

Title: Reconstructing the Past: Ritual Revitalization and Identity among the Ch'orti' Maya
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Abstract:

The Ch'orti' Maya of southeastern Guatemala have all but abandoned traditional ritual practices in the last century. The once vibrant socio-religious system led by ritual priests known as *padrinos* involved frequent ceremonies in order to secure rains for planting as well as elaborate rites to thank the gods for plentiful rains. Internal pressures from western religious and governmental sources have contributed to essentially the eradication of all such rituals that once formed an important component of Ch'orti' religious expression. Deeply-rooted suspicion has supplanted belief in these ancient religious practices. Based on fieldwork with the Ch'orti', this paper examines a recent movement by a group of Ch'orti' to revitalize many of these former ceremonies by employing Maya priests from the Highlands who speak different Mayan languages to conduct these ceremonies (3 of which I have attended) in an effort to, as the Ch'orti' describe it, "regain a portion of lost identity." I explore the socio-cultural impact of and resistance to the 're-introduction' of traditional forms of religious belief to Ch'orti' areas that are now heavily Evangelical and Catholic.

Reconstructing the Past: Ritual Revitalization and Identity among the Ch'orti' Maya

The Ch'orti' Maya live today in the southeastern region of Guatemala in the department of Chiquimula primarily in and around the *municipio* of Jocotan. Since the time of the conquest, the Ch'orti' have been able to preserve many their customs and religious practices up through the mid 20th century (Girard 1949, 1995; Wisdom 1940). Since that time, however, many of Ch'orti' have steadily been assimilating to a significant degree into *ladino* culture and have in the process abandoned the majority of their traditional ceremonial practices and beliefs. Due to this ongoing process, the Ch'orti' are considered by many to be one of the least 'traditional' of the various

Maya groups today. While many traditional practices of the Ch'orti' have disappeared (or are only practiced clandestinely), there remains a small section of the Ch'orti' population who still understand if not practice many of the traditional ceremonies relating to agricultural and healing (Hull 2000, 2001). In this paper I investigate the changing role of ritual as it relates to notions of identity and economic prosperity for the Ch'orti'. I will attempt to contextualize a recent grass-roots movement among some Ch'orti' to revitalize certain ceremonial practices that were no longer performed in the Ch'orti' area by adopting *in toto* rituals from other Maya groups. I will also examine questions of group identity and cultural adaptation associated with conceptions of ritual validity and performance as it relates to this integrating process. I will argue that this effort to 'recapture the past' as it were locates ritual as a socio-validating mechanism for some Ch'orti' today. I will also investigate a counter movement galvanized by a deep-felt reticence by other Ch'orti' to return to traditional beliefs and practices which they now consider "*malo*" (evil) and "*peligroso*" (dangerous). This ideological division has in effect created a rift within certain Ch'orti' communities as the present clashes with the both the past and the *reintroduction* of the past.

Today, the vast majority of Ch'orti' practice subsistence agriculture at some level consisting primarily of squash, beans, bananas, palm, tule, and agave. Corn, however, stands alone as the most important crop for the daily needs of the Ch'orti'. Planting season for corn usually begins around April 25th. The second planting season or *pejwa'r* begins in September and is harvested in late December or the first week of January (cf. Girard 1942: 4:1128; Hull 2000). The formal date of planting for the first planting season is decided upon by a group of elders known as *sakumb'irob'*, 'older brothers'. The *sakumb'irob'* of a particular community meet together around April 17th and decide when they want the rainy season to begin, either April 25th

or May 1st (or possibly some other date in between). Once they have made a decision, they announce the date to the community and begin specific preparations for several agricultural ceremonies. In the past, in order to insure that rainy season begins at the appropriate moment, the Ch'orti' always relied on ritual priests, known as *padrinos*, who were specialists in calling down the rains. Rain-making *padrinos* played a crucial role in the larger Ch'orti' society up until as recently as 40 years ago. These ritual specialists were known in Ch'orti' as *ajk'ajt jaja'r*, or 'one who petitions the rain' and functioned as a type of mediator between the gods and the people. The Ch'orti' *padrino* offered up prayers for plentiful rains and asked for permission from *Katu'rum* or 'Our Mother Earth' to begin the planting season. The *padrino* assumed a central role in this ceremony that includes the ritual caching of turkeys and *chilate* in a hole dug under a specially prepared altar constructed in the center of a hamlet. This hole is known as the "umbilicus of the earth," locating this ceremony in the center of the quincuncial universe.

In traditional Ch'orti' thought, there is a covenant between humans and the earth that requires a payment to the gods before one can plant the first seed. Much in line with the important work of John Monaghan concerning the covenant process between the Mixtec and their gods, the Ch'orti' internalized this mutual obligation of covenant making as a foundation for their social order (Monaghan 1995). One of the most crucial of these covenant processes is known as the *Limosna* or 'Payment to the Earth' ceremony that is usually performed on an individual basis by farmers on or before April 25th at midnight. Out of fear of being discovered, most remaining Ch'orti' agricultural rituals are performed at night. Sacred offerings of corn gruel, turkey, and chicken meat are taken to the field and deposited in the four corners and in two holes in the center. The offerings are a 'payment' to *Katu'rum*, or "Our Mother Earth" as a petition to ensure a bountiful harvest and to secure protection for his field from animals and

natural elements. Today, apart from few individuals who perform this ceremony clandestinely, this rite has all but disappeared.

The majority of the beliefs and ceremonial practices I have described here are in serious danger of being lost. The majority of Ch'orti' Maya today have taken a non-tolerant stance against any practice or belief that is associated with what they term "witchcraft." All types of traditional ceremonies, healings, and non-Christian prayers have been highly devalued and, in fact, are sometimes practiced at great personal risk. Most *curanderos*, or traditional healers, with whom I have spoken no longer practice for fear of retribution. Likewise, many ancient prayers to non-Christian gods can only be done safely today in secret. In fact, in 15 months of fieldwork among more than 25 Ch'orti' communities I have only found a handful of people who still practice agricultural rites as I have described here.

In a dramatic reversal of these current trends, a small group among the Ch'orti' has recently initiated an effort to revitalize certain ancient agricultural ceremonies. This group is allied with the *Movimiento Nacional de Resistencia Indígena, Majawil Q'ij*, in addition to several other local indigenous groups in and around Jocotan. In this turbulent environment of anti-ceremonial and anti-traditional sentiment, the emergence of a pro-ritual movement is all the more striking. This grass-roots effort began in the 1990s. There are several notable motivations for the emergence of this pro-ritual group during this time. First, and not coincidentally, this movement corresponds chronologically with an upsurge in local indigenous activist groups in the Ch'orti' area. During the 1990s, groups like DIGEBI, *Academia de Lenguas Mayas*, and PLFM began to take a foothold in Jocotan, Guatemala and have been successful in many areas of improving education, literacy, promoting the use of the Ch'orti' language, some improvements in human rites, and the introduction of locally-generated commerce throughout the Ch'orti' region.

It is interesting to note that several of the founders of this pro-ritual movement were some of the first to become literate through many of these very programs. In addition, many of the initial members of this pro-ritual group have also pursued advanced degrees in various disciplines at the university level. Some of these members have actually been the object of criticism both from within the Ch'orti' community and from without (i.e., non-indigenous individuals). Many within the Ch'orti' community disapprove of their apparent 'assimilation' into *ladino*, or non-indigenous lifestyle. They have also faced criticism from the large *ladino* population in Jocotan who, based on my interviews with some of them, are uncomfortable with the educational advances of the Ch'orti'. This is a common dilemma facing the Maya intellectuals from all Maya areas. In spite of the resistance of some, the leaders of this pro-ritual movement have been aggressively advocating progress in intellectual and economically-driven programs as well a revival of past traditional rites and practices to assist them in their effort to escape poverty. It should be noted that the leaders of this pro-ritual group are a mix those with advanced education as well as farmers with little formal education. The intellectuals in among this group have been especially involved in organizing these ceremonies (in particular arranging for priests from other Maya areas to come and perform the ceremony) while the less-formally educated in the group have played a key role in recruitment from local communities.

What, then, are some of the other motivating factors in the effort to revive certain ritual practices among the Ch'orti'? One major factor relates to economic prosperity. The current economic situation in all Ch'orti' areas is dismal at best. For example, in the last three years drought has caused widespread famine in most Ch'orti' communities which, due to its severity, received world-wide press coverage. Conceptually, one might ask what ritual performance has to do with economic improvement. Several of the members of this pro-ritual movement have

told me that they see agricultural ritual as the means of returning to the 'days of plenty', to times when the correct performance of ritual assured a good harvest. Similarly, many elderly Ch'orti' whom I have spoken hearken back to 'the good old days', referring to the times when ritual was a vital component of Ch'orti' life and food abounded. One eighty year-old consultant described in rich detail the how his ancestors used to carry out a variety of agricultural rites with great devotion. He finished with this comment:

Asi es kocha ucho'b' ani ninoy. Ayan ani e nar, e b'u'r, tuno'r, ma'chi kocha kone'r.
That is what my grandparents (i.e. ancestors) used to do. They had corn, beans, everything, unlike today.

Another elderly consultant had just finished describing the ceremonial practices he had seen as a child and young man. He attributed the current suffering of the Ch'orti' to the fact that the ritual rain making priests, known as *padrinos*, had long since stopped practicing in that area. He made this observation:

Por eso pwes ke' b'an ani, pero kocha verdad, i kone'r kocha war kak'ajti. Mixtuk'a e padrino, mixtuk'a e rogante. Por eso war kache sufrir...
For this reason, well, thus it was, but for real, and today how we are praying. Now there are no more *padrinos*, now there are no more petitioners. That's why we are suffering...

Other Ch'orti' have described to me how the decline of traditional ritual practice corresponded to the decrease in field production for corn and other major crops. Others see a direct connection between the disappearance of the rain-making *padrinos* with the severe droughts that have been affecting the Ch'orti' area for many years. The current pro-ritual movement, therefore, has a solid ideological and practical base in the minds of many Ch'orti' by linking the issue of economic prosperity to the practice of certain traditional ceremonies.

The rationale for this reemergence of ritual practices, however, goes beyond economic and

touches upon notions of identity for the Ch'orti' Maya. What correlation exists between ritual practice and identity? For some Ch'orti' the connection between them is an intimate one. In fact, one of the leaders of this pro-ritual movement told me that the practice of these rituals was nothing less than "the true manifestation of one's identity" ("*la manifestación real de su identidad*"). No better example of the link between ritual practice and identity can be found than when the leaders of this pro-ritual movement selected the ruins of the ancient Maya city of Copan for a ceremony in the spring of 2002. Copan was chosen as the location for this important pre-planting rite since, according to one leader of the group, "it was the sacred site of our ancestors, the place where they performed similar rites and communicated with God." According to many Ch'orti', ritual practice is necessary to establish a close connection with deity. One member of the pro-ritual group's leadership emphasized this point when he explained that the motivation behind the reintroduction of these rituals among the Ch'orti'

...ha sido por la cosecha, por la familia, por la paz, por la toma de posesión de una autoridad y otros motivos que la intención sea, la de establecer alguna comunicación con el Creador por la ejecución de alguna actividad a contemplar.

...has been for the harvest, for the family, for peace, for the taking of possession of some authority and other motives whatever the intention may be, with establishing some communication with the Creator by carrying out of some activity for future contemplation.

Here then was the bringing together of the past and the present, the cultural connection between ancient practice and modern ideology. The ancient Maya city of Copan was seen as an ideal place to 'reconnect' with the Gods of the past. Permission was obtained to use the site of Copan. The Executive Director of the Copan Association, Ricardo Argucia and Catherin Docter, from the Board of Directors of the Copan Association, were invited to attend. My family and I were also invited to this ceremony that was going to be held in the Main Plaza of Copan. About 40

Ch'orti' attended together with other interested tourists who were touring the ruins that day. Interestingly, in all of these ceremonies since the early 1990s, it was not a Ch'orti' priest who conducted the ceremony. Instead, priests from other regions in Guatemala were employed (e.g. Kakchiquel, Mam, and K'iche'). A female K'iche' priest was brought in from the Guatemalan Highlands to perform the ceremony at Copan. When I first attended one of these ceremonies in June of 2000 I asked why priests from distant Maya groups were enlisted to perform these ceremonies. I was told simply that "there are no Ch'orti' priests who know how to do it today." During the 3-hour long ceremony at Copan, the K'iche' priest both petitioned and offered thanks to the gods. There was noticeably less reticence among those Ch'orti' who were there to fully participate than I had seen at two previous ceremonies performed near Jocotan. One Ch'orti' participant, who had attended several other these ceremonies, commented to me after the ceremony that she felt a powerful sense of connection between the ancient Maya and her people, the Ch'orti', that stripped away any inhibition to be involved this time around. The Ch'orti' today regularly refer to the ancient inhabitants of Copan as "*kanoy*," or "our grandfathers." They also preserve in their oral traditions tales of interaction between the kings of Copan with other Classic period sites such as Quirigua (Hull n.d.a). The inhabitants of Copan Ruinas, the small town around the archaeological site, are primarily made up of Ch'orti' who have been in that region since the Classic period. Furthermore, current linguistic research on the underlying language of the Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions shows conclusively the hieroglyphs at Copan show distinctive morphological features only found in modern Ch'orti' (Wichmann 2002). Among the pro-ritual group today, this ancestral tie to the former inhabitants of Copan is part of their cultural currency and identity as Ch'orti'. This connection to the past is effectively recreated and reified with each enactment of these modern-day rituals. 'Doing what the ancestors did'

represents an important sense of continuity according to several Ch'orti' with whom I have spoken.

Self-determination and resistance are also key factors in this revival of ritual. A member of the pro-ritual group once explained to me that these rituals were crucial for "*la liberación por la situación del colonialismo*" ("the liberation from the situation of colonialism") and the proper execution of "*los derechos y deberes de los pueblos indígenas que tienen en todo país*" ("the rights and responsibilities of the indigenous towns that they have in the whole country"). This statement reveals another ideological component to the reinstatement of these rituals among the Ch'orti'; that of resistance to the dominant power structure found throughout Guatemala in relation to the indigenous populations. By exercising their rights to practice these rituals the Ch'orti' openly contest the existing power paradigm and hegemonic forces imposed upon them since the Spanish conquest and the era of colonialism.

There is also significant disagreement and outright hostility to this reintroduction of ritual practice by many Ch'orti' today. The deep-felt fear and paranoia associated with the practice of certain traditional rites was made remarkably clear to me during my fieldwork in the summer of 2000. In June of 2000 members of the pro-ritual group brought a Mam-speaking priest all the way from western Guatemala to perform a ceremony to thank the gods for the abundant rains that had been falling up until that point. This event created considerable discontent and anxiety in many hamlets because many were worried about promoting *brujería*, or "witchcraft" in the area. The ceremony was held on the summit of a sacred mountain in the hamlet of Suchiquer that still contains physical remnants of stone altars that looked hundreds of years old. I hiked up to the top of this mountain together with the Mam priest. During our discussions he privately expressed to me astonishment that there were no Ch'orti' who could perform such a ceremony.

About 100 people turned out for this ceremony from neighboring hamlets. Many of them were visibly quite skeptical and antagonistic. The ceremony lasted over 3 hours and was done all in the Mam language! This of course meant that no Ch'orti' understood more than an occasional word since these two languages, though distantly related, are today mutually unintelligible. At the beginning of the ceremony, very few from among the large crowd chose to participate when directed by the Mam priest. Then, about 20 minutes into the ceremony, the head nun from the local Belgium Mission, who has spent nearly 30 years living and working in the Ch'orti' area, suddenly appeared at the base of the mountain in her jeep. Immediately, about 20 of those watching the ceremony darted off the other side of the mountain in a full sprint. Many others among the crowd were noticeably uncomfortable as they saw her hiking up the mountain accompanied by several other local Catholic Church leaders. I asked a Ch'orti' friend of mine what all the commotion was about and he said that they were afraid to let the church leaders see them participating in a 'pagan' rite. There was a palpable tension among many who were there as they struggled internally with their current religious beliefs and their interest at whatever level in the traditional ceremonies of their ancestors.

For the first portion of the ceremony, only those involved in the pro-ritual movement and a few others were actively participating in the ceremony. Over the course of the next hour, however, I noticed a remarkable change of attitude especially among the elderly women of the crowd. One by one they began to work their way up to the front of the group near the ceremonial fire the priest had built and began to actively participate in the ceremony. A number of these same women were in tears at the end of the ceremony. I knew one of these women and so I spoke to her right after the ceremony concluded to find out her feelings and thoughts about what she had seen. Quite tellingly she stated that as the ceremony progressed she was overcome

with a sense of longing for this type of ritual that she had participated in so often as a child. She also told me that she had no intention of being involved but had simply come as a curious observer. The reaction of these elderly women, according to one of the leaders of the pro-ritual movement, is typical for many who attend:

En las personas quienes participan se manifiesta un cambio de actitud, en algunos para practicar con libertad sus costumbres y tradiciones, y otros por la valorización de la riqueza que existe en la región.

In the people who participate is manifested a change of attitude, in some to practice with freedom their customs and traditions, and others for the valorization of the richness that exists in the region.

There was still a large percentage of those gathered who did not participate during the 3-hour event. Many of the comments I heard among them centered on the fear of involvement with any form of "brujería," or "witchcraft" and with "cosas del diablo," or "things of the devil." When ceremony ended I rode back down to Jocotan with the head nun from the Belgium Mission and with the Mam priest. The ride down was considerably less congenial that was our hike up together. During a break in the ceremony, the priest was had walked around to all the participants to ask for monetary donations. He received very little. Everyone could see his visible anger and frustration as it became apparent that most were unwilling to make a monetary donation. Discussions began immediately in many of the neighboring hamlets over the next few days about whether the priest was indeed angry and what he might do in retribution. It did not take long for the negative attitudes and fears of many to be seemingly substantiated. Quite amazingly, the rain that had been consistently falling everyday for three weeks stopped cold the day after the Mam priest left. By the time I left in August, 70% of the harvest had been lost and many Ch'orti' placed the blame on the Mam priest for offending the Christian God with this

'pagan' rite. Others believed the priest had placed a curse on the people for not supporting him financially when he had asked for donations. Once the rains disappeared for four consecutive days there was a palpable anger among many Ch'orti', even with people who had not attended the ceremony but had heard about what happened. In the subsequent two weeks to this ceremony I overheard a number of men talking in groups state that if that priest ever showed his face in Jocotan again, "*Vamos a machetearlo*," "We are going to kill him with a machete." This local event had the immediate effect of confirming to the minds of many Ch'orti' the danger in going back to the ritual ways of their forefathers.

Conclusion

Ritual practice, then, in many ways represents a double-edged sword for the Ch'orti'. It is seen by some as a means of breaking the chains of colonialism, the exercise of rights and responsibilities, economic advancement, and as an integral part of Ch'orti' identity itself. At the same time, a larger number of Ch'orti' today view traditional ritual practices as an 'evil' that represents backward motion; the very antithesis of their current efforts to progress. One member of the pro-ritual movement characterized this latter ideological stance as follows:

...la falta de aceptación de estas prácticas por otros grupos de la localidad...[demuestra] así una actitud negativa entre las personas. Se manifestó mucho los prejuicios y estereotipos en contra de las personas que iniciaron con esta práctica a nivel público, hasta llega el momento de calificar como grupos satánicos o hechicerías.

...the lack of acceptance of these practices by other groups of the region...[demonstrates] thus a negative attitude among the people. The prejudices and stereotypes are manifested a lot against the people who begin this practice at the public level, until the moment arrives to qualify them as satanic groups or sorcerers.

There is clearly a deep ideological divide between these two camps. Those opposed to traditional practices have a new-founded concern over the *openness* of these ceremonial practices

since in the last 50 years most Ch'orti' ritual practices have been relegated to the clandestine realm. From my point of view it does not seem, however, that the staunch opposition to the reintroduction of these agricultural rites will not be successful in stopping this pro-ritual movement. The pro-ritual movement, on the other hand, certainly has an uphill battle to overcome a generation of negative sentiments surrounding certain traditional ceremonies. Those who support the reintroduction of these rites are presently in the clear minority. This being said, what is apparent to me from this sociocultural process of ritual revitalization and my fieldwork in the Ch'orti' area is that there is strong current of discontent with the status quo among the elderly and some of the younger generation. Among some of younger and middle generation of Ch'orti' have made conceptual link between ritual practice and issues of cultural rights, economic advancement, and of larger movements of resistance. Moreover, they view the practice of these rites as a cultural commodity, and a vital part of Ch'orti' identity that has been lost for a period of time through centuries of suppression from religious and secular authorities. Ritual revitalization is overt and symbolic, and represents a challenge to the repressive hegemonic power structure that has clearly been working against the Ch'orti' people. It is through these ritual and *ideological* practices, according to one Ch'orti' member of the pro-ritual movement, that the Ch'orti' people can "*recuperar lo que les pertenece*" ("recover that which belongs to them"). For many Ch'orti', then, the road to self-determination in the present includes a recapture and reinstitution of the past.

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