological understandings of the world does not mirror our own. For many Q’eqchi’, the encounter we call colonisation is not isolated to a specific series of moments in time, but ongoing. It also allows us to think of objects as being able to tie disparate moments in time together in a very real and visceral way.

**Q’EQCHI’ CONCEPTIONS OF TIME**

Q’eqchi’ understandings of time and existence force us, as researchers, to expand the horizons of our theoretical understanding of museums and their role and to broaden what we think of as the border space created in the museum. The story that museum objects tell extends beyond the simple (or complex) life of the object itself on the neat and tidy timeline that we have created, and into the production and trade of objects at every point of their existence. Henare demonstrates, with careful archival research, that the production of knowledge through the collection of objects was for her an intense didactic process involving individuals both on the side of the coloniser (European) and colonised (in her case, Maori). Individuals on both sides of the initial encounter between Maori and Europeans would have been selecting which objects they brought to trade to match their expectations of what the other was seeking out (Henare 2009: 34). If, in fact, the objects in question retain a part of the creator of the object, there is potential for that didactic process to continue into the present.

The decisions made by these early collectors has shaped not only the way these collectors and curators understood their initial encounters, but also how future generations (including our own) experience them. This means that our modern understanding of historic cultural artefacts continues to be formed by interactions between individuals and groups around the time of colonisation, further compounding the post-colonial space in which objects are framed and understood (Ibid: 37). From a Q’eqchi’ perspective, my research shows that these objects become reflections of the tastes of people who have lived before and vessels that hold some small part of that person. As a result, when contemporary Q’eqchi’ weavers interact with
historic Q’eqchi’ objects, they are directly or indirectly interacting with historic Q’eqchi’ weavers. Both the object and the weavers are engaged in the interaction, thus extending the didactic process into the present.

Time from a Maya perspective is, as Barbara Tedlock argues in her seminal work “Time and the Highland Maya” (1992), a construct that serves as a both physical and spiritual space for Maya peoples. The interaction between spiritual leaders and time as a metaphysical presence serves as the grounding space for human beings in time (Tedlock 1992). While time exists independently from human experience, it is the human interaction with time that “completes” it (McLeod 2017: 21). Time, while continuous, is cyclical in nature. The cyclical nature of time is dependent on human ritual interaction with and tracking of time. That ritual interaction and tracking in turn, governs our awareness of our place within time across generations; “There is a relationship between humanity and nature at the core of Maya thought, in which humanity completes the raw material provided by nature, following the patterns given by this same nature” (McLeod 2017: 21). The tracking of time becomes a powerful act of cooperation between the human and natural realms. This tracking of cycles situates us within time; however, that specific way of being within time—what MacLeod refers to as the “now moment” (Ibid: 21)—holds limited value in a cyclical understanding of time without being connected to or rooted in the experiences of other individuals in other time spaces.

“Today” is experienced by the modern Maya as a space in time held in relation to the spaces in time held by their ancestors and their descendants. Colonial rule, as an epoch, cannot be viewed as having come to an end until the experience of Q’eqchi’ people shifts dramatically in comparison to the experience of Q’eqchi’ people under direct colonial rule. As time both exists outside of human experience, but is completed by human interaction with time, it then makes sense that our understanding and experience of time is governed by our ritual interactions with and tracking of time. It follows then that other beings (eb’tzultaq’a for example) might experience time differently than we do, as their experience of time will be governed by their interaction with time.

Our experience of time roots us in specific segments of time, binding us to a temporally bound experience, held in place not only by our own experience, but by the experiences of our ancestors and descendants. Within that space, the echoes of colonisation continue to have a present and contemporary impact on the lives of the Q’eqchi’ as a whole across both geography and time through the network of kinship ties Q’eqchi’ people share with their ancestors and descendants. Not only has the act of colonisation not yet ended in our particular section of time, but also its impact continues to move from the past and into the present via nonhuman beings
or objects who are less “stuck” in time than we are and through the connections between individuals across time, per Henare’s temporal collapse.

When weavers encounter museum textiles that border space across time comes alive. Moving into an active, rather than observational, space, museums can establish a dialectic of critique with source communities. This gives source communities better access to objects and museums a broader contextualisation of those objects. Weavers are also able to consciously create heritage through the interaction with historic textiles. As they perceive themselves to be learning directly from long-dead weavers this production of heritage is not seen as the ‘imagination’ of new heritage; but rather the re-learning and re-creation of what was once lost.

It is important to remember that since the advent of anthropological museums, both within and outside the university system, Mayan textiles have featured heavily both as museum artefacts and as prize possessions of textiles collectors. The juxtaposition of these textiles as valued artefacts with the violent history of repression against the Mayan people in Guatemala over the last century has provided us with a stark contrast in which objects and knowledge were (and may continue to be) more highly valued to institutional guardians of history than to the individuals and cultures creating these objects. Mayan textiles have historically had more access to the western halls of power than the Maya themselves have had.

This is due to both ongoing experiences of violence and oppression directly rooted into colonial and post-colonial systems of power and racism, and economic exploitation and the presence of boundaries (intentional or not) between people with limited access to western education and academic spaces, such as museums. If those boundaries are breached, or bridged through the use of technology, we are then able to widen our understandings of knowledge production through objects. In this case study, that is particularly relevant through the use of distinct understandings of temporality.

As the flip side of this identity, with a new understanding of objects as producers of knowledge comes the opportunity for curators and museums today to use those objects, their ownership of those objects, and the resources they have on hand to engage in a decolonisation of the museum. All of the above become the drivers in how museums and their staff can reinvent their role informed by and informing anthropology and ethnography. Border spaces represent not only a break in the hard walls between two defined spaces, but also an encounter between spaces. These spaces create room not only in our ability to understand and connect with cultures across the world, but also in our ability to think about power structures, knowledge production and justice.
MUSEUMS & REPATRIATION MOVING FORWARD

The objects in any collection have a long-term impact on future academic research work (Bouquet 2012; 72). The selection of specific objects for preservation is the selection (in part) of the way that that culture will be viewed by future researchers who do not have access to the full range of objects the acquiring collector did at the time of collection, and have to rely on photographs, a few museum objects, and contemporary objects.

Brian Spooner challenges concepts of “authenticity” in museum objects by reminding us that object authentication is often carried out by western experts, and not through cooperative or community-driven work. By placing the burden of proof for authenticity on an outsider, this then denies source communities the authority to define the value and meaning of their own cultural artefacts. Objects can lose or gain authenticity while being completely “divorced” from their original contexts. It also reinforces the narrative of European or American academic superiority and the role of their institutions in the creation of knowledge through the notion of authenticity. This can be so overwhelming that in some cases communities lose all ownership of the knowledge about these objects. Citing the example of Turkish carpets, Spooner says:

The Western interest in Turkmen carpets has had the effect of alienating the Turkman from their own forms of artistic expression. Before they worked with designs, embodying symbols that were for them extensions of their own social identity. They did not understand these symbols or need to know their origins. Now these symbols have become the property of others. To repossess them they must now find out from others what they mean. They are concerned only with how they will look to others. In the words of another branch of the literature, on nationalism, the Turkmen have chosen epochalism and lost essentialism, they have taken universalism and abandoned nationalism. (Spooner 1986: 230)

In my case (and also as explored by researchers working in other parts of the world; see Fienup-Riordan 2003; Herle 2008 and Bouquet 2012), the presence of picb’il textiles in museum collections had the opposite effect, adding authority to the community claims of authenticity in the region and allowing weavers to reaffirm their belief that textile production is an integral and historic part of Q’eqchi’ identity. It could be argued that given the chance to have a dialogue with museum professionals, weavers would have the agency to co-opt the
purpose of the museum collections and refocus them towards the continuation and valuation of Q’eqchi’ culture and history. As, Appadurai states, the value of objects and things can be negotiated reciprocally (1986: 13). Building again on the work of Fienup-Riordan (2003) it is clear from past examples of visual/photographic repatriation that both communities and museum professionals can benefit hugely from these kinds of encounters.

In the specific case of Q’eqchi’ objects, both Kistler and Kockelman present ethnographies of the Q’eqchi’ which link objects directly to their makers, users, and owners in a metaphysical sense. It can then be posited that for Q’eqchi’ objects or textiles value is negotiated and renegotiated each time the object interacts with different individuals. Its physical and metaphysical value was negotiated at the point of purchase and can be renegotiated at its re-encounter with the community. Links between the social environments in which the objects exist and the people negotiating the value of the objects in very specific intersections of time, place, and social structure change and impact the meaning and value of the object (Appadurai 1986: 12-16).

For museums that renegotiation may be of significant value, since encountering new regimes of value and worldviews enhances the role that museums seek to play as spaces for cross-cultural encounters and education. As documented extensively in the Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples, published in Ottawa in 1994, many museums have already benefited enormously from similar encounters with source communities.

In the case of nineteenth century ethnographic museums, originally, in the collection process, communities may have engaged in what Appadurai refers to as “silent trade,” where communities or individuals (not including producers) share only the “most minimal understanding about the objects in question, and agree only about the terms of trade,” (Appadurai: 15). However, in expanding the role of the museum and engaging actively with power structures and cross-cultural dialogue, that understanding of objects in question need not remain “silent.” Museums, in a postcolonial context, have the obligation to re-understand their role in the world and the objects in their possession.

As storehouses for objects, museums serve as the repositories for the last physical elements of the conquest and pre-conquest world, which includes archaeological objects from the ancient Maya past, the four surviving Maya books or codices, and a plethora of Maya textiles, pottery, and household goods that span the years around and after the conquest. Through object ownership museums serve as not only producers of knowledge through objects, but also as gatekeepers to the objects whose history and authenticity underpins that knowledge. As indigenous activists and academics challenge the narrative of colonisation and regimes of
ownerships, museums have and will (in many ways) continue to bear the brunt of these challenges, but also as as sites of great potential. Museums can, as demonstrated by my field research, serve as spaces of encounter for the production of new knowledge or the rediscovery of lost knowledge by community experts and craftspeople.

**DIGITAL REPATRIATION IN THE ALTA VERAPAZ**

I initially envisioned the role of my photo booklets to be one of historical documentation of the changing nature of *pich’íl* weaving over the course of the last century. It turned into much more than I had anticipated or imagined as my informants co-opted my research tools as aids for their own heritage revival. The ability of Q’eqchi’ weavers to re-centre my own western centric work within the Q’eqchi’ world and cosmovision demonstrates the quiet, consistent, resilience of the Q’eqchi’ people and culture. As Clifford documented in the basement of the Portland Art Museum in 1989, members of the source community used the objects as launching pads into an extensive exploration of and engagement with their own history and past (Clifford 1997).

In adapting to their requests (as informants) and following the research where it led me, I was able to encounter new possibilities for the museum textiles which with I had worked prior to my field research. In every single interview I conducted the weavers requested photo copies of at least portions of my photo booklets. With the permission of the museums involved I was able to leave photographs of historic textiles with over one hundred weavers; at least nine of whom used those photos between 2016 and 2017 to reproduce once-lost-to-them motifs on contemporary textiles.

For my interviewees (as in many other past cases), the digital repatriation was a success. Weavers regained patterns they had lost through the direct use of objects intimately connected with, or part of, long-dead ancestors. Weaving cooperatives and community organisations gained knowledge of the presence of Q’eqchi’ objects in museums in the west. A foreign researcher was useful to the communities in question; whether or not she originally intended to be. For me, that foreign researcher, the digital repatriation was successful in that it opened new windows into heritage revival and the value of material objects in the creation of intangible heritages. It demonstrated the potential for museums to work in partnership with local communities to further the knowledge they hold.
CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSION

Within my own research, weavers and other community members exposed to historic textiles via the digital repatriation I carried out (see chapter two on methodology) were acutely aware of the loss of textile patterns as well as the ongoing threat of loss posed by environmental degradation, lack of economic access and opportunity, loss of language, and loss of cultural practice. When asked what she thought about museums, one interviewee stated:

Pues, if the museums do have our huipils then they need to tell people who we are: that we are weavers. Not just that it is traje from Guatemala, but that it is Cobanara, that women still weave and we still sell textiles. It is important that they show not only traje but that they tell people where it is from, that li tenamit (the community) of Q’eqchi’s are still here in Cobán and we still weave. We are not gone.

This sense that it was important not to divorce textiles from their origins and that weavers wanted an active story told of their communities was pervasive and linked to an expression of identity rooted in survival. Geographic and economic instability during the period of the Guatemalan genocide disrupted patterns of life essential to what women referred to as “being Q’eqchi’.” One elderly weaver explained to me (repeatedly) that the most recent Guatemalan genocide was, for the Q’eqchi’, simply an extension of ongoing violence that they could date back to “before the time of our grandmothers’ grandmothers.” For her, Q’eqchi’ life, history, and heritage have always been threatened, and the Q’eqchi’ have always fought not only for their present, but also for their past to not be forgotten.

Engaging intentionally with the processes of knowledge creation, and taking ownership of processes that are already occurring, places museums in the position of being able to address past wrongs while defining knowledge and social values such as justice, equity and truth. Museums become active participants in processes of heritage re-discovery and the politicisation or de-politicisation of objects. This opens the door to imagining or understanding the museum itself as a revolutionary site for the decolonisation of the academic sphere, and a space in which ideas of ownership, heritage, and value can be questioned and re-grounded. As we re-evaluate the role that the museum-as-storehouse can play in knowledge creation (and excavation), we are challenged to rethink the content and ownership of knowledge, and the ways in which communities, academics, and individuals can utilise the resources available to rebuild, relearn, or reshape lost heritages (Kopytoff 1986: 108).
Digital, virtual and photographic repatriation techniques present opportunities for researchers and museums to reach out to source communities in increasingly cost-effective ways. My research demonstrates that when the value of the repatriation is found in the intangible heritage contained within objects, and not within the tangible object itself, these methods may prove as impactful and valuable as actual repatriations can be for communities who seek to reclaim ownership of physical objects.

With the increasing accessibility of online catalogues museums can easily give source communities the tools to learn about and digitally access their heritage objects in museum collections. One San Juan Chamelco based weaver and a member of Hijas de Aj Po’op B’atz asked me midway through my fieldwork to show her the museum catalogues where I had found some of the textile images I was using. We spent an afternoon walking through the use of the Hearst Museum Online Database with Google Translate as a tool for working with/in English for her as a non-English speaker. With a little coaching on search terms and the structure of the database she was soon able to navigate it proficiently and had located several textiles I had chosen not to use in my photo booklets due to poor image quality. The database itself proved a useful and helpful tool for her as a weaver; and as the aldeas in Guatemala gain better infrastructure it is very likely that many more weavers or their family members would be able to access museum databases independently in the future.

What is missing in the use of databases and the style of photographic repatriation I engaged in, is a true two-way exchange between source communities and museums. One informant reiterated the importance of this exchange of knowledge becoming a true exchange by stating in June of 2016:

I think it is very good, bringing us these photographs. I also hope that you tell other people, where they came from, that weavers still exist. We still live here. I imagine that there are a few who know but tell the others. We Q’eqchi’ still live.

For her, and for other weavers the importance of museums and academic institutions revisiting the idea of repatriation, not only as a physical project focused on objects and direct ownership thereof, but also as an intellectual and educational project in which individuals from communities are able to access their heritage through the collections’ resources while simultaneously being recognised by those institutions is vital. In this way, communities may be able to utilise and repurpose the products of colonisation through the use of the museum as
border space in order to rebuild or enrich lost, damaged, or destroyed heritage while being allowed to use the institution of museum to tell their own stories.
**Conclusion**

Each jar broke open as it entered the waves. And in each jar, there were different kinds of animals. There were fish and frogs and ducks and deer and birds. All of the animals Ixb’alam wove into her huipils. Her blood gave them life. With each jar that the sun threw into the sea, he grew sadder and sadder. Finally, he threw the last jar into the sea, and as it broke open he heard a woman shout “ayayayayaya” and it made him smile— that woman was Ixb’alam, his moon.

The story of *Ixb’alam* as told to me by the women weaving *picb’il* is emblematic not only of their relationship to weaving, but demonstrative of the connection between textile production and the personhood of the women who weave as being Q’eqchi’ people. The story illustrates the ontological ability of the self to transcend physical boundaries; further emphasises views, such as those held by QanaRux, that there is a universality to Q’eqchi’ life which both defines what it is to be *li q’eqchi’*; and serves to distinguish the Q’eqchi’ people from the Conquistadores and their descendants and also from other Maya peoples in the region. *Ixb’alam’s* ability to infuse her own life spirit into the physical world in which we exist, and to do so by bringing life to the textile patterns she wove, is a reminder that weaving is, for many women, much more than an act of economic sustenance. The production of textiles on a back strap loom is an act of creation and of connection. It is a statement of particular feminine power to give life, not only as mothers, but as creative beings in whose hands fibres become textiles imbued with a particular life of their own. Life is given to them by the weaver who first created them and sustained by the woman who wears them. This sense of life can continue to survive years after the women who wove and wore the garments have died, thus disconnecting them, in a sense, from the era in which those women lived and instead connecting them to future women; in some cases, women yet to be born.

There is great value in finding the ways in which anthropological ethnography holds relevance for academic researchers and to those for whom its findings have more practical implications. The present research does, I believe, have practical implications for the communities of informants who have shared their time, lives and knowledges with me over the time I have lived and worked in the Alta Verapaz. To that end I demonstrably show that, for QanaRux and the weavers of *picb’il* in the Alta Verapaz, textile production continues to occupy two important roles in daily life. Culturally, the production and use of the *picb’il huipil* is a way to assert an identity and to claim indigeneity and space in a non-indigenous nation. Economically, it provides women who live in poverty with the ability to earn an income that is
unconnected to their family or spouse’s incomes. Moreover, I contribute to the field of museum literature in demonstrating the value of facilitating cross-cultural encounters with and around museum objects as pathways to decolonisation and greater understanding.

**PICB’IL AS HERITAGE AND Q’EQCHI’ RESISTANCE**

For many of the weavers I interviewed, cultural survival has been a process not of protest but simply of patience. Juanita Chen, one of the oldest weavers I was able to interview, spoke of difficult times encountered by her community as waves. She described the violence inflicted by German settlers on indigenous peoples in the region in the same breath that she did the Guatemalan genocide of the 1980s and even hurricane Mitch in 1998. For her, the only constant in this history was the survival of the Q’eqchi’ people. Suffering and struggle were inevitable, as was survival. Over the course of my fieldwork I was able to observe a number of interactions between community members and international NGOs. In almost all cases, Q’eqchi’ communities and individuals were amicable and cooperative during the course of projects—but only until the volunteers and staff returned home, at which point any aspect of the project not independently seen as valuable to the community within their own context was discarded. Cultural continuity for these communities takes the form of patience. The presence of outside groups is permitted, but amiability and malleability are strategies to simply wait-out the ideas of non-Q’eqchi’ people, who are known to inevitably leave the region. The is a substantial distinction made locally between internal and external actors and organisations in Q’eqchi’ region.

Within the Q’eqchi’ world the word for ‘outsider,’ ‘*kaxlan*’ quite literally means ‘strange’ as both a noun and a verb. References to non-Q’eqchi’ peoples, places and cultures include the moniker *kaxlan* as a necessary way to understand and engage with a non-Q’eqchi’ person. While this can be interpreted as simply the result of an isolated community having little opportunity to engage with the wider world, I argue that it is far more than that. Embedded in Q’eqchi’ language and culture is a distinct understanding that the Q’eqchi’ experience of the world is unique. This extends to the insistence of Q’eqchi’ people and Q’eqchi’ communities of centring the world in the Alta Verapaz, the traditional urban centre of the Q’eqchi’ world. *Lí tenamit, el pueblo* in Spanish, or ‘your community’ in English, is grammatically the foundational structure within the Q’eqchi’ culture for situating self in relation to other. Through language Q’eqchi’ people belong to an ever-expanding circle of communities, from the aldea
to the municipal centre, to Cobán – the heart of the Q’eqchi’ world – and the term ‘li tenamit’ for Q’eqchi’ people, does not extend beyond that.

By defining the hub at the centre of economic, cultural and community life through language as Cobán, the Q’eqchi’ have actively resisted the centring of their political world in Guatemala City. The political and economic repression that the Q’eqchi’ have faced from a national government which has not historically recognised the political or cultural autonomy of the various Maya groups has not yet forced the Q’eqchi’ to resituate their political lives or identities. This assumption that the centre of the politically relevant world is Cobán functions to protect local heritage and identity. It gives individual Q’eqchi’ people the agency to assert their identity as legitimate despite a history of violence acted upon them as an indigenous ‘other’ in Guatemalan society.

Judith Butler offers a framework for understanding the valuation of pain and suffering in human lives through her conception of ‘grievability’ (2009: 14-15). For Butler, who and what is ‘grieveable’ can be defined through proximity; social, personal, political, to the self in question. Working from there, we can expand both our ability to humanise the ‘other’ and widen our own framework for understanding value by re-centring our dialogue outside of the monolith of the west. Understanding that we, in the west, can occupy the space of ‘other’ in non-western ontological models can allow us to use that framework as a lens to more effectively engage with non-western ontologies and non-western systems of value. By inverting the ‘othering’ of mainstream Guatemalan society, the Q’eqchi’ have created space in which their identity and heritage can thrive—and in which their lives and experiences have great value despite the deep racism they face in their national context. They redefine who (& what) is ‘grieveable’ (Butler 2009) by simply refusing to concede the centring of the world outside of the Q’eqchi’ geographic cosmovision. This re-centring of the dialogue can then be expanded to the ways in which my informants thought about and engaged with museum objects; viewing them first and foremost as helpful/useful to the Q’eqchi’ and only secondarily as useful to the museum—all without feeling the need to challenge the ownership of the objects themselves. My work, as presented in this thesis, pivots around that inversion of the anticipated ‘self’ encountering the textile and as such provides new access to otherwise forgotten voices in the context of picb’il textiles held in museum collections.
Western museums have long known that to remain relevant to increasingly diverse communities they needed to continue to broaden the acceptance of knowledges and ontologies originating outside of the western world, and to foster an ability and willingness to decentre their own power in those interactions. From the basement of the Portland Art Museum in 1989 (Clifford 1997) and onwards many in the museum world have revamped the way that museums not only manage objects; but how those objects are considered and thought about. Museums, such as the MAA at Cambridge and the Hearst museum at the University of California Berkeley continue to lead the way, with innovative and community-centric approaches to handling contentious objects, or relationships with source communities across the world. In 2008 the Hearst museum exhibition of Guatemalan textiles (see Chapter six) relied heavily on the consultation with local weaving communities. Furthermore (as seen in chapters two and six) many museums (including the MAA in Cambridge) have fostered direct and ongoing relationships with artists, community leaders and local educators in object collection, display and storage.

This research adds to the collective demonstration that the use of visual reproduction is a way in which museums such as the MAA and Hearst, seeking to reimagine their own role in decentralising knowledge and power, can move forward cooperatively with researchers and communities. It is further evidence that work can be done to decolonise museum spaces both in large institutions with substantial budgets, as well as in smaller institutions with limited funds, as visual and virtual repatriations can be significantly less costly than physical encounters with objects. Most importantly, this type of research can do so in an object focused way, with the presence of the museum object facilitating the encounter and the production of new knowledge or the rediscovery of old knowledge--thus honouring the purpose of museums as the homes of objects and the spaces of research themselves.

My research contributes to the canon by demonstrating that contemporary photographs can be used to facilitate historic object encounters. Using Fienup-Riordan’s work in 2003 where individuals were given direct access to museum objects themselves, and the Luo Visual History project’s repatriation of historic images to their communities (Bouquet 2012; 175) I demonstrated that a blending of these strategies can provide great value to both the museum and the community. The continued diversification of approaches to community connections only widens the already rich realm of community engagement for museums. My informants
directly benefited from interaction with historic museum objects through contemporary photographs which allowed them to bridge both geographic and temporal distances in interacting with historic Q’eqchi’ knowledge.

The visual repatriation of textiles to weaving communities in the Alta Verapaz through photographs demonstrates a local interest in engagement with and reclamation of museum objects. The reframing of my original intended research into a repatriation by my informants emphasised the need for further examples of the way in which cooperative anthropology can create research outcomes which are beneficial to both researcher and the community in which research is conducted. It also demonstrates the potential for positive and mutually beneficial relationships between museums and source communities leading to the continued production of rare cultural heritage.

Weavers, and other community members, are acutely aware of the loss of textile patterns as a part of lost heritage, and the ongoing threat of loss posed by environmental degradation, lack of economic access and opportunity, loss of language, and loss of cultural practice. Geographic and economic instability during the period of the Guatemalan genocide disrupted patterns of life essential to what women referred to as “being Q’eqchi’”. The loss of intangible heritage such as knowledge was tied directly to the difficulty of being Q’eqchi’ in the face of ongoing conquests; simply one aspect of an institutional assault on the existence of the Q’eqchi’. The opportunity to relearn, or reclaim, lost textile patterns was a chance to reverse some of the damage done over the centuries to the collective body of knowledge owned by the Q’eqchi and an opportunity re-learn physical aspects of that disappearing skill and re-weave forgotten patterns. This was uniquely valuable to the Q’eqchi’ through a direct connection between themselves and non-contemporary Q’eqchi’ individuals.

With a Q’eqchi’ ontological perspective to guide us in rethinking concepts of conquest, ownership, objects and repatriation through the ideas of lost tangible and intangible heritage, this study of the picb’il textile as heritage object and museum object presents a compelling argument for museums and academic institutions regarding the need to continue to expand the ways in which objects are encountered or repatriated digitally. It also further supports the trend within and around museums to develop stronger policies and even take legislative action around museum object management and ownership.
WEAVING WITH OUR GRANDMOTHERS’: Q’EQCHI’ RESILIENCE, DIGITAL REPATRIATION AND THE RECLAMATION OF HERITAGE

In 2003 UNESCO held a conference in Paris leading to the adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (CFICH) as an international treaty going into effect on April 30, 2006. This was spurred in large part by demands from indigenous groups, beginning in Mexico City in 1982 during the World Conference on Cultural Policies, for recognition of non-structural heritage. The convention defined intangible heritage as:

...the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity... (CFICH 2003)

The Convention followed in the footsteps of other regional, national and bi-national bodies (especially in New Zealand, Australia and Canada) to potentially place the definition of cultural heritage, and intangible heritage, into the hands of individual indigenous communities, but represented the first time that the UN or similar body had followed suit.

Henrietta Marrie, an indigenous rights activist, argued in 2008 that this convention could not represent actual change in the understanding and protection of heritage if it did not increase the value placed on indigenous knowledge in the establishment of definitions for heritage and valuation of that heritage (Marrie 2008: 174-175). Within Guatemala, where only one cultural tradition (a dance in the west of Guatemala) has been declared a UNESCO world heritage practice, the idea of protected cultural heritage is more a dream than a reality. When laws are passed to define local traje as regional dress they are driven more by the desire to protect Guatemalan craft markets from foreign exploitation than they are to protect indigenous identities. Margarita’s experience with the Ixchel Museum in Guatemala City is a far cry from the experiences of indigenous peoples working with museums and lawmakers in Canada to craft documents and guidelines such as the Canadian government’s ‘Caring for Sacred and Culturally Sensitive Objects’ or the Reciprocal Research Network at the University of British
Columbia. This does not, however, mean that Guatemalan weavers themselves are not finding ways to assert their agency in owning the reproduction of their heritage.

Q’eqchi’ people have spent five hundred years navigating a broader society seemingly intent on their eventual submission but have yet to lose their sense of identity or their sense of value. While access to a westernised market will change Q’eqchi’ weavers, there is no reason to doubt that change will occur with their own intentional and powerful agency. The ongoing role of German-Guatemalan women in the propagation of picb’il weaving and its valuation as an “indigenous garment” speak to the interconnected nature of cultures in the context of Guatemala, and to the ability of Q’eqchi’ people to co-opt the aspects of colonisation and domination that continue Q’eqchi’ culture and life, while ignoring, to the extent possible, those that do not. If we think about picb’il huipils and other picb’il textiles as these tangible forms of heritage, via the object itself, and as intangible forms of heritage via knowledge recreation and generation, it allows for these objects to serve as physical conduits through which an intangible heritage and identity is shared and expressed, both internal and external actors.

To that end, I recognise that my presence as a researcher will impact the tradition of picb’il weaving in the Alta Verapaz of Guatemala. The interactions, interviews and conversations I have had with my informants will change the way they think about picb’il as a bridge to the external world, as theirs have informed and changed my thinking. The photographically repatriated textiles have already had an impact, as historic patterns and designs are being re-woven by contemporary women in contemporary ways. Moreover, the women who re-weave those patterns view that act as a direct taking of ownership of their own lost heritage; and a reclaiming of an awareness to their own heritage and history as Q’eqchi’ weavers in the Alta Verapaz. My research also resulted in conversations with weavers about their own goals and ideas around the roles that museums and museum textiles could play in their lives. As one weaver in Samac stated in an interview shortly before I left Guatemala in 2016:

If the museum respects and appreciates our work--the picb’il--then with God’s guidance they will want to work with us. They will want to know more about the huipil and the picb’il and if they respect us we will agree to teach them. The patterns they have are ours, and if they respect the patterns and the huipils and our work, then good--I do not know how to say it, but they need to understand los q’eqchi’s.

Another weaver, in Santa María said, during a farewell gathering as I was leaving the
community with a loom produced for the MAA:

We did not know that our traje was in so many places so far away. Thank God that we do, and that we have seen what our grandmothers’ wore. Maybe the museums can tell people about us: that there are still women who weave in Santa María --the place of the cotton trees. Los q’eqchi’s have not forgotten. And maybe they can tell the people who see our loom in their museum that we are looking for a market. That we want to weave to improve our lives. Our threads are not forgotten; our daughters and granddaughters are weavers.

Ultimately, picb’il weaving is a mechanism through which women who are easily understood to be powerless can express their agencies and identities. It is a complex form of art interwoven with a history thousands of years old, owned and possessed by indigenous women. For these women, and other weavers I interviewed, the presence of picb’il textiles in museums was unknown, but once introduced to the idea it became a significant one in terms of the reclamation of Q’eqchi’ heritage and the promotion of a narrative of Q’eqchi’ communities centred around their cultural vibrancy and extensive history as a people. The immediacy with which weavers were reproducing museum textiles I had shown them is evidence to this end. And perhaps it is also evidence of the life that weavers see and understand in each textile. Each textile embodies the voice, and agency, of a weaver whose life existed (or exists) in a space within time we cannot reach, asking her granddaughters and great granddaughters not to forget who they are, and in doing so uses us--researchers and museums--as her bridge.

INTERNATIONAL MARKETS: MOULDING THE FUTURE OR MIRRORING THE PAST?

In July of 2018 Ixb’alam Ke was nominated for the award of best artist of the year at the International Folk Art Market in Santa Fe. A local volunteer and long-time supporter of Amalia Gue posted on Facebook:

Cooperative Ixbalamke, represented by Amalia Gue - Gauze weaving on a back strap loom-nominated best artist of the year at the 2018 folk art market. Come see their amazing work this weekend- BOOTH F 120. Come support a female Guatemalan cooperative create a sustainable way of life. #SantafeInternationalFolkArtMarket2018 #Guatemalatextiles #Womencoop #sustainableCentralAmerica
Within a few hours the post had received nearly two dozen ‘likes’ and a string of supportive comments from local IFAM volunteers and international textile aficionados. Over the next few days Amalia would go on to have a successful run at the fair, selling (according to a source within IFAM who requested anonymity) most of what she had brought along from Guatemala, but ultimately not winning the award for which her booth had been nominated. Amalia returned to Samac and Guatemala at the end of July, starting another cycle of what has become an annual pattern of production and sale for many of the women weaving in Samac and the surrounding area.

This cycle of access to markets through intermediaries with German-Guatemalan heritage began with the relationship between QanaRux and Doña Leslie Hempstead in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Through Doña Leslie, QanaRux gained access to a market which allowed her to not only support her own family through the violence of the 1980s, but to teach other women to weave through the creation of an external economic demand for picb’il. This marketisation of picb’il textiles allowed QanaRux to mobilise the same identity (Q’eqchi’) that was being used to oppress her community as an identity that provided an income. Through that initial boom (and then bust) of textile production QanaRux laid the groundwork for what has evolved into a connection between Maya weavers in an isolated community and the machine of global capital through the International Folk Arts Market held in Santa Fe, New Mexico, each year. More directly, the International Folk Arts Market is a contemporary example of a museum (or museum connected institution) directly driving change in a source community.

Amalia and her relationship with Olga Reich (post 2008) represent another iteration of this pattern in access to external market, the need for or use of an internal intermediary (Amalia) and an external intermediary (Olga). Amalia serves as a gatekeeper between international markets and weavers; Olga serves as the gatekeeper between weavers and the international market. Their relationship as intermediaries; and the resulting presence of Ixb’alam Ke at IFAM each year have created a significant new market for picb’il textiles which in turn has created a boom in the number of women learning to weave.

These relationships are examples of the complex and difficult interactions between textile producers and buyers in the region. The breakdown of community ties and the conflict around access to markets demonstrates the fragile nature of market relationships in resource-poor regions. With limited access to resources outside of their own community, or in any language other than their own, weavers are reliant either on these outside buyers or community representatives to expand the market for their textiles. It is easy for community members to
feel as though they are being taken advantage of, and it is a situation where it is not difficult for outside buyers to buy and sell at rates which advantage themselves. The juxtaposition of these relationships within the Guatemalan context is striking and emblematic of the difficulties that exist for scholars and individuals grappling with questions of justice and history in many conflict-ridden regions, including the Alta Verapaz, where craftspeople interact with international markets.

The relationship between booms in picb’il production and the presence of a significant market for picb’il textiles cannot be discounted. The tricky relationship between heritage practices and economic activity is one that critics of UNESCO’s increasing championing of intangible heritages discuss—these practices have led, in some cases, to a commodification of those heritages. This commodification runs the risk of separating textile production from the production of culture and from the role of weaving in identity construction. This is further complicated by the question of power in defining what is and is not significant cultural heritage. In Guatemala there is increasing conflict between the use of Maya heritage by the Guatemalan government to foment a national identity and promote tourism and the treatment of indigenous Maya by the government. This may have long-lasting implications regarding local funding for heritage projects such as weaving or for the ongoing dialogue between indigenous peoples and ladino peoples regarding Guatemala’s national identity and the racial politics surrounding that identity.

**PICB’IL MOVING FORWARD: THE FUTURE OF WEAVING PRODUCTION IN THE ALTA VERAPAZ**

Despite the recent boom/bust cycle of weaving, the precarity of picb’il weaving as a cultural practice in the communities where it continues to thrive should not be understated. Having nearly disappeared in the 1980s it is not unforeseeable that the tradition might dwindle again. While more and more women are currently learning to weave, the economic and geographic barriers to textile production are high. Outside vendors and buyers impact the ways that picb’il textiles and styles change and there is now a concentration of younger weavers who know only how to reproduce those patterns popular on items meant for international sale. As the picb’il textile is unique, even among back strap weaving practices, when it disappears from a community it is all but impossible to re-establish.

More fragile still are the ontological roots of what picb’il textile weaving means to some weavers and to some families. The presence of an international market may ensure the continuation of weaving; what it does not ensure is the continuation of women’s connectivity
to weaving as a spiritual and cultural practice whose value, while in part economic, is more fundamentally rooted in their identities as Q’eqchi’ women and their place in a tapestry of Q’eqchi’ history.

The complex production process of *picb’il* textiles, along with the fragility of the finished garments, limits the scope of any international market. The production of textiles that can take up to several months to complete cannot continue to be economically viable for a large-scale market as the standard of living (and minimum wage) in Guatemala increase. As the Q’eqchi’ communities of the Alta Verapaz gain more economic stability, any large-scale *picb’il* production will either be forced from an admittedly already boutique market into one that is truly high-end, or fade as weavers no longer have an economic incentive to produce for outside-markets.

Alternatively, the increase in the textile market may itself prove less impactful on the ongoing production of *picb’il huipils* than the rise of the pan-Maya movement. As more and more indigenous peoples in Central America begin to imagine an indigenous future and connect themselves to an imagined united past, the more the local market for textiles (such as *picb’il* specifically, which are seen as coming from the truly ancient past) may grow. It may also be that the primary motivations for textile production change as women have more and more access to economic capital.

For current weavers of *picb’il* the value that others are beginning to ascribe to the textiles they produce seems only natural. In a conversation in late August 2017, Candelaria, one of Amalia’s sisters, explained to me why *picb’il* sales were so successful at IFAM each year. *Picb’il* textiles serve as a link between tangible and intangible heritage through their unique construction.

Of course people want to buy it. The *picbi’il* is the finest fabric of any *huipil* in Guatemala. And only the women of our *pueblo* know how to weave it. It has to be expensive; because it takes so long to learn to weave; and we spend so many hours sitting under our roofs weaving until our eyes ache and our backs are sore. But it is the most beautiful and the most delicate. No other *huipils* are woven like ours from *picb’il*. (field notes 2017)

The setup and operation of any back strap loom is an intense, time-consuming, and knowledge-heavy practice. During the weaving process of *picb’il* textiles, a series of extra steps are needed to protect the delicate threads.
If we think about *picb’il huipils* and other *picb’il* textiles as these tangible forms of heritage, via the object itself, and as intangible forms of heritage via knowledge recreation and generation, it allows for these objects to serve as physical conduits through which an intangible heritage and identity is shared and expressed. The dialectic between the fixed components of intangible heritage (e.g., the process of learning to weave *picb’il* specifically with all the unique intricacies required) and the unfixed components (e.g., individual creativity and style change) allows for innovation and a shifting in the meaning of the heritage practice and heritage objects. Moreover, as the process of textile weaving is, as we have seen, an intensely physical one, there is an intangible heritage expressed in the very act of being a weaver through the embodiment of the practice.

This embodied experience of the physicality of weaving contributes to the weavers’ ability to use the practice of textile production as one that can bridge temporal gaps. Regardless of when a weaver lived or worked, her experience of producing *picb’il* is likely to be similar to those of women living generations before or after her, as she shares a lived-experience with other women whom she will never encounter; precisely because of the unique nature of the *picb’il* textile it is an experience of being Q’eqchi.’ An informant near the end of my fieldwork in 2016 explained how:

> Before then there were many, many weavers. All the women wove. My grandmother’s grandmother, the sisters of my grandfather, the sisters of my father. They were all weavers, they all had looms and cotton thread. They are all dead now, but we still weave. My daughters weave and my granddaughter weave. It’s not like before the war, but this is where the cotton plants once grew, and we are still *tejedoras* (weavers).

The sense of *picb’il* weaving as a local heritage paired with the belief held by the majority of my informants (weavers and not) that *picb’il* was an especially ancient form of textile weaving. The understanding that the Maya used sheer textiles before the arrival of the Spanish further cements the value of *picb’il* specifically as a heritage object. This connection with the imagined past gives *picb’il* textiles and *picb’il* weavers increased status within the pan-Maya movement as representatives of what is seen as ‘pure’ Maya.

Indeed, the ability of the Q’eqchi’ to assert their cultural and historical identity as a communal ‘self’, from which the world can be understood and viewed, provides Q’eqchi’ weavers fertile intellectual space for a re-imagination of the conqueror/conquered relationship and ample room to engage in resistance to challenge the seats of political and economic power.
in Guatemala through the physical act of weaving. Furthermore, this means that as these weavers are encountering museum textiles through photographs they have their own ontological intellectual frameworks for understanding those textiles in museums. These frameworks do not rely on situating the museum (or the collectors, etc.) as the ‘self’ in the narrative of the textile object’s history despite the comparative power of the museum or collector. Rather the museum, and the non-Q’eqchi’ people involved in the textiles history, occupy a well-defined verbalised space of the ‘other.’ For these weavers the subaltern voice that Spivak refers to in her work (1988) is only subaltern from a non-Q’eqchi’ perspective, and while the value of the textile to the museum may be acknowledged, it is comparatively unimportant when juxtaposed with the value of the textile patterns and lost knowledge held within the textile itself to Q’eqchi’ weavers and communities.

Through expanded access, communities may be able to utilise and repurpose the products of an act of colonisation in order to rebuild or enrich lost, damaged or destroyed heritages. For objects representing tangible and intangible heritages jointly, such as picb’il textiles, this is contingent upon the survival of craftspeople capable of being able to understand the construction of those objects and to recreate them. In some cases, that may mean that the window of opportunity for the rediscovery of intangible heritages is limited. In the case of picb’il textiles it is evident that while the textiles are culturally valuable to many Q’eqchi’ people, their specific value as agents of knowledge exists only for a small subset of Q’eqchi’ women--those who know how to weave, and it is this subset of people for whom museum textiles hold the most value as tools for reclaiming visible and yet intangible cultural heritage that they once believed had disappeared.

**Picb’il weaving and the visibility of the Q’eqchi’**

It is women through the production and use of traditional *traje* who have created a visible, public, Q’eqchi’ identity that has remained stalwart in Q’eqchi’ imaginations. *Picb’il* textiles, as both a part of that visual image of a Q’eqchi’ woman, and as the product of specialised local knowledge rooted in Q’eqchi’ traditions, serve as intangible and tangible forms of cultural heritage helping represent and cement the resilience of the Q’eqchi’ people.

In the years since the advent of the pan-Maya movement, the idiomatic insistence of defining the ‘self’ as the indigenous and the ‘other’ as the foreigner in a visible way has allowed Q’eqchi’ people and communities to create an overt sense of self in the world through language
and ontology. That insistence on maintaining not simply an internal, but an external and voiced way of being centred in the universe allows Q’eqchi’ people, and picb’il weavers to centre themselves, and not the other (as perceived by them) in their understanding of Maya textiles in museums.

The co-optation of Guatemala’s indigenous beauty pageant, Rabin Ajaw, is emblematic of this ability to centre the world they experience around the Q’eqchi’ perspective. In claiming Rabin Ajaw as an indigenous space (although it was not founded as such) and particularly as an event held annually in Cobán, Q’eqchi’ communities have not only re-asserted their control over indigeneity on display in Guatemala but asserted Cobán as the heartland of the Maya world in Guatemala and the pan-Maya world in Central America. Key to this is the international public stage that Rabin Ajaw provides for the display of Maya textiles as national treasures and works of art in Guatemala. This act of co-optation, revolution and reclaiming ownership is centred around women’s performance during the competition, and women’s skilled work as integral to the production of Maya identities. In the Alta Verapaz this means, very specifically, that the production and use of picb’il as a textile is integral to a continuing cultural identity.

This framework gives us the intellectual space to understand the survival of the Q’eqchi’ culture not simply as resistance, but as resilience. This distinction is important as is the resilience of Q’eqchi’ culture which allows it to not only persist but thrive despite oppression. This resilience is integrally tied to the production of Q’eqchi’ identities by the women who maintain the eb’junkab’al and serve as the anchors for communities throughout their lives. It is women who have maintained community and local life despite upheaval as economic impoverishment has historically pushed men into migrant work, and throughout episodes of violence men were targeted during massacres and disappearances.

IXB’ALAM: THE MOON AND OUR GRANDMOTHER

The story of Ixb’alam, the moon and the first weaver is one that was told to me over and over. In each field site that I visited I could be assured that as long as I spent enough time drinking li kape (coffee) or helping la’at xorok (making tortillas) someone would at some point ask if I had heard the story of the moon, Ixb’alam. Regardless of my answer, I would be told the story again. One hot afternoon in Campat outside of San Juan Chamelco, Rosa Mes Che, the daughter of weavers and the grandmother of weavers, ended it like this:
That is why women shout very loudly. Because the moon shouted so loudly. And that is why we bleed--because the moon bled. And we weave because the Moon, our grandmother, taught Qana Itza’m to weave. But that is another story, and it is one my mother did not know. It is one I have lost.

For her and for other Q’eqchi’ weavers of the Alta Verapaz, the story of Ixb’alam is more than the story of a young woman weaver’s adventure and misadventure. It is a link to an identity formed in the distant past, before the intrusion of the Spanish into their world, and it is an image and idea of womanhood (including weaving) that transcends temporal boundaries. The animals women rely on for daily sustenance were brought into the world by Ixb’alam’s death and return to life. Through this and her weaving she forever connected her own life spirit to the livelihoods of her descendants--the Maya women of Central America. More importantly, the story is an integral part of the production of their indigenous identities against a backdrop of oppression, and for Rosa Mes Che, it contains a reminder that much of the Q’eqchi’ body of knowledge has been lost.

In de-emphasising the romance between the Sun and the Moon and focusing on the gifts that women received because of Ixb’alam’s death and rebirth, Rosa Mes Che reminded me over and over that the story of Ixb’alam, and indeed the story of weaving in the Alta Verapaz, is a story of women and their importance to their communities and histories. As Ixb’alam is a Q’eqchi’ woman, Rosa, and other weavers who told me this story, are direct ancestors in the sense that weaving, mythologically, came from her into the Q’eqchi’ world. But Rosa’s story does not end, or even begin there. For Rosa, the story hinges on what she believes the Q’eqchi’ have lost in terms of cultural heritage: the story of QanaItza’m. And it is for women like Rosa, and her daughters, that the recovery of lost heritage traditions is of most value. For Rosa, replacing her link to the body of knowledge held by the Q’eqchi’ people is one step in a long process of repatriation and decolonisation. For me, and indeed for many researchers working between museums and source communities, it is a reminder that individual researchers and community members can work with institutions to continue to build new and more constructive ways to engage with our histories and our futures. It is also a reminder that the role which museums have to play in the decolonisation process is not a small one, and that researchers and curators can continue to lead the way in building new and better regimes of knowledge production and (re)circulation.
POSTLUDE

It is the end of August 2017. I am sitting on a wooden bench balanced on a concrete floor. The thousands of raindrops pelting onto the tin roof above us sound like as many tiny rocks being thrown from the mountains behind San Juan Chamelco. We can hear the water rushing down the gutter outside the house. Margarita, a weaver and local environmental activist, is looking across the table at me intently as she talks;

We are los hijas de Aj Po’op B’atz because we are indígena, we are Q’eqchi’. If you go to Chamil you can see the cave where he mediated and the tzuzaltaq’a took him into the earth. Aj Po’op B’atz is our grandfather and he protected li q’eqchi.’ We do not live as Ladinas; we live as Q’eqchi’s. We are his granddaughters and Chamelco is a Q’eqchi’ pueblo. We cannot forget our grandmothers and we cannot forget that they are the ones who taught us to weave.


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Appendix A

Sample of interview schedule designed before arrival in Guatemala February of 2016. This sample includes the reasoning behind each question and the introduction of a textile booklet.

This questionnaire is targeted at women between the ages of 25 and 45, married with children, who weave the textile ‘Picb’il’ in the Alta Verapaz of Guatemala. Many, if not all, women interviewed will be Q’eqchi’ speakers in aldeas of the Alta Verapaz.

Overview questions (Pre booklet) (9 questions)

1. Do you weave or are you learning to weave?

(Many women throughout the Alta Verapaz weave a variety of style of textiles. While I am hoping to primarily interview women who weave Picb’il, due to the nature of community life in Q’eqchi’ regions, and knowing that I will be introduced to new respondents by contacts I already have, not all the women I encounter or have the chance to interview may weave any type of textiles, let alone Picb’il)

2. Would you consider yourself a weaver?

(All the anthropological material I have read on the Q’eqchi’, along with my own experiences in the Alta Verapaz, suggest that there is a distinction between women who are learning to weave, women who know how to weave but only weave occasionally, and women who consider themselves weavers. While I am interested in interviewing both women who weave picb’il, and women who identify themselves as weavers, I am curious as to what differences (if any) there are between the views of women who consider themselves weavers and those who do not.)

3. How long have you woven picb’il?

(With this question I am hoping to both establish the length of time that women weave, learn what ages (more or less) women learn to weave at and start a comfortable dialogue. From my time working in the Alta Verapaz, asking how long someone has done something/been somewhere/known someone, seemed to serve an introductory role in social relationships.)

4. Who taught you to weave?

(With this question I am hoping to construct a genealogy of who has taught women to weave. The data I already have suggests that most living weavers today can trace how they learned to weave back to Rosario Coy. I would like to verify this if possible.)

5. Do you know where/when they learned to weave?

(This question will help me continue to construct the weaving genealogy. It will also allow me to see how accurate women’s understanding of who learned to weave where, as I will be able to compare this question with the answers of who directly taught women to weave that I get from each respondent. It will also help me understand if there are overlaps between teachers and learners. For example, do weavers have only one teacher, or many?)
6. Are you weaving anything right now? Can you show me?

(With this question I am hoping to be able to start looking at or photographing (with permission) current textile projects. I am also hoping to figure out how many of the women who say they weave, or identify as weavers, have current weaving projects.

a. Follow up question: what patterns are these?
b. Do you know any other patterns?
c. Which is your favourite?

(From my past experience most women identify patterns with similar names or stories. I am hoping to get documentation of these names/stories and to better understand the use of patterns or any meaning behind various patterns. I am also hoping to compare contemporary patterns with historical patterns in museum textiles.)

7. Do you wear picb’il? Can you show me?

a. Follow up question: what patterns are these?
b. Do you weave these patterns?
c. Which is your favourite?

(I suspect from my experience in the Alta Verapaz that most women who weave picb’il, or who know someone who weaves picb’il, will wear the textile to special occasions, religious festivals etc. Cobán’s annual contestant in Guatemala’s indigenous beauty pageant, always wears picb’il, and the textile is used extensively by local municipalities at events and to showcase Cobán Mayan heritage. I am also curious as to if there is a difference between the patterns women prefer to weave and those patterns they prefer to wear.)

8. What do you do with the textiles you weave/what are they?

(With this question I am hoping to understand what women are primarily weaving. Picb’il huipils for sale? picb’il huipils for their own use, or as gifts? Do they weave it for daughters, nieces, family members? Do they sell napkins or other small items for market? My guess is that most women weave huipils to wear and sell, along with a few smaller ‘practice’ items that are sold in tourist markets. Due to the energy and complexity of picb’il weaving, not many items end up in tourist markets)

9. Why do you weave picb’il?

(With this question I am hoping to follow up on conversations I had with some of the women in 2009 and 2010. Many women see weaving as primarily an economic activity; something that they can do on the side which allows them to add to their family’s income. Other women (particularly the daughters and granddaughters of Rosario) seemed to connect picb’il weaving to an integral part of their identities as Q’eqchi’ women. I am curious to see what different women are thinking now about these textiles and whether or not there is a correlation between women who view themselves as ‘Weavers’ also see weaving as being a solid part of their identities)
Booklet Questions (These questions will be asked after I have introduced the booklet to the weavers—knowing the communities I am working with, I imagine that once I complete one or two initial interviews, women will be anticipating the booklets and already heard about them from other community members. That said, I think it is important to start the interviews with the textiles the women are currently weaving or wearing). (10).

1. Have you ever travelled?
   a. If so, where?
   b. Have you been to Guatemala City?
   c. Have you ever been to a museum?

(With this question I am hoping to understand the ways in which respondents think about active connections between museums and source communities.)

2. Have you heard of museums? Do you know anyone who has ever been to a museum?

(As Amalia Coy, the last president of the weaving cooperative, has been to the Ixchel museum in Guatemala City as a representative of the weavers, I expect that most of the women will have heard about the Ixchel museum from her.)

3. Can you describe a museum to me?

(I am curious about when and how museum staff interact with source communities or their members. Is it limited to a particular group? Are the relationships positive experiences for the members of museum staff? Or for the weavers?)

4. Did you know that there are picb’il textiles in museums?
   a. What museums/where?
   b. Do you know how long those textiles have been in museums?

(I suspect that the women involved in Ixb’alam Ke are aware of picb’il textiles held in the Ixchel Museum in Guatemala City, whether or not they are aware of textiles held in other museums, or of the age of textiles in those museums.)

At this juncture I hope to introduce the photo booklets to the women I am interviewing. I will have an introduction to each booklet written in the first page of the booklet, describing the textile, where it is held today, where it is collected and as much information as we know about when/where the textile was collected and who may have woven those textiles.

5. Have you ever seen or woven any textiles/patterns like these?

(With this question I am hoping to see if the weavers draw any connections between the textiles in the booklets, and the textiles that they weave. I am hoping that they may draw connections between the patterns/styles/manufacture of those textiles and the ones that they weave.)

6. Do you know any women who weave textiles/patterns like these?
   a. Do you recognise these patterns?
   b. Which ones/what are they?
(Here I am hoping to build off the last question to get more information about each pattern, and what the weavers know about them.)

7. Do you know who might have woven these textiles?
   a. If so, what makes you think of that person?

(Based on my previous work in Guatemala I believe that as women learn patterns from the weavers around them, there may be a genealogy of patterns. A woman who learnt to weave from a particular line of weavers may have more knowledge of and even practice patterns similar to those in the museum textiles. How different women respond to different patterns might give me more information about whether or not particular women feel ownership or connection to a textile due to a personal or kinship connection she may share, or believe she shares with the weaver of the museum textile.)

8. What do you think about them being in a museum?

9. What do you think about people seeing picb’il textiles in museums?

10. Do you feel connected to these picb’il textiles?

Age Group Specific Questions (These questions are placed after the introduction of the booklet so that all weavers in all age groups are answering them at the same time during the interview process.) (10).

   1. Are you teaching anyone to weave?

(I suspect that women only begin teaching others to weave after they are considered to be of a particular skill level or status within the community. This means that many of the younger women I interview may not be teaching anyone to weave. I also suspect that weaving instruction will occur along kinship lines, which in turn sheds light on the unique situation of the 1980s where most women who learnt to weave were learning from a non-kin person, Rosario.)

   2. If not, do you intend to teach anyone to weave?

(Women who do not currently teach others to weave may become weaving teachers if requested by a blood relative, or if they have a daughter old enough to begin weaving. I am hoping to ascertain how many younger women are involved in the passing of weaving knowledge on, or how many intend to be involved)
Appendix B

Sample of interview schedule designed after my arrival in Guatemala with the assistance of my translator Maria Elena Toj between March and April of 2016. This new approach included allowing weavers to have access to the photo booklet prior to the beginning of an interview and relied on a (sometimes extensive) conversation between myself and interviewees regarding the museum textiles prior to the start of the interview. I came to expect, quite early on in this process, that in order to have good interviews, I would need to be open to more organic conversations in which these questions served more as guideposts than as data collection points.

1. Do you weave or are you learning to weave?
2. How long have you woven *picb’il*?
3. Who taught you to weave?
4. Do you know where/when they learned to weave?
5. Are you teaching anyone to weave?
6. Do you wear *picb’il*? Can you show me?
7. How many patterns do you weave?
   1. Follow up questions: What are they called/where & when did you learn them?
8. What do you do with the textiles you weave/what are they?
9. Why do you weave *picb’il*?
10. Have you heard of museums? Do you know anyone who has ever been to a museum?
11. Did you know that there are *picb’il* textiles in museums?
12. What do you think about them being in a museum?
13. What do you think about people seeing *picb’il* textiles outside of Guatemala?
14. Do you feel connected to these *picb’il* textiles?
Appendix C

The following is one of the photo booklets I brought to communities as interview aids. It has been reformatted to fit onto fewer pages to meet the criteria for the length of this thesis. In the original textile booklets the pages were printed one sided, with each photograph taking up one full page on the right, balanced by a blank page on the left.
Pitt Rivers Museum

University of Oxford

Textile Collected in 1929 by Mrs. Elsie McDougal

Donated the Pitt Rivers Museum in 1946