

“School is for the lazy ones.”

*Local interpretations of children’s rights to education in a rural
community in Guatemala.*

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Chapter 1: Introduction

José was 18 years old and one of several sons of a major land owner in San Antonio Palopó. His estimate was that his father's land was worth about Q 2.000 000 (equivalent to US\$ 274 000 at 2001 exchange rates). His father had refused all the other sons an education, and José was the only one who had gone to school. When I met José at age 18, he had just finished 6th grade, and was hoping to be able to go on to secondary school. But first he had to work one year in order to earn enough money to cover the cost of books and school fees. From the time he was a little boy he had desperately wanted to go to school, and had struggled and quarrelled with his father to get permission and money to do so. That is why it had taken him so many years to finish elementary school; there were only some years he would be allowed to attend school. His father was against education, thinking it was a waste of time, and he wanted his sons to farm his land instead. José's brothers accepted this and farmed the land, while José kept insisting on going to school.

During my field work in San Antonio Palopó, I found that a large number of children did not receive an education, either because they never went to school or because they dropped out of school during the first few years. As José's story shows, this was not always due to poverty. Almost all the people I met emphasized that education was very important and something they wanted for their children in order for them to *superarse* (get a better life), escape poverty and be able to communicate with the rest of the society in Spanish. Still, of

the children in San Antonio Palopó who do attend school, I found that they on average do so for only 3-4 years. Many children never attend school at all.

Education is seen as a universal human right by the United Nations, and often thought to be of crucial importance to a nation's and individual's development. Since so many people in San Antonio Palopó choose not to send their children to school, I found it important and interesting to look at the underlying causes for this. It was initially my intention to study the interpretation of human rights in general and not focus on education specifically. But as I settled down in San Antonio, education (or lack of education) was a factor I could not ignore. While people were so concerned about education and expressed that education was what they wanted and needed, very few children actually completed their primary education. The study of education allowed me to see a particular human right, the right to education, interpreted and contextualized in a small community. As 'human rights' is an abstract term difficult to discuss, the right of children to an education became a useful approach for me in discussions of rights. Particularly so since almost everybody I spoke to in San Antonio had an opinion on education.

In order to understand the contradiction between what people say (that education is important) and what they actually do, I will investigate how people in San Antonio Palopó conceptualize education and what they see as good strategies for succeeding in life. Although education is communicated as something important and good, there might be aspects to the upbringing of children that are seen as more important. Questions I ask in this study are: Why do so many children never attend school, or drop out during the first years of primary

school? What does education mean to people in a rural community like San Antonio, and what do people think about children's right to education?

I find Guatemala to be an interesting country for human rights studies, as human rights were an important issue in the Peace Process leading to the end of the civil war in 1996. Human rights have also been adopted by the various Maya organisations, often referred to as the Maya movement, yet at the same time the term 'rights' is not even part of the Maya vocabulary. In Guatemala, the concept of human rights was introduced as part of the peace negotiations in the 1980's, and human rights are central in the Maya activists' claims for a better situation for the Maya population. I will describe the development of the pan-Maya movement later in this chapter, as I find Maya activists and their struggle for rights to be of interest for my approach. The pan-Maya movement and the Maya activists have the opportunity to bring forward what they see as important claims to the Maya people, and they point to aspects of what I have called the Maya worldview as central point of reference to understand their claims. Another point of interest is that some of these claims differ from what the locals in San Antonio see as most important. Therefore I will include the development of the movement and the main issues that their leaders are working for in my thesis.

My main focus, however, is the local interpretation of human rights by people in the rural community of San Antonio with a special focus on the right to education. Ordinary people have few if any channels through which to be heard. Most Maya have not had a chance to take part in the peace negotiations or to voice their hopes and visions for the future. I agree with Linda Green in the importance of giving voice to poor people and those who suffer

(Green 1999: 21-22). Christine Kovic also stresses the importance of studies of suffering, which has been remarkably absent in anthropological studies until recently (Kovic 2005).

‘Human rights’ as an anthropological study

In chapter two I will outline the dilemma of anthropological studies of human rights in more depth, but I will briefly describe the dilemma here as an introduction to my own study.

The legal conception of human rights has a long history going back to the Enlightenment and the revolutionary constitutions of France and the United States in the eighteenth century.

Human rights gained international recognition in the contemporary period with the creation of the United Nations in 1945, and as a response to World War II the 58 member states of the UN drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was passed in Dec. 1948. The adoption of the Universal Declaration stems in large part from the strong desire for peace in the aftermath of the war, and out of the conviction that protection of human rights was no longer only a domestic concern (Sally E. Merry 2001).

Since 1948, the Universal Declaration has been translated into more than 200 languages and remains one of the best known and most often cited human rights documents in the world.

Although the Declaration is not a legally binding document, it has inspired more than 60 human rights instruments which together constitute an international standard of human rights. These instruments include the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, both of which

are legally binding treaties. Together with the Universal Declaration, they constitute the International Bill of Rights.¹

Central points in human rights are that they encompass all human beings simply because he or she is a human being, and that the state should be the one to protect human beings against violations of human dignity. Thus humans are protected, and the state is the protector. The state can also be the violator of human rights, and therefore be both the violator and supposed protector of these rights.

International human rights can be understood as a universal declaration embodying a set of international treaties regulating relations between states and individuals, and a set of national and international institutions whose task it is to assist states in respecting, protecting and promoting these rights (Ekern 2003). Human rights deal with relations between states and individuals, where the states have the obligation to ensure every individual their rights. And as Ekern continues:

“Human rights are also an international political and administrative system designed to assist, and if necessary force, states to comply with their human rights obligations, primary through the UN system of collective security and cooperation and the various treaty bodies that oversee the implementation of the conventions” (Ekern 2005: 281).

Since the international human rights system has no power of enforcement, a form of “shaming” through international condemnation of states that violates human rights has become an important instrument in upholding human rights law (Ekern 2003: 281).

The anthropologist Richard A. Wilson (1997) sees human rights as one of the most globalised political values of our times. Still, only recently did human rights become a topic of interest

¹ www.unhchr.ch/udhr/miscinfo/corta.htm

to anthropologists. This was mainly because of the emphasis on localism as well as culture in anthropology; the strong focus on local culture often led to a critical opposition to universal values such as human rights (ibid: 1).

For anthropologists, the universal nature of human rights has been difficult to relate to and accept. Marie-Bénédicte Dembour points to how human rights conventions strive to reach the universal while addressing the problems they wish to confront from a particular position (Dembour 2001: 75). The UN Declaration, for example, was drafted as a response to a particular historical situation; the Second World War. Although not against human rights as such, she argues that human rights do not make sense outside the specific political and social history from which they have evolved (ibid: 58).

According to Richard Wilson (1997), human rights are globalized but not homogenized; rights are not interpreted the same way world wide. This brings us to the debate of relativism/universalism, which I will discuss in greater depth in chapter two. But as processes of globalization have led to human rights discourses being adopted throughout the world, and the concept of 'rights' is being used in negotiations between social groups and political institutions on both local, national and international level (Cowan, Dembour and Wilson 2001: 1), human rights have increasingly become a topic of interest also to anthropologists. By comparing local notions of human rights, and struggles for them, anthropologists can develop an understanding for exactly such variations between groups of people - and within groups. The anthropologist Lynn Stephen, who has done research on human rights in southern Mexico, writes:

“Thus the most important criterion for analyzing human rights from an anthropological perspective is that the analysis be grounded in a particular situation linked to the actions and

intentions of specific actors within the context of institutionalized power” (Stephen 2002: 29, quoted in Kovic 2005: 94).

This thesis can be seen as a small contribution to the understanding of local variations in the interpretation of human rights. I will attempt to understand aspects of how rural Maya people, living in a context of poverty and discrimination, and in a time with major changes in their social structures, understand and interpret human rights.

During the last 10-15 years some ethnographic studies of local interpretations of human rights have been published, and of special interest to me are three anthropological studies of human rights from Guatemala and Mexico which I will draw on in this study. Rachel Sieder and Jessica Witchell have studied how Maya activists in Guatemala claim that ‘traditional’ law operates at the community level according to a ‘harmonious’ worldview particular to indigenous people. Sieders and Witchell argue that such strategies, which fail to recognise the complexity of social relations while at the same time reinforcing stereotypes of ‘harmonious’ indigenous communities, may lead to further marginalization of indigenous people (Sieder and Witchell 2001).

Jennifer Schirmer has investigated how pressure from human rights organizations led to a seeming victory; the Special Tribunals that existed in Guatemala in 1981-82, where prisoners were convicted and sentenced to death by secret tribunals outside the normal court system, were abolished. In the end, all the prisoners that were transferred from the Special Tribunals to the Supreme Court were killed by the army after they were released from jail. According to Schirmer, human right organizations must learn to contextualize perceptions and practices of rights, and understand that momentary actions may not lead to lasting victories (Schirmer 1997).

Christine Kovic has done research on displaced Maya in Chiapas, Mexico. Thousands of people were expelled from their communities by Maya community leaders due to political and economic rivalry. The expelled have moved into new communities and organized themselves to work for religious rights and political and economic justice based on a broad understanding of human rights (Kovic 2005). Kovic observed the violence of everyday life, the poverty and marginalization of people, and realised that human rights abuses were an integral and ongoing part of everyday life rather than isolated events that can be described and quantified in legal terms (Kovic 2005: 116).

Contextualizing human rights

According to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, article 2, human rights shall protect all human beings in all possible contexts. That is to say, human rights are context-independent. At the same time, human rights are locally interpreted by people living in certain contexts. Marilyn Strathern (1995) points to how everything global is locally manifested; that is, experienced and interpreted in local contexts. I see human rights as a global phenomena, and in this study I want to see how human rights are experienced and interpreted in a local context. What I aim to do is to contextualize the so-called universal and context-independent human rights, and see how they are interpreted in a rural Maya community. For example, I will attempt to find out how the right to education is interpreted and why so few children obtain an education, even though education is often communicated as important for the Maya people as a tool to improve their lives and escape poverty.

In order to understand the conceptualization of education and human rights in general, I will use the Maya 'worldview' as a context in which my informants live. By worldview I mean the way many Maya think about life, work, the relationship between the living and the dead, and the cyclic understanding they have of time. Not all Maya think the same about these matters, but the information I obtained from my informants in addition to various ethnographic literature, seems to indicate that many share a particular Maya worldview. According to Edward F. Fischer (2001), the reciprocal relationship between people and the soil, and people and the ancestors, play a significant role to the Maya. I find that this reciprocal relationship is relevant in order to understand the local conceptualization of rights and obligations.

Schirmer argues that ethnographies of human rights based on actions and intentions of actors within the framework of daily local and institutional life can be of great importance to understand how to make international human rights standards more culturally viable. As she notes: "[...] intervening in the name of universal good without recognising the political and legal realities of local life may not just backfire but may even worsen human rights violations" (Schirmer 1997: 179). In this thesis I use the daily local life as a context in order to understand how people interpret human rights. The right to education will be a main focus but not the only one. Criminality and poverty will also be included as important contexts for my informants. Over the last years the level of crime has escalated in Guatemala, and I observed a strong concern about this. People felt insecure despite the end of the civil war, and feared for their lives and property. The judicial system in Guatemala is highly inefficient and fails to prevent and punish crime. A common perception people had was that while the Government failed to secure peoples' right to life and security, there was an inproportionate

focus on the rights of criminals, and that the vast majority of criminals were not convicted or punished. The conclusion was often a rejection of the concept of human rights, as it was understood to be only rich people and criminals that had such rights. Therefore, criminality and the judiciary system in Guatemala form an important context for the understanding of human rights.

Another issue of great relevance to most people in San Antonio was poverty. In almost every conversation the topic of poverty and the unequal distribution of resources was brought up. While the price of fertilizers had gone up drastically over the last two decades, the price *campesinos* (subsistence farmers) received for their agricultural products was very low. Those who worked as manual workers experienced that their salaries were too low to feed a family, and if someone in the family became ill or suffered an injury, the medical expenses could be a serious blow to the family economy. I will focus on poverty as an important context in which the people in San Antonio Palopó (and most of the people in Guatemala) live. According to both Green (1999) and Kovic (2005), viewing rights from the perspective of the poor necessitates an emphasis on economic and social rights.

Approximately 60 % of Guatemala's total population of about 11 million is indigenous, including 21 different Maya linguistic groups and two small non-Maya groups (Xinca and Garifuna). The rest of the population is Ladino², with an additional small segment of the population originating from other European countries (Sieders and Witchell 2001: 208). The resources in Guatemala are distributed very unequally and this has a marked ethnic

² Because it took a long time before Spanish women came to "the new world", Spanish men took indigenous women as their mistresses and this resulted in a large population of Ladinos.

dimension; the Maya population has since the colonization in the 16th century been exploited economically as well as having suffered from political exclusion and racism (ibid: 208).

According to Sieders and Witchell, these centuries of discrimination have resulted in a culture of resistance which has enabled the Maya to avoid the fate of assimilation, which has met many indigenous peoples in Latin America (Sieders and Witchell 2001: 207-208). As I shall come back to in the historical overview, the Maya population in Guatemala has met a tremendous pressure to become assimilated and integrated into the wider society over the last centuries.

Discrimination and racism are also important contexts in which my informants live and interpret human rights. Officially, the Constitution of 1985 recognized Guatemala as a multi-ethnic state, referring to the specific protection of ethnic groups (Sieders and Witchell 2001: 210). Still, there exists widespread racism and discrimination in all levels of society. All Maya people who I talked to felt that they experienced discrimination, almost on a daily basis, and this was an issue that was constantly brought up in conversations that we had. Discrimination and racism were expressed as shameful and degrading, both personally and to their identity as indigenous people. Since they were both poor and discriminated against socially, people felt that they were of little value, and that they therefore had no rights.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will first discuss methods and the ethical concerns of my study. Then I will describe Guatemala's historical background up to the present time, before moving on to the United Nations (UN) and their work for the development of universal human rights. The UN played a significant role during Guatemala's peace process and I will briefly describe their role in Guatemala. Although the civil war has ended, there exist severe

problems in Guatemala today. The UN and human rights organisations are concerned about the situation, and this will briefly be discussed in the following section. In the end I will describe the Maya movement, which consists of many different and independent organisations all led by Maya activists and intellectuals. As mentioned, although the Maya movement is not a main focus in this thesis, I will use it as a point of reference as it is the Maya activists and intellectuals who are the voice of the Maya people both nationally and internationally. The poor, rural population in Guatemala has very little political influence, and few possibilities to be heard.

Methods

When I prepared for my fieldwork, I planned on doing research regarding different views on human rights in Guatemala, and to interview both Maya activists as well as rural farmers. I wanted to see whether the activists and the majority of the Maya focused on the same issues regarding rights. Did the rural population find language politics important - a major issue for the activists - or did they have other main concerns? I was interested in whether 'human rights' was a topic amongst the people in Guatemala, considering the important role human rights played in the process towards peace. After arriving in Guatemala, I soon realized that the scope was too wide and ambiguous; I had neither the time nor energy to focus on two different groups. Originally I had thought that during the weeks of language studies I could also interview activists and professionals, but it turned out to be both tiring and time consuming learning Spanish and I chose to focus fully on the language studies first, and then focus my time in a rural community later.

As the Maya activists are already voicing their concern about Guatemala's political, economical and cultural situation through academic publications and their contact with national and international organisations, I found it more interesting to focus on a group that is almost voiceless; the rural indigenous population. Guatemala is a country with extreme inequalities in the distribution of land, wealth and political influence. The Maya population has since the Spanish invasion not had any real political power or influence, and they have experienced pronounced racism and discrimination. During the civil war they were further silenced through terror, systems of spying, and the risk of denouncement to the army as subversives. A very low rate of literacy and higher education amongst the Maya further adds to this lack of a voice and influence.

My fieldwork took place from September 2000 to June 2001, and most of the time my husband was with me in the field. I used the first months in language schools in Antigua, San Pedro La Laguna and Panajachel. My teachers were both Maya and Ladino, and I had many interesting conversations with them which were of relevance to my study. When my language skills were sufficient for everyday interaction, we moved to San Antonio Palopó (San Antonio for short), a village situated next to Lake Atitlán in the western highlands of Guatemala.

Since many of the villagers could not communicate in Spanish, and the scepticism towards strangers in general was very strong, there were limits to how much information I could obtain by general interaction and participant observation. Being invited into people's homes did not happen that often, and I was often met with aggressive questions about where I was going when I was walking around in the village. According to Maria Stern, during the civil war

the army relied on a 'climate of fear' to silence dissidence within the population, and it was dangerous for people to converse with others. Anyone could be a spy for the army, even members of one's own family. Silencing the population became a mechanism where control and repression became internalized within individuals, families and communities (Stern 2001: 116). Silence was, and still is, a survival strategy for the Maya in Guatemala, one that can make inquiries and research rather difficult.

The major problem I experienced during this field work was the hostility, not only towards strangers but also within the village. It was difficult to adapt to the fear and hostility that prevailed in the community and was directed towards me as well, in addition to the difficulty of obtaining information when people simply did not want to talk. I was not properly prepared for this, and it made the work very hard and difficult, both in methodological terms and personally. Being rejected on a daily basis is hard, and living in a society with so much hostility and fear can be quite nerve-wracking. Although the civil war was over by the time I conducted the field work, the general fear still seemed to penetrate all levels of community life and social interaction. People had lived with danger and violence for so many years, and had no reason for trusting anyone, not even their neighbours.

After a while I decided that participant observation would not provide me with enough material, and I conducted a survey using a questionnaire and employed an interpreter, Felipe, as I wanted to be able to interview also those who did not speak Spanish. Together with him I tried to gather more information about the understandings of, and opinions on, human rights. To choose the right person as interpreter was very important in order to gain peoples' confidence and reduce the levels of scepticism and fear that were always present. Felipe was

from San Antonio, worked as a teacher at the primary school teaching both the local language Kaqchikel and traditional Maya culture. He had been part of a voluntary project teaching people to read and write when he was young, and had subsequently earned the respect of many of the villagers. People often tried their best to answer our many questions, and at the end of the day Felipe and I would sit down and talk about the day's work and discuss points of interest. As he knew, or recognized, most of the people in the village, he could clarify certain aspects concerning people's life situations and the answers they had given, something that enriched the information a great deal.

Of course there are problems involved with using an interpreter – information might be lost or distorted, and one makes oneself dependent on that one person to obtain information. At the same time Felipe gave me valuable information which I would not otherwise have obtained, and he was very careful to translate as accurately as possible. Using the questionnaire helped me gather much more information from many more people than I could have managed through participant observation in these particular circumstances. Using an interpreter from the same community can influence the answers people give, but it did not seem to have any significant effect. For example, since Felipe was teaching Kaqchikel in school one could expect people to say that the teaching of Kaqchikel was good and important. Some did, but many expressed the opposite; that the teaching of Kaqchikel was unnecessary.

Using a questionnaire with 29 questions (appendix 2) we interviewed 44 people where 24 were women and 20 were men. Of all the respondents, 14 were between 19 and 30 years old, 15 were between 31 and 40 years old, 10 were in their forties while five respondents were

between 50 and 65 years old. The answers did not differ much according to sex or age, but the level of education played a certain role, as I shall come back to later. 17 had never attended school, 16 had attended school for between one and three years but did not learn to read and write properly, 6 respondents had four to six years of school and five respondents had between 7 and 15 years of schooling.

In addition to conducting the survey, I interviewed the leader of the weaving cooperative in San Antonio, the police, health workers, and local politicians. I also spent considerable time at the local school talking to the headmaster and the teachers in addition to sitting in on and observing classes. I also had informal arenas where I could observe and interact in normal village life. We lived with a young family and their two-year old daughter, and they were friendly and including and we spent considerable time with them, their extended families, and also their neighbours who invited me into their homes. I also had other friends who invited me home, and others with whom I chatted whenever I saw them on the street.

Before settling in and conducting the study, I talked to the local *alcalde* (mayor) and he expressed his approval for me to both live in San Antonio and to do my field work there. Still, it was a moral dilemma to stay and work in a village where I felt that I was not a hundred percent welcome. To many I presented a threat, being a stranger, asking questions and walking around - people were uncertain whether I was an informer working for the government or otherwise what my role was. I always tried my best to explain who I was and why I was there, but I think that it was difficult for most people to understand what I was actually doing. At the time of this study it was only 4-5 years since the Peace Accords had been signed, and the situation was still uncertain. There were serious human rights abuses

going on in Guatemala, and many were uncertain whether the peace would last. Although this thesis does not bring forward sensitive information, I have chosen to protect my informants by changing their names.

In order to understand the present situation in Guatemala and how the conditions have been for the Maya since the Spanish invasion, I will now try to outline the more important sides to Guatemala's history from the Classic era of the Maya until the Peace Accords were signed in 1996. Guatemala's history forms an important context in which to understand the local interpretation of human rights.

Historical background

To many, Guatemala is almost synonymous with the 'mysterious' Maya culture and its pyramids. The ancient Maya civilization rose around 1200 BC and had its classic period from 300 – 800 AC. The "Maya world" had its centre in Guatemala and reached into Belize, Honduras, El Salvador and Mexico, and consisted of rivalling city-states with different languages. Typical traits of the culture were stratification between the upper class of priests and nobles and the hardworking underclass of farmers (Laughton 1998). The Maya built impressive pyramids and ceremonial centres, and used a hieroglyphic script. They also developed two different calendars; one sacred almanac of 260 days used for predicting the future, and one solar calendar of 365 days. They had a cyclic understanding of time where it was important to register events so that they could be alert and aware for the future. The Maya further developed a mathematical system based on twenties, and they invented the zero (Laughton 1998). The pyramids were built as monuments over dead kings, and

representations of the kings' alliances and war victories were engraved into large stones standing in front of the pyramids, using the hieroglyphic script (Bendiksby og Ekern 2001: 10).

Around 790 AC several kingdoms collapsed due to intense and long-lasting warfare combined with too intensive agriculture (Bendiksby og Ekern 2001). When the Spanish conquistadores came in 1524, many parts of the Maya world were already deserted. In the western highlands of Guatemala, some Maya kingdoms were still fairly strong and active, and the Kaqchikel and the K'iche' were dominating kingdoms. By 1535 Guatemala was conquered by the Spanish (ibid: 10-11). Handy (1984) refers to both chronicles from the conquistadors and written Maya records from this period, which indicate a population of about one million people before the Conquest. Within the first century of the conquest, the population was reduced by 70 – 90 % due to disease, violence, slaughter and enforced labour.

The Colonial Period

During the colonial period, the society was rigidly stratified with Spanish natives occupying the uppermost levels and the Creoles (people born in the New World of Spanish stock) next in the hierarchy. Below them were the Ladinos and at the bottom were Maya and black people. Only the Spanish had real power (Handy 1984). The colonial economy was based on a system called *repartimientos*: a method where the ruling class had the right to extract labour from the indigenous population who were forced to pay tribute as well as supply a working force (Thomas Cage 1983). In return for the acceptance of Catholicism, forced labour and taxation, the Maya were able to keep some self-governance (Bendiksby og Ekern 2001).

Traditional political organisations melted into the new Catholic institutions, and today one can still see this form of syncretism in the religious brotherhoods known as *cofradías*. The figures and saints celebrated in processions and mass are often both Catholic saints and representations of local deities (ibid: 11). For example, in the village of San Antonio all the figures and saints in both the church and the *cofradías*, including baby Jesus, are dressed in the local, traditional dress (*traje*). In the colonial period the leaders of the *cofradías* were political as well as religious leaders (Bendiksby og Ekern 2001: 11), while today they are playing only a religious role. The *cofradía* system and other Maya traditions will be discussed in chapter two.

From independence to the 20th Century

In 1821 Guatemala gained independence from Spain, and the Constitution of 1825 ended the formal segregation of Creoles, Ladinos and Maya. In reality, the Ladinos became the dominant group with political as well as economical power (Bendiksby og Ekern 2001). The Guatemalan economy was first based on the export of indigo and cochineal dye, and by 1870 coffee replaced dye as Guatemala's single most important export (Fischer 2001). Bananas, sugar, cardamom and cotton have also been important export crops since the late 1800's, and since they all are labour intensive and need large plantations for efficient production, these crops constitute what Fischer calls 'high market-entry barriers' which keep both economic and political capital restricted to a small class of wealthy Ladino landowners (ibid: 71).

In the 1800's, the liberal politicians in power envisioned Guatemala to become a modern, unified state based on the model of European nations, and they wanted to integrate the Maya

into the Western society. An educated and homogenous population was seen as a key to economic growth and political stability (Fischer 2001). The goal was to make the Maya population abandon their traditions and ‘primitive culture’, which was seen as the main barrier to progress. In this process, communal land was privatized and many indigenous social structures that were built up around communal property were abolished. Many Maya families subsequently lost control over land their families had cultivated for centuries (ibid: 69-71). As coffee was introduced as a new cash crop in the late 1800’s, this led to an increased demand for labour, and the solution found was to increase the use of institutionalized forced labour where the Maya were forced to work for the state or for private landowners (Fischer 2001). The government also enforced the policy where they sold and privatized Maya communal land, thus destroying the autonomy of the highland villages and thereby forcing increasing numbers of farmers to labour on the coffee plantations (Handy 1984).

Until 1944 Guatemala was governed by a succession of presidents whom in practice were lifelong dictators (Bendixson og Ekern 2001: 12). From 1944 to 1954 Guatemala experienced a short, democratic period marked by economic modernization and social reforms. Jacobo Árbenz reformed land ownership, and made it possible for individuals and agricultural organisations to claim uncultivated land from the owner (Jonas 2000). These reforms threatened the economic interests of the Ladino elite. This group had for a long time feared a possible Indian uprising, and felt that the Maya population constituted a possible danger to political and economic stability, as well as a threat to the economic development of the country (Stern 2001, Sam Colop 1996).

Towards Civil War

In the first part of the 20th century, the United States of America had extensive economic interests in all of Central America. The United Fruit Company, a USA-based multinational company, held great power and controlled vast areas of land, the railways and distribution nets, and in addition had a marked influence over many Central American governments (Handy 1984). In Guatemala, the United Fruit Company was the biggest land owner, and they also had considerable political influence in the USA. When the new land reforms threatened capitalist interests of the United Fruit Company and the Ladino elite, the CIA supported a military coup in 1954 (ibid). This counterrevolutionary coup must also be seen in the context of the Cold War and anti-communism campaigns of the USA (Fischer 2001: 79-81). The USA played an important role in assisting the different right-wing military leaders that would rule Guatemala for the next thirty years. The population of Guatemala was suppressed by terror and military power, and the USA encouraged social programs that were favourable to the USA and the economic elite in Guatemala (Jonas 2000). In 1963 a revolutionary movement supported by Cuba emerged in the eastern highlands of Guatemala, and the year 1963 is commonly ascribed as the beginning of the civil war (Fischer 2001: 75).

Between 1960 and 1974 Guatemala experienced great economic growth. With the help of the World Bank, USAID and other international donor agencies, the Government managed to increase the export of agricultural products and manufactured goods. But the benefits of this economic growth were mainly restricted to a small Ladino elite who controlled large areas of land (Fischer 1996: 54). At the end of the 1970's there was a worldwide decline in commodity prices, and Guatemala went into a period of economic crisis. This led to an

increase in the number of Marxist insurgents operating in poor, rural Maya communities (now with activities spreading into the western highlands of Guatemala), and in turn to a succession of brutal military rulers who were bent on destroying the insurgent and communist movements and any sympathy they had in the population. The army intensified its anti-guerrilla campaigns and increased its support of secretive death squads throughout the 1970's (Fischer 2001: 76-77).

The indigenous population found themselves caught in the middle, being forced to support one side or the other (Stoll 1993, Stern 2001). If they would not actively join the PACs (*Patrullas de Acción Cívico*, civil self-defence patrols)³ or the army, the army would often accuse them of supporting the guerrilla movement and either kill them or force them to inform on their neighbours and family (Stern 2001). The guerrillas used the same tactics, but to a lesser degree (CEH 1999). Although the majority of the indigenous population was not involved in the guerrilla movement, they were conceived by the army as being inherently subversive (Stern 2001: 98).

In 1982, the guerrilla movements and the communist party united to form the URNG (*Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional de Guatemala*) (Bendiksby og Ekern 2001). The army reacted by intensifying the level of control and violence. This counter-insurgency policy was marked by military action aimed at destroying entire groups and communities in order to fight the guerrilla movement and its support network. In his weekly television sermons,

³ The civil defence patrols were organized by the national police and the army, and were supposedly voluntary but in practice mandatory. Most men in the countryside had to patrol and protect their villages and towns against guerrillas from 8 PM to 8 AM every day, seven days a week. This put a tremendous burden on the Maya population, taking time away from agriculture and other productive work (Fischer 2001). It also led to a frightful regime where all villagers were watching each other, and no one could be trusted.

General Ríos Montt (who came to power in 1982) “...called for the need to surgically excise evil from Guatemala, and dry up the human sea in which the guerrilla fish swim” (Stern 2001: 98). This meant killing the peasantry and destroying their cultural and economic resources (ibid: 98). Families and communities were divided by forced recruitments to the PACs and to the army, and by the instalment of model villages⁴. Those who resisted these measures were conceived as subversives or enemies of the state.

Men returning from the army or those who joined PAC’s would often return as changed men and deny their culture, and “in their uniforms they would represent the Enemy, and, in fact, had become the enemy” (Stern 2001: 105). One method to create fear and distrust was the use of spies, both outsiders and from within the communities. Control and repression became the norm, and bonds holding communities and families together were destroyed. Family members became enemies, fighting and living on opposing sides in the war, and could even kill one another. As it was dangerous to speak and anyone could be a spy, the population was effectively silenced. Silence had become a survival strategy (Stern 2001).

The infamous methods used by the military in order to control the population and install fear included ‘disappearances’; people would simply be taken away by the army, never to be seen again. Their families and loved ones were left in a void, not knowing what had happened and without a grave to go to (Handy 1984). Sometimes all the inhabitants in indigenous communities would be exterminated (IACHR 2001). In the massacre of Dos Erres in Peten, the truth commission CEH (*Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico*) notes that not only

⁴ In 1984 the army began congregating villagers displaced by the violence into model villages (*polos de desarrollo*). It was believed that this could integrate the Maya into the Guatemalan nation and thus eliminate the base of support for the guerrillas (Stern 2001).

were all the inhabitants killed and the houses destroyed – there were also cases of torture, rape, abortions performed on pregnant women, and the beating of defenceless children and elders (CEH 1999).

CEH stated that during the civil war 440 villages were decimated, and that more than 80 % of all the 200.000 killed were Maya. While the guerrillas committed 3 % of the killings, the army committed 93 %. CEH claims that all this qualifies as genocide. The disproportionate response by the army towards the guerrillas is explained by the fact that the counterinsurgency policy was aimed not only at destroying the social base of the guerrillas, but also at destroying the cultural values that fostered cohesion and collective action in the indigenous communities. The result of all this, as mentioned earlier, is that fear and distrust penetrates many, if not all, Maya communities.

While some consider General Ríos Montt the worst dictator of them all, others see him as a strong leader who managed to discipline the army and subdue the guerrillas (Bendixby og Ekern 2001: 13-14). In 1982 he established *Tribunales de Fuero Especial* (special tribunals); secret courts to impose death penalties and rapid justice to “maintain order, peace and public security” (Schirmer 1997: 163). The president would appoint the judges himself, and the armed forces were granted powers of arrest. “The decree-laws of the Special Tribunals served as a reformulation of penal laws: political crimes could also be judged as common crime, and vice versa [...]Disrupting public order, such as robbing a store or stealing a taxi, was equivalent to waging war on the nation” (Schirmer 1997: 165). Through the special tribunals, alleged criminals could effectively be jailed and punished. As Montt said himself: “[...] And we gathered up the assassins and criminals, we judged them and we shot them, but in

accordance with the law” (Schirmer 1997: 165). These tribunals were a personal invention of Montt, and he believed the tribunals “were a chance to restore confidence in the rule of law: If [justice] is not rapid, then it loses its effectiveness, and confidence in law is lost. Normally, the legal process just goes on and on...” (Schirmer 1997: 169).

One year later, these tribunals were disbanded due to massive pressure from human rights organisations. In 1991 Schirmer asked Montt what happened to the prisoners when the special tribunals were dissolved. He answered: “We released 112 from prison. They were later assassinated [by the army] on the street, in their homes, in the countryside, because they were dangerous [and] had done wicked things – PUM! (he mimics shooting a gun against his head) (Schirmer 1997: 161). Although the tribunals were dissolved, the army continued the same tactics but in a different manner. In fact, the army learned to eliminate ‘terrorists’ in secret and often bury their tortured victims in clandestine graves. The number of assassinations by the army remained high, and in 1995 ten bodies arrived weekly at the morgue, most with signs of torture by army intelligence (ibid: 178-182). The abolition of the tribunals did not actually change anything, the only difference being that the killings were now done in secret.

The Process towards Peace

By 1983-84 the influence of the guerrilla movement was greatly reduced, although they did continue the fight. Ríos Montt was succeeded in 1983, and a democratic election took place in 1985. The conflict and human rights abuses continued however. In 1987 the negotiations for peace started, and with the help of the UN and several countries that formed ‘the Group

of Friends'⁵ the final Peace Accords were signed in 1996. The peace agreement consists of 10 parts or agreements which aim at reforms on different levels of society. These agreements encompass 1) improvements of the human rights situation in Guatemala, 2) repatriation of the about one million refugees, 3) initiating the truth commission CEH with its mandate to investigate the human rights abuses during the civil war, 4) the Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 5) social, economic and land reforms, 6) the role of the army in the civil society, 7) cease-fire, 8) constitutional reforms, 9) the legal incorporation of URNG as a political party, 10) a time schedule for the implementation of all the parts of the Peace Agreement (Bendiksby og Ekern 2001: 15).

One big challenge has been to disarm the URNG and reduce the size of the army, and creating a new civil police force. Demilitarization has led to a void of power and a weaker state, which in turn lead to a rise in crime (Salvesen 2001). By 1996, 200.000 members of the PAC had been disarmed and 13.000 arms had been confiscated. But since the original numbers of PAC-members and arms were not registered, it is impossible to know how efficient this process has been. In 2000 MINUGUA reported that many previous members of PAC had reorganized and some of these new structures were in contact with the army or retired members of the army. These groups have been proved to have taken part in lynchings (popular justice) (Salvesen 2001: 52).

The Peace Agreement included the creation of a new civil police force, *Policía Nacional Civil* (PNC), with 20.000 members, but it has been difficult to train such numbers of police.

⁵ This group consisted initially of Colombia, Norway, Mexico, Spain, the U.S. and Venezuela. Denmark and Sweden joined the group at a later stage.

Meanwhile there has been a dramatic increase in crime (kidnappings, car thefts, bank robberies, murders and lynchings), and in 1999 Guatemala City was rated as one of the three most violent cities in Latin America (Caribbean and Central American Report 24.08.99, in Salvesen 2001: 53).

The public pressure to end the wave of crime led to a strategy of recirculation of the members from the old police force and the army into the new civil police force after only three months of training. The old police force had very basic training and had been involved in corruption and human rights abuses, and by using the same people in the new police force there is a high risk that these actions will be repeated (Salvesen 2001: 53). In a report from 2000, MINUGUA states that the civil police force (PNC) was the governmental institution responsible for the majority of human rights abuses, including torture, extrajudicial murders and social cleansing (killing of street children) (UN: A/55/174§102, in Salvesen 2001: 56).

The army has since the Peace Agreement was signed in 1996 been involved in intelligence and operations in the civil society far from its mandate. As Jennifer Schirmer notes, it is a problem when the army operates in fields it is not trained for. Officers in the army are trained for war, not to investigate crime. As one colonel in the army said to her: “The army is trained to kill, not to police. And now by way of these *patrullas conjuntas* and *fuerzas combinadas* (joint patrols and combined forces), we are merely training the police in such methods (Schirmer 1997: 5, in Salvesen 2001: 59).

While the Peace Accords have managed to solve the open armed conflict, the structural changes aimed for have not been implemented. There is a long way to go before all members of the population can freely and fully exercise their fundamental rights and freedom, but the

peace process can be seen as a start. As the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights states: “The accords provide the framework for discussions and work to solve the causes and consequences of that conflict, and to construct a system based on respect for human rights and democratic participation” (IACHR 2001: 1).

In 2003 the UN expressed concern with the insufficient progress made by the Guatemalan Government towards implementation of the Peace Agreements. The lack of results have led to serious problems, such as violence, corruption, impunity and lack of constitutional, fiscal, educational and agrarian reforms. The population is just as poor as before, and the promised land reforms have not been put into action. There is generally a lack of economic, social and cultural rights, particularly with regard to indigenous peoples (UNHCHR 2003).

Guatemala and human rights

The UN played an important role in the peace process, and after the first Accord was signed in 1994, the United Nations General Assembly established MINUGUA (*Misión de Naciones Unidas en Guatemala*), United Nations Mission in Guatemala. MINUGUA has since 1994 been verifying the observance of human rights by both parties (the army and the URNG), and has also played an important role mediating conflicts at the local level and in strengthening government institutions responsible for the protection of human rights. Other important tasks of the Mission have been to reintegrate combatants into civil society, public information regarding the Peace Accords, technical assistance and promotion of human rights (Salvesen 2001). One way of reaching the public has been through radio broadcasts, where MINUGUA has sent programs with information about human rights and the Peace Accords.

The State of Guatemala has committed itself to protect and promote human rights through the provisions of its Constitution, the regional and international obligations it has undertaken, and through the Comprehensive Agreement on Human Rights. In 1998, Guatemala also ratified the ILO⁶ Convention 169 (Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples) (ILO 2003). Since the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996, when the Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples took effect, little has occurred concerning the rights of the Maya. The Office of the Ombudsman for Maya Affairs stated in March 2000 that “The practices of the State [...] continue to favour one small social, economic and ethnic group only. Therefore, widespread and intense discrimination and racism as a state policy continue” (IACHR 2001: 182). There has been no fulfilment by the State regarding commitments to return communal land and compensation to the indigenous communities (ibid: 193).

A serious problem in Guatemala today is impunity and the lack of prosecution of crime and human rights violations. Human rights violations that continue today include serious threats and attacks against victims, witnesses, lawyers and judges in reprisal for their pursuit for justice (IACHR 2001). The impunity for human rights violations “...controverts the obligations of the State under national and international law, subverts the most basic principles underlying the Peace Accords, and undermines the rule of law. The inability of the judiciary to provide protection for basic human rights and the lack of public confidence in the mechanisms of the State exacerbates the potential for social conflict, as manifested in the extreme example of lynchings” (IACHR 2001: 2).

⁶ ILO - International Labour Organization.

In a lynching, mobs of up to hundreds or thousands of local people converge on a suspected delinquent. The victims (usually men but they also include women and children) are beaten, hacked or stoned to death, shot or burned alive (IACHR 2001). Mostly it is alleged criminals that are being lynched, but also judges, mayors, tourists and others have been victims.

Lynching is a violation of the right to justice; those identified as criminals (thieves, rapists or others) do not have the chance to defend themselves. There is no investigation or court case, and the mob acts instead of governmental institutions. During the last years there has been an increase in the frequency of lynching, and my informants explained this as being a reaction to increased criminality and the failure of the authorities to fulfil their role as administrators of justice.

In Guatemala the institutions of justice suffer from structural weaknesses that cause corruption, inefficiency and impunity (IACHR 2001: 59). Delays in processing and deficiencies in the quality of work done by the institutions administering justice are high priority problems. Public confidence in the judicial system is low (ibid: 65), and this is exemplified by people taking justice in their own hands, as is the case with lynchings. Former members of PAC are often involved in these extrajudicial killings, probably because they became accustomed to establishing and applying their own law during the war (IACHR 2001).

The Peace Accords commit the State to take measures to recognize the management of internal matters by indigenous communities according to their traditional norms and international human rights norms. One development is the establishment of 400 courts of peace (*Juzgado de Paz*) throughout the country (as of 2000). This is considered important as

the judicial system is more geographically accessible, and includes staff who speak indigenous languages (IACHR 2001).

During the 1990's, human rights became a highly political issue worldwide. In 1992 the Nobel Peace Prize was given to the Maya activist Rigoberta Menchú Tum, a sign of a stronger focus on indigenous rights. The work for special rights for certain groups (indigenous, women, children) poses a contradiction in some ways to the Universal Declaration's notion of human rights, which are founded on the criteria of equality and non-discrimination. The process of protection of a specific group can, through the articulation of specific rights, serve to codify and shape identities within asymmetrical relations of power (Sieders and Witchell 2001: 204). Focus is being put on cultural differences rather than equality.

For the pan-Maya movement, which emerged towards the end of the armed conflict, it was important to work for special rights for the Maya people, including the right to traditional legal systems and making at least one Maya language co-official (Fischer 2001). I will now turn to the development of the Maya movement and point to the specific rights their leaders are fighting for.

The Maya movement

During the armed conflict in Guatemala and the process towards peace, many political and social indigenous organisations arose. They consisted of Maya academics, widows, lawyers and farmers all fighting for a myriad of different goals, including human rights, indigenous rights, land rights and improved working conditions. As international organisations became

involved in the Peace Process, including the UN, human rights became a central issue in the process and in public discussion. For many of the local organisations and the Maya activists, the focal point changed from class struggle to human rights (Warren 1998, Fischer and Brown 1999, Stern 2001). While one can see the pan-Maya movement as post world-war-II or even post cold-war (Fischer 2001), Maya activists themselves see their struggle as a continuous struggle since the Spanish Conquest (Gálvez and Esquit 1997).

According to Bendiksby and Ekern (2001), the Maya movement consists of a myriad of different groups and organisations that rarely act as a single group or movement. This movement has its roots in the cultural and political changes in the Maya communities in the 1950's and 1960's (ibid: 14-15). In the 1950's, evangelical missionaries expanded their activities throughout Guatemala, and the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) introduced literacy programs and also trained teachers in Maya communities. Their aim was to translate the Bible into Maya languages, incorporate Maya children into the national school system and to erode the strong positions of Maya religion and Catholicism. SIL trained hundreds of Maya linguists and helped foster the growing interest among young Maya for their native languages (Fischer 2001).

Simultaneously, the Catholic Church world wide shifted from a theological to a social focus, and in Guatemala the Catholic Action movement worked for social change through training of native catechists. These catechists would "...bring literacy, political awareness, and God to the backwaters of the Guatemalan countryside" (Fischer 2001: 91). Many of these catechists became community leaders and activists. The Church was involved in different projects such as cooperatives, schools and providing health services. Together with the Rafael Landívar

University, the Church started special educational programs for young Maya, and through 1990 they had educated 20.000 young people. However, when these youth returned to their communities, they were often met with strong racism and were still unable to obtain relevant employment. While some rejected their culture, others became more intent on working for their Maya culture (Esquit and Gálvez 1997).

From the mid-1950's to late 1960's the political climate did not favour Maya activism due to the tension between the government and the guerrilla movement. In the mid-1970's there was a strong growth of popular struggle, and some activists began focusing on linguistic research and training again. The late 1970's and early 1980's were again dangerous years for Maya activists, but from 1985 it was possible to work for cultural rights, such as a unified alphabet for writing Maya languages. Fischer points out how it might seem strange to focus on such an issue in a country with pressing social, economical and political problems, but that this was actually a brilliant move. To begin the movement by addressing an issue like land reforms would have resulted in very little support, as well as the likely assassination of the Maya leaders. Concentrating on linguistic issues was a path of least resistance in the work for institutional reforms (Fischer 2001: 97). Language issues continue to be one of the main concerns of the movement, as native languages are one of the strongest symbols of Maya identity. As the Maya activist Cojtí Cuxil states: "Maya people exist because they have and speak their own languages" (Cuxil 1990: 12).

The Maya movement consists of two main fractions; the cultural movement mainly consisting of an educated elite of Maya academics (often linguists and anthropologists), and a popular/political movement consisting of both Ladinos and Maya political organisations

rooted in the experience of *La Violencia*⁷. The members in the popular wing are farmers, widows, lawyers etc., and they work for human rights, the location of those disappeared, land rights, and against torture (Stern 2001).

It is the contemporary cultural movement that has mainly been the focus of foreign anthropologists (see Warren 1998, Fischer and Brown 1996, Fischer 2001). This part of the movement works both for the conservation of the old Maya culture and for reforms in the Guatemalan state structure and policy (Fischer 2001: 98). Such reforms include political influence, bilingual education for Maya children, making at least one Maya language official, land reforms and economic reforms (Gálvez and Esquit 1997, Cojtí Cuxil 1996). Some Maya leaders, such as Raxche' (1996), stress cultural rights such as recognition of Maya medicine and promotion of Maya worldview and languages. He argues for a pluralistic approach which "[...] protects and values the cultural identity of peoples so that each group may promote the development appropriate to its needs. Thus, the pluralist approach seeks cooperation and unity through diversity (Raxche' 1996: 83).

Others work for extensive changes and rights, such as Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil. He stresses the importance of the right to differences between the different groups in Guatemala, and demands the right to political self-determination and limited self-government (Cuxil 1996: 29). He also calls for the right of the Maya to hold collective ownership to land as it is an important part of their customs and culture, and that they should have regional governments that conform to the Maya ways of administration (ibid: 31-32). While the regional

⁷ *La violencia* (the violence) is an expression often used about the period of civil war in Guatemala, and particularly the violent period of the early 80's.

government should have responsibilities such as law enforcement, education, commerce and agriculture, and social services, the national government should have responsibilities such as diplomatic relations, state defence and macroeconomic policy (Cuxil 1996: 35).

To all Maya activists, language policy seems crucial. Raxche' states: "For all Maya, the recovery and development of our languages is our principal immediate objective" (Raxche' 1996: 76). Maya leaders took part in the peace negotiations, and the Peace Accords actually mandate that Maya languages be made co-official with Spanish along with many other reforms yet to be implemented (Fischer 2001: 100). The work done by the linguists and the revitalization movement during the last decades includes the development of practical tools that facilitate literacy and standardization. The latter is not a simple process, due to the 21 languages and many dialectic variations. Should one choose one existing form of a language and promote it as the standard for the written form, or create an artificial written standard based on combinations of characteristics from different spoken varieties? (Nora England 1996). The debate about how to make the Maya languages official has a similar problem; should one language be chosen to represent a Maya *lingua franca*, and be made co-official, or should regional languages be made official in smaller geographic areas? One suggestion is to make official the Maya language with the greatest number of speakers, while including all the languages at regional levels (Sam Colop and Iximulew 1996, in V. G. Borrell and A.E. Choy 1997).

Maya language policy has been an essential focus point for the cultural movement. The culturalists see the rescue of the ancient Maya culture as essential, and seek authentic linkages between ancient and contemporary Maya culture. Their focus on cultural continuity

is an important tool in their struggle for rights and demands on the Guatemalan state, and the indigenous languages are seen as particularly important (Fischer 2001). By proving a continuity between the ancient Maya civilization and today's Maya, they can justify their claims on indigenous rights.

Edward Fischer finds that the Maya movement takes an essentialist stand in the search for authenticity and essence of the Maya culture, essentializing here being to "...reduce the rich diversity of lived experience to social categories that are manageable both intellectually and politically" and thus "reinforce [...] the delusion of holism" (Fischer 2001: 9). This way, culture is seen as static, in contrast to many foreign anthropologists who have taken an anti-essentialist, constructivist view, focusing on how individuals and groups actively create their own cultural realities. As Fischer notes, this constructivist stand has been used to undermine indigenous claims for authenticity, as the Maya culture then can be seen as 'fabricated' and imagined, as according to Benedict Anderson's theory on "imagined communities" (Fischer 2001: 10).

Anderson sees a nation as an imagined political community, since the members of even the smallest nation will never know or meet most of their fellow members, yet in the minds of each member there exists an image of their communion. He sees nationality and nationalism as cultural artefacts, and all communities larger than small villages as imagined. People imagine a certain relationship between all the members "[...] as indefinitely stretchable nets of kinship and clientship" (Anderson 1983: 16). We also imagine deep, horizontal comradeship despite the inequalities and exploitation that actually exists, and it is this fraternity that makes people willing to die for such imagined linkages (ibid: 16).

Some anthropologists argue that there are no qualities that are inherently Maya and that we are rather witnessing a process in which such qualities are constructed (Sieder and Witchell 2001: 213). Culture can not be viewed as a bounded entity separate from other influences. As Sieder and Witchell phrase it: "...cultural processes are involved in a matrix of dialectical relations and identities reconstructed and maintained through processes of change" (ibid: 213). According to them, indigenous identities are being narrated through dominant legal discourses of international human rights organisations. This has resulted in an essentialized and idealized indigenous identity, and the Maya leaders often see such essentializing as tactically necessary in order to secure collective rights for the Maya people. By 'proving' historical continuity, the Maya claim their collective identity (Sieders and Witchell 2001: 201).

Pan-Maya activism can be seen as inauthentic; that what they promote is not really Maya culture but a politically strategic reconstruction (Fischer 2001: 84-85). Fischer sees the movement as a social construct, using past symbols and structures in order to advance their goals. In their pursuit for authenticity and constructing identity on the base of a continuous history, he sees the Maya movement as quite similar to other ethnic movements that have emerged in the last few decades, for example in the Eastern Europe.

While Maya activists point to the 'authenticity' of cultural elements that existed prior to the Spanish invasion (Fischer 2001), recent research on ethnicity in Guatemala has shifted from a focus on defining boundaries to recording the fluidity of boundaries, and the changing system of meanings assigned to cultural symbols. This approach recognizes the essential continuity

of Maya culture while also seeing that cultural elements can change and take on new forms (Fischer and Brown 1996: 11).

The Maya intellectuals themselves are resentful of the manner in which their culture and history have been viewed by non-Maya academics. They want to “regain at least partial control over representations of the Maya people, and in doing so they tend to make essentialist analyses” (Fischer and Brown 1996: 3). The production and control of history and prehistory are of central importance to the movement, as in early Western scholarship (and still influential in Guatemala) the view was that ‘true’ Maya culture consists only of those features surviving from the pre-colonial period (ibid: 13). As one of my Ladino Spanish teachers claimed; the Maya who had built the pyramids had died out centuries ago, and were not the same indigenous people we could see today.

Kay B. Warren describes how Maya activists use much time and energy in studying old Maya chronicles and legal documents dating from the 16th to 19th centuries. These documents, she claims, are now considered sacred, even biblical (Warren 1996: 90). These documents have been copied and re-copied, lost, destroyed and changed, and Warren wonders why the culturalists devote so much time and effort on these less than authentic scripts. The answer given by the Maya themselves is that these scripts show that the Kaqchikels (in this case) have their own origin and describes when they started to exist as Kaqchikels, and the scripts provide valuable information on the Maya worldview (Warren 1996: 90-92).

While the Maya of Guatemala form one of the largest concentrations of indigenous people in the Americas, they are also one of the most divided due to the many different languages,

rugged terrain and local customs (Fischer 2001). The Maya movement seeks to unite the different Maya groups in Guatemala, but to build a pan-Maya identity is not easy. While the movement's leaders promote associations based on linguistic groups hoping that this can create a pan-Maya identification and trace the foundations of their identity back to pre-Hispanic societies, the vast majority of Maya people root their identity in geographical place and in known genealogical continuities (Fischer 2001: 84). To most Maya, it is their community they build their identity around.

The Maya leaders meet other challenges as well, both nationally and locally. They have to manoeuvre carefully between the danger of being too politically provocative and thus putting themselves in real danger, and they have to work within the cultural norms of rural Maya community life (Fischer 2001). Although they are working for what they perceive as important goals for all the country's Maya population, they are often perceived as aiming more at their own personal careers and material gain (according to information from my informants). While the local leaders often come from humble backgrounds, the state-level activists are often well educated, affluent and urban, and not really representative of the majority of the Maya population (Fischer 2001). Even some of the Maya leaders themselves recognise that they speak for the organized Maya and not necessarily for all Maya (Gálvez and Esquit 1997: 88). They also realise that the organizations not only have weak representations, but also have a hierarchical and often elitist nature. Another weakness is the lack of a single organization that can represent the entire Maya population (ibid: 87).

Summary

In this chapter I have described the historical background of Guatemala and the development of the pan-Maya movement, which through its many different organizations and groups is working to better the conditions of the Maya people. Two main groupings mark the contemporary Maya movement: The popular one, which focus amongst other issues on class struggle, and the cultural one which focus on the specific rights of the Maya people. The history of Guatemala since the Spanish invasion is a history of conquest, violence, discrimination and a succession of dictators. After more than 30 years of civil war people hope for a better situation, but so far the Peace Agreement has resulted in little more than the end of the armed conflict. Poverty prevails, as does discrimination and human rights abuses. Along with the rise in crime, poverty and discrimination are important factors in the daily lives of my informants, and these will be further discussed in later chapters.

In the next chapter I will describe the village where I did my fieldwork, San Antonio, and present my key informants. I will also describe the different institutions in San Antonio such as the school, the police station and legal office, and the *cofradía* (religious brotherhoods). I will further focus on the strong relationship the Maya have to their land and the corn plant. There is a strong emphasis on reciprocity between the living and the dead, people and the soil, and this reciprocity is important as a context for understanding the local interpretation of human rights. Instead of focusing on 'rights', the Maya put stress on obligations, and without fulfilling ones duties and obligations one can not expect 'rights'.

In chapter three, the problematic relationship between anthropology and human rights will be viewed closer. Further, I will explore people's understanding of human rights in the context

of how they live, with poverty, racism and violence being major factors. In chapter four I describe the school system in Guatemala and the schools in San Antonio. I will show how many children who actually go to school, when they drop out and how people explain the low attendance in school. I will look at how education is contextualized and what people see as important to learn in order to become a good person and succeed in life. I will also show how two young people choose different paths and identities as ways of improving their life situations. In chapter five I will summarise the thesis, and try to offer concluding remarks about how the Maya understand rights and why so few children in San Antonio complete primary school.

Chapter 2: San Antonio – the village, the people and their way of life

In this chapter I will describe the village where I did my fieldwork and introduce some of my key informants. I will try to show how they and their families live, and how they struggle with issues like conflict between generations, the right to education and deciding over one's own life. They live in a time marked by major changes in both social and family structures, and changes on community level where the power of the religious brotherhoods and the elders is declining. With weakened family bonds, abuse of alcohol, and domestic violence women often feel vulnerable. I will also describe aspects within the Maya worldview; most Maya are strongly connected to their soil and agricultural work, and together with a special reciprocal relationship towards the ancestors and local deities, their worldview plays an important role in their view on rights and duties.

The pueblo San Antonio

San Antonio is a village in the western highlands of Guatemala, and the population belongs to the Kaqchikel language group. Written sources and archaeological findings indicate that there was a small population in San Antonio before the Spanish invasion, and that the village held a ceremonial centre for the Kaqchikeles. It seems that it was members of the Xahil-clan who

populated San Antonio, one of the most important clans or families in the Kaqchikel *pueblo*⁸ (FUNCEDE 1997).

San Antonio is one of 14 villages and small towns situated on the shore of *Lago de Atitlán* (Lake Atitlán), a lake surrounded by volcanoes and often described as the most beautiful lake in the world. The area attracts lots of tourists, in addition to wealthy Ladinos who drive up from the capital (Guatemala City) during the weekends and holidays to stay in their nearby villa complexes. San Antonio is a beautiful village with an old, white stone church in the centre and small houses scattered around. Mostly onions, but also coffee and beans are grown in small terrace fields, stretching from the shore of the lake up into the hillsides where corn is grown. The view across the lake to the volcanoes and green hillsides on the other side is breathtaking. The climate is between tropical and mesothermal winter-dry, and rains are monsoonal (Carlsen 1997). San Antonio is a *municipio* (township) under the administrative department of Sololá. Sololá is also the name of the capital of the department, which is the administrative and commercial centre with a hospital and institutions for higher education, and it is about an hour drive from San Antonio. While Sololá is situated high up on a hill, another commercial centre closer to San Antonio, Panajachel, is situated on the lake shore. Panajachel became the hippie hangout in Guatemala in the 1960's and 1970's and still is the main tourist centre in the area with language schools and restaurants. Most tourists stay here and make short trips to the smaller villages around the lake with boats.

⁸ *Pueblo* usually refers to a village or township, but is also used on specific groups of indigenous peoples in Guatemala, for instance '*el pueblo Kaqchikel*'.

A road was built from Panajachel to San Antonio around 1980. The whole ride takes about half an hour, and on the way one passes the village of Santa Catarina. Only 5-10 minutes away from San Antonio, they also speak Kaqchikel but with a different dialect, and they have a different facial structure and also a very different *traje* (traditional dress). As the cultural geographer Felix McBryde observed in 1947, the Lake Atitlán basin displays maybe the highest degree of geographic diversity in the world, and "...many of the villages may be separated from their neighbours by two miles or less, and yet being isolated by physical barriers such as precipitous headlands, cliff shores, and a dangerous lake surface, they may have distinct economies, dress, and even vocabularies" (McBryde 1947: 2, quoted in Robert S. Carlsen 1997: 29).

As mentioned, San Antonio is a *municipio*; a township or commune which consists of a *pueblo* (administrative town), and smaller *aldeas* (small villages or clusters of houses) in the hillsides (Carlsen 1997). In 1994 the population of San Antonio was 8460 inhabitants, mostly consisting of peasants growing corn, beans, onions and coffee (FUNCEDE 1997). Those who do not have their own land often work for other farmers or rent land. Some men work as carpenters or unskilled workers, some weave textiles for sale on large foot-looms, others have small shops or other businesses, and a few are fishermen.

Most women in San Antonio stay at home doing housework and weaving *ropa típica* (traditional clothes) for themselves and their family members. A few women weave *ropa típica* for sale. Although almost all the women in San Antonio weave, some women buy their *traje* (traditional dress) from others because they can afford to, and can choose to spend their time doing other things. Weaving is very time consuming, and to make a *traje* takes some

weeks. Some women wash clothes for others or clean onions before they are taken to the market, and all these jobs that are typically performed by the women are poorly paid. A handful of women, including Maria who we stayed with, buy woven textiles from others and sell directly to the tourists in Panajachel, and this is lucrative work which pays well.

San Antonio is a rural village with only a handful of resident Ladinos. The professionals in San Antonio (police, health workers and teachers) are mostly Ladinos from other towns who commute to and from San Antonio. The entire indigenous population speaks Kaqchikel, while only a minority speak Spanish. More men than women speak Spanish due to two factors: They have more education, and they have been forced to learn Spanish as they more often travel to other regions to sell their produce and thus have to relate to the main society. In 1997 the illiteracy rate in San Antonio was estimated to be 64 % (FUNCEDE 1997), with a clear overrepresentation of women. It might even be higher, as 75-80 % of the indigenous population in Guatemala is illiterate, rising to about 90 % of Maya women (Minority Rights Group 1994: 40, in Sieder and Witchell 2001: 208).

The traditional houses are made from bamboo and are very small. During the rainy season the earth floors becomes muddy, the roofs leak and the houses can be very cold. Houses made of *adobe* (soil which is cut into bricks and then sun-dried) are more solid. The floor is still of earthen, and the cooking will take place in a corner over open flames. Due to lack of ventilation these houses are dark and often full of smoke, and children often suffer from infections in the respiratory tract because of this. In 1997, 60 % of the people in San Antonio lived in houses made of mud or bamboo (FUNCEDE 1997), but in 2001 it seemed to me that the percentage had gone down. As people can afford to, they will invest in a small

house built from brick and concrete, with more than one room and with a special outdoor area for cooking.

The difference in wealth is easily seen from the standard and size of the housing, ranging from traditional dwellings to 2-3 story concrete houses with several rooms and a car parked in front. A few families have made money on business (textile and transport) and form a wealthier upper class. The middle class are those who are skilled workers, who have a small business or own a reasonably sized area of land. The unskilled workers and smaller farmers have to struggle to get by, the average wage is 20 Q (about 3 US\$) a day, much less for women. According to the local health post, about 30 % of the school children are undernourished, and the general health situation in the village is not good. Many are suffering from skin and respiratory infections, and pneumonia was the cause of half of all the deaths in 1996. Diarrhoea is another health risk, especially for small children. The death mortality among infants is as high as 24.5 pr. 1000 live births (FUNCEDE 1997).

The meaning of traditional Maya dress

A special feature of San Antonio is the high number of men wearing *ropa típica*. The colourful dress of the Maya is an external cultural sign distinguishing Maya from the rest of the Guatemalan population (Otzoy 1996), and San Antonio with its homogenous Kaqchikel population is marked by its traditional *traje*. When I asked people what they saw as important aspects of Maya culture, many referred to the *traje* as something they were very proud of as something unique for their group and for the village of San Antonio. Their Maya dress continues to play a significant role as a cultural marker.

While most Maya men in Guatemala have adopted western style clothing, the Maya women continue to wear *traje*. Traditionally, *traje* was woven on backstrap looms, but for economic reasons, many Maya now wear *traje* woven on larger foot looms which are larger and more efficient. While the backstrap loom was in use before the Spanish came, and is only used by women, foot looms were introduced by the Spanish and are often used by men.

In the bigger cities many women wear a standardized *traje* consisting of a *corte* (skirt) made on foot looms and a synthetic machine made top called *blousa*. This is mostly due to economic reasons; synthetic thread is cheaper than cotton and wool, and garments made by machines or large foot looms are cheaper than *traje* woven on backstrap looms. When women use these standardized *traje* one can not see which community they come from, but generally *traje* is very specific and particular to each community. In smaller communities like San Antonio, everybody wears the same *traje* typical to that specific community. As Irma Otzoy notes, the relative isolation of Maya communities functioned as a social barrier that aided the survival of Maya culture, and the Maya wear their *traje* as a symbol of their identity and as a tie to their local or linguistic community (Otzoy 1996: 153).

According to Otzoy, *traje* is a cultural element that embodies the process of historical struggle, cultural creativity and political resistance (Otzoy 1996: 141). While some studies suggest that the Spanish imposed regulations and standardizations on the Maya dress, Otzoy focuses on how elements like brocade, embroidery and specific patterns have clearly survived since pre-colonial times. To see Maya textiles as a colonial creation is unfounded and ethnocentric, she argues (Otzoy 1996: 142-143). The fact that elements in the weaving have changed over time, counts for the creativity of the weaver (artist), and Maya weavings are

not static museum artefacts but rather manifestations of continuing experience. Continuity in weaving symbolizes a continuing Maya political resistance, and changes in the designs and motifs express cultural creativity (Otzoy 1996: 151). As mentioned in chapter one, Maya activists see Maya resistance as a continuing struggle since the conquest, and not a recent struggle connected to the civil war. For Otzoy it is also important to link weaving to this struggle, as a subtle form of resistance. By continuity of traditions (weaving) and by transforming real objects of ritual importance into woven motifs, the weavers preserve and reproduce valuable elements of their culture (ibid: 151-154).

Maya dress has often been the object of ridicule by the Ladinos and seen as something backward and primitive. This, together with the general social and cultural pressure from the Ladino society, has led to a reduction in the use of *traje* by Maya men. Men have traditionally been more mobile, travelling to different parts of the country to sell products and work on plantations, and been more involved in economic and administrative matters of the country. Many men changed to western dress to avoid discrimination. Maya women continue to a large degree to wear *traje*, and some see Maya women as more courageous and having a stronger cultural responsibility to transmit their values to future generations because of this (Otzoy 1996: 147). As Otzoy remarks: “In wearing Maya clothing, Maya women demonstrate their identity and impart a lesson of active cultural resistance” (Otzoy 1996: 147). Even when they take higher education in universities and work in offices, women keep using their *traje*, while most of the Maya male activists wear western clothes.

The difference between men’s and women’s use of *traje* can also be seen as a response to fashion and how *traje* is seen according to western standards; Women’s *traje* conforms to

western standards of femininity with a skirt and a blouse/top, while the outfit of Maya men, with its colourful shirts and calf-length pants or kilt-like skirts, does not meet the expectations of formal dress and masculinity (Hendrickson 1996).

In San Antonio all the women wear *traje*, and maybe a third of the men still do. The women wear a dark blue skirt (*corte*), a blouse (*huipil*) woven in a lighter blue and with a range of other colours mixed in, and a woven belt. When working women usually wear an apron as well, and they braid their hair and wrap it around their head with a red band. The male *traje* in San Antonio consists of a woollen brown and white skirt, a shirt in red and white, a textile belt and a hat. The high number of men wearing *traje* is probably due to the relative isolation of the village as it is not connected to any major road, and other Guatemalans rarely have any reason to visit San Antonio. Before the road to Panajachel came in 1980, the village was even more isolated.

In Tracy B. Ehlers (1991) video from San Antonio, filmed in 1991, we can see that the women's *huipil* was the same as the men's shirt; red and white. Ten years later, when I did my study, the women's *huipil* was blue. Only some older women still wore red *huipil*. People explained this as simply being a change in fashion; someone had started wearing blue *huipil* and others followed. Although the Maya keep specific cultural elements such as *traje*, the tradition is not static but continually changing. Another interesting feature in the video is that in 1991, almost all men used *ropa típica*. The transition from *ropa típica* to the use of western dress is thus fairly recent in San Antonio. In the video, the *alcalde* (major) Pantaleon describes how he changed to western dress some years earlier and how uncomfortable he felt in the beginning. After a while he got used to it, and as he says: "[...] now I can travel

everywhere in the world” (Ehlers 1991). By wearing western style clothes, he feels more comfortable when travelling around in Guatemala as he can more easily avoid discrimination. What characterizes an individual as Maya are cultural markers like dress, community allegiance and language. These factors predispose for social racism, as the base of racism is more cultural than biological (Linda Green 1999: 7).

Institutions in San Antonio

I will now describe the official institutions in San Antonio, as they form one context in which people live. San Antonio is what one can call a small town or a village, and there is no market place and only a few small shops. The *municipalidad* (town council) governs the *municipio* San Antonio. There is a legal office in San Antonio, *Juzgado de Paz*, which as mentioned in chapter one is a direct result of the Peace Accords and a reform of the judicial system. Many *municipios* now have their own legal office with a judge who can deal with minor legal problems and staff who speak the local Maya language.

The *Juzgado de Paz* in San Antonio was a rather new institution, less than three years old at the time of my field work in 2001. The office consisted of a judge, two assistants and a secretary. None of them were from San Antonio, but the secretary was from Sololá and spoke Kaqchikel. To use the legal service is free. As most people in San Antonio are very poor, the judge mostly gives warnings instead of punishment. To imprison a man can often mean starvation for his family. According to the judge, about 99 % of the cases he deals with have to do with accusations and personal conflicts, during his three years in San Antonio there had been only 3 murders, he said. Gossip is very common, and often people are being

accused of having sexual relations with someone. Marital conflicts, where the man leaves his family or beats his wife, are also very common. Mostly the wife does not want the man to receive punishment; she just wants him to beat her less, according to the judge. Inheritance and land conflicts, often while the parents are still alive, are other difficult issues that can lead to violence between father and son(s), or at least consultations with the judge in order to get help solving the conflict. According to local custom, a father is supposed to give his sons land when the sons marry, but for different reasons some do not do so. There is also a police station in San Antonio which had been there for only one year.

There is a public elementary school and a secondary school in San Antonio, the latter not public but organized as a co-operative. The education at primary level is divided between a morning session and an afternoon session, as the school building is too small to accommodate all the children at once. There is one headmaster for the morning school, one for the afternoon, and another one for the secondary school. The headmaster of the primary school that has classes in the morning, Vicente, was from San Antonio. His brother Felipe was teaching the Kaqchikel language and Maya culture, and worked together with me as an interpreter. They had both been away from San Antonio for years, but had now returned to work and if possible do something positive for the community. They were both positive to my research, and Vicente gave me permission to sit in on classes to observe, and talk to the teachers.

A co-operative organises the male weavers and sell their textiles mostly for export. Weaving on the large foot looms, men weave larger textiles that will later be cut and used to produce clothing, both for national and international markets. Women weave on the smaller backstrap

looms strapped to their feet, making *ropa típica* and smaller textiles sold to tourists, and are not organized in the co-op.

There is a small health service in San Antonio staffed by two nurses. They examine the sick and dispense medicine if they have it available, in addition to giving general advice. One important job is to vaccinate and give vitamins to children. For serious ailments the villagers have to travel to Panajachel to see a doctor, or to Sololá for more extensive medical treatment in the hospital.

In addition to the Catholic church, there are 5 evangelical chapels scattered around the village. Throughout Guatemala evangelical churches have placed loudspeakers on the outside of the chapels, and in the evenings when mass is conducted and broadcasted over the loudspeakers, the noise level can be almost unbearable. This is also the case in San Antonio. The mass can go on for hours with music, singing and clapping, and the Catholics expressed frustration about this noise. There was a marked division between evangelicals and Catholics in San Antonio, and people from different church societies generally did not talk to each other.

Cofradías

A traditional institution is the religious brotherhood, *cofradía*. The *cofradías* were originally introduced by the Spanish as cults honouring Christian saints, but quickly took on an important role in mobilizing public resources for the clan groups' spiritual and material welfare. Through village common lands they raised crops to finance elaborate religious festivals, and continued to honour Maya obligations and responsibilities between the living and the dead, through ceremonies and rituals that venerated their ancestors, local spirits and

deities (Green 1999). Only 2-3 decades ago the *cofradías* played a significant role in the Maya communities, being an arena for gaining local prestige, taking care of local disputes, teaching the younger ones traditional values, organizing local politics as well as providing an important space for ritual performance (Green 1999, Fischer 2001). Although the Catholic Church did not like the strong focus on the Maya traditions, they more or less accepted it. During the last 2-3 decades there has been a strong evangelical missionary movement in Guatemala, which has resulted in numerous sects of evangelical churches all over the country, which are not equally tolerant. Their pastors often condemn Maya *costumbre* (traditions), which include worship of Maya spirits and the use of alcohol and cigarettes in the ceremonies.

There are still two *cofradías* in San Antonio, but they are having problems recruiting members and exist only in an abbreviated form today. While it was normal to spend at least a year or two in one of the *cofradías* in earlier times, hardly anyone seemed interested in being part of one today. It used to be a group of about 10 people who were members and who shared the *cargos* (duties and obligations members of the *cofradía* had to contribute with) involved in a *cofradía*, in a strict hierarchical system⁹. Each member and his wife had certain duties to fulfil, and with time one would rise in the hierarchical system and thus gain prestige and secret knowledge.

The *cofradía* San Antonio, which honours the patron saint of the town, consists of only one family today, and the leader who has the experience and knowledge is more than 80 years old. One of his sons is now taking over the responsibility of carrying on the duties, and his

father helps him out during the town's fiesta on the 13th of June, when the *cofradía* is visible and active with celebrations. Nobody else helps them with all the work involved in the *cofradía*. The same is the case with *cofradía* San Nicholas; a couple in their thirties are taking care of the saints and San Simon¹⁰ (or Maximon as he is also called), and they are all alone with the responsibilities. They have to provide fresh flowers every three days, burn incense three times a day, and during *fiestas* they have to pay for live marimba music, food and alcohol for the guests. As well as having to cope with the economical burden of it all, they feel hostility and ridicule from the others in the village, especially the evangelicals.

Linda Green finds that the Catholic Action (the catechist movement that was training lay men in the 1950's) undermined the ideological basis of the *cofradía*; the Maya belief in the power of the dead. Many of the young men that were trained as catechists viewed the *cofradía* as a force that contributed to the subordinate plight of Maya through the burdens of *cargos* (Green 1999: 44). Through *cargos* people spent a considerable amount of money, and some view this as one contributing factor for the poverty of the Maya. The cost of the *fiestas* and *cargos* would be taken in turn, and some families would be forced to sell parcels of land in order to pay for their ritual obligations (ibid: 44). Kay B. Warren notes how young catechists used their new position to challenge the authority of the elders. In Maya communities, the patriarchal and hierarchical structure meant that elders held power over the younger members of the community, and men held power over women (Warren 1998). The

⁹ See Fischer 2001: 182-183 for a detailed description of the *cofradía* in Tecpán, another Kaqchikel town.

¹⁰ San Simon is a male figure made of wood, dressed in cowboy style and with a hole for a mouth, where his caretakers insert cigars and pour alcohol. While nobody knows for sure, some see him as a syncretism between a Maya God and Judas. His caretakers said that people come to sacrifice cigars and alcohol to him when they want good luck in business, in love or when they want to cause someone harm. Many believe San Simon has the power to cause illness or even death.

Catechist movement might have altered this structure, and be one reason for the many conflicts between generations today. People might still hold belief in the power of San Simon and the saints of the *cofradía*, but they are not interested in taking on the *cargos* and using time and resources to climb the hierarchies as they did before. My informant Lucas had been a member of the Catechist movement, and was very knowledgeable about the Bible history and concerned about the economic exploitation of the Maya. He explained that the Church and the *cofradía* filled different roles; if one wanted to hear the word of God one would go to the church, and if one wanted good luck one would go to the *cofradía* and make offerings. As the *cofradías* lose influence and relevance, an important arena for learning traditional values and customs is in the process of disappearing (Fischer 2001). Today most people prefer to work and earn money for themselves instead of working for the community. By working for themselves they can invest in a better life instead of sponsoring elaborate festivals. *Cofradías* used to be a conflict-solving institution and through mediating they were used to prevent violence both between community members and in marital relations (Green 1995: 42-43). The diminishment of *cofradías* and other indigenous social structures can be one explanation of the many conflicts in San Antonio and other Maya communities today.

The relationship to the land and the forefathers

To be Maya is to grow corn, I was often told. Their strong relationship with the corn plant is illustrated by the legend of creation; God tried over and over again to create man from different substances like wood and soil, but failed. In the end he tried the corn plant, and succeeded. So the Maya are, according to this legend, made of corn. The staple of their diet is corn, as they eat flat, cooked corn pancakes, *tortillas*, at every meal. The poor people may

eat only *tortillas* with some salt and chilli; otherwise one eats *tortilla* with other dishes. But a meal without *tortilla* is not really considered to be a proper meal; if one has not eaten *tortilla*, one has not eaten food.

To grow corn is what the Maya have always done, and their *milpas* (corn fields) have a very significant importance. One aspect is the productive and the physical aspect – the whole corn plant is used for different purposes. The corn stalks are used as building materials and as a sweetener for foods, the cobs are fed to pigs, cows and chickens, and the husk is used as wrapping for *tamales* (a special dish). The other aspect is how the *milpa* connects you to your forefathers, to the past. The *milpa*, where one's forefathers have grown corn for generations, is a place where the spirits of one's forefathers still reside. To be Maya is to grow corn, to be a farmer, to work the land of one's ancestors (Green 1999).

In cosmologies all through Mesoamerica, food production and consumption is "...closely related to a sacred covenant based on reciprocal relations between humans and cosmic forces that animates the agricultural production and ensures the world's continual regeneration" (Fischer 2001: 142). Thus, agricultural work is of great importance as a continuation of past practice and as a sacred act. The reciprocal relationship between the farmer and the cosmic forces means that the farmer will show respect and perform rituals connected to sowing, and in return he will receive a good harvest. In the Maya worldview, equilibrium and balance between cosmic and earthly forces is of crucial importance, and a good harvest is a sign of such a balance (ibid: 142). Survival is premised on a collective enterprise between the living and the dead. To be able to harvest and thus live, you have to fulfil certain obligations towards the *antepasados* (forefathers); otherwise the spirits can become upset and cause you

harm. Land is conceived as belonging to the ancestors, one lives upon it by their grace (Green 1999). All things in nature - the mountains, rivers, trees - are also believed to have spirits towards which you have to show respect and fulfil your obligations.

Siebers (1999) writes about Tzuultaq'a, a mountain spirit amongst the Q'eqchi Maya group, and describes different rituals when this spirit is addressed. When the corn is to be planted almost every man takes part in the planting rituals, where they amongst other things sacrifice a turkey, burn candles and incense, and address God, the Tzuultaq'a, the sun, the moon, the rain, the wind and the saints. They ask permission to cultivate the land and ask for protection against accidents and misfortune. The relationship between people and the spirits has a reciprocal character – if they comply with their obligations, the Tzuultaq'a will reward them with abundance and protection. If they do not perform the rituals or show respect, the spirits will cause accidents or natural catastrophes to destroy their harvest.

My translator Felipe told me a story that illustrates how important respect and the reciprocal relationship towards the ancestors and nature is: Three men from Patzun, a Kaqchikel town up on the hill behind San Antonio, went out to get some leaves that are used in a special dish. The men left the town early in the morning, before dawn, and after walking for several hours they found the right tree. As they were hungry and tired, they sat down to eat the food they had brought with them before they started picking the leaves. On the way back they got lost, the trail actually disappeared altogether, and they were walking in circles for hours until they were totally exhausted. Suddenly a person or spirit appeared next to a river, fair-skinned and dressed in white clothes. “You have lost your path because you did not ask the tree for permission to pick the leaves”, he said to the three men. “The tree is sad

and disappointed, and hungry. You must remember to share your food with the tree next time, and not eat everything yourself”. Then he disappeared, and the path reappeared for the men, who could walk back to Patzun, happy to have survived. This happened only three years earlier and was a true story, according to Felipe. In this story, the men failed to make an offering to the tree (food) and to ask permission to pick the leaves. That is; they did not show respect and failed to fulfil their obligations in the reciprocal relationship between them and the tree (nature). One can not harvest (leaves in this case) without sacrifice and proper behaviour.

Felipe was very religious (Catholic) and therefore against taking part in the *cofradía* system, but still he had great respect for the ancestors and *costumbre*. One day we talked about the lake and the fishermen (one fisherman had drowned a few days earlier just below the house where I stayed), and Felipe wondered why so many fishermen, although highly capable of swimming, drown. They fish in small dugout canoes, and never go far from shore. Still about 4-5 fishermen die yearly. One reason, he said, might be that they do not ask permission of the guardian spirit before they go out fishing. The lake has its own spirit, as does everything else, and you have to show respect for all things in nature in order to survive.

In San Antonio some still perform rituals before sowing. Several older men expressed worries about the people who do not perform rituals – these days it was difficult to get good harvests and they thought that this was due to lack of respect for the soil, the ancestors and the spirits. But people live with a difficult dilemma since they are religious and are told by priests and pastors that performing *costumbre* is a bad thing. While in the past everybody performed the same rituals and had the same world view, today the village population is

divided into different groups. As mentioned, people from different church societies do not speak to each other. The ones who do practice traditional rituals, often elders, feel that they are being judged as sinful both by the churches (both the Catholic and the evangelical churches) and the rest of the population. At the same time they feel that those who are not showing respect towards the soil, spirits and ancestors ruin everybody's possibility of a good harvest; the community depends on the actions of all its individuals.

To many Maya, continued human existence is dependent on the maintenance of a cosmic balance (Fischer 2001: 147). This reciprocal relationship, where you have obligations towards the spirits, but also can expect protection and food in return, is interesting for understanding the strong emphasis on obligations in other areas of social life as well. One has to fulfil one's duties in order to deserve rights.

Cosmic harmony

To the Maya, cosmic order is one of harmony and balance between natural and metaphysical forces, and it is the duty of man to work for cosmic harmony on earth. During the Classic Maya era, cosmic harmony was maintained through blood sacrifices of humans to the gods (Fischer 2001). Today, rituals are of a more symbolic and peaceful character. Collective harmony is reinforced through rituals, and one's personal balance should be maintained between aspects of the cosmic force acting on oneself (ibid: 149-150).

Maya religion and mathematics are closely related; cosmic harmony is mirrored in the precise balance of mathematical equations (Fischer 2001: 147). Sacred calendars keep track of the passage of time and are used in predictions. The 260-day calendar, *tzolkin*, has 20 named

days complemented by numerical coefficients running from one to thirteen. Cosmic harmony is measured and maintained through counting the *tzolkin* cycles, and the balance of physical and metaphysical forces is mathematically demonstrable in the calendar's cycle ($20 \times 13 = 260$) (Fischer 2001: 148).

The day one is born affects one's fate, linking individuals to the convergence of cosmic forces. Cosmic forces work on individuals in other ways too, through the mind, the liver and the heart (Fischer 2001: 150). The Kaqchikel language has some words and terms that Fischer sees as key words and essential for understanding the logic of the Maya worldview. Many words in Kaqchikel has no adequate translation in Spanish or English, like *k'u'x* which can mean 'heart', 'soul' or 'essence'. All things, including humans, mountains, animals and plants, have *k'u'x*. It can be seen as a stabilizing force, and maintaining a balance of cosmic forces requires that one's *k'u'x* be grounded or centred in those forces. There is a close connection between one's *k'u'x* and one's self, and to have an ugly *k'u'x* is to be a bad person, a potentially dangerous state for both the individual and the collective. To have a big *k'u'x* is to be a good person, trustworthy, honest and reliable. A normal person is described as having a content *k'u'x*, and abnormal behaviour is related to various states of one's *k'u'x* like hot, cold, hard. Such abnormal behaviour can be untrustworthiness, dishonesty, bad temper, or reluctance to participate in communal activities (Fischer 2001: 154-166).

Anima is another such key word, usually translated to 'spirit'. *Anima* can be seen as a vitalistic force unique to humans, what makes us human and gives us the will and power to live. *Anima* and *k'u'x* come together in the phrase "*ruk'u'x ranima*" (the essence of one's being), which reflects expressions of individual identity. Kaqchikeles view the self as

intimately connected to cosmic forces, and the soul links the individual to the cosmic forces that animate the world (Fischer 2001: 151-152). The self is thus connected to both the collective and to the cosmos, and one's actions and behaviour are important to everybody in the collective.

The nature of one's *anima* is laid down at birth based on the cosmic influence associated with the day of birth according to the *tzolkin* calendar. Still, *anima* is susceptible to change throughout one's life, and is especially vulnerable when one is frightened (*susto*). When one experiences strong fright or fear, one's *anima* leaves and therefore also one's desire to live, and this can result in death (Fischer 2001: 152). I was told of people who had experienced traumas, for example traffic accidents, and who were very ill and without life-force until they received help from religious specialists. They would chase and threaten the *anima* back into the person, who would recover. *Anima* is also central to the understanding of child rearing and socializing.

The socialization of children

As mentioned, various states of *k'u'x* can lead to abnormal and unwanted behaviour. The qualities of one's *k'u'x* partly depends on the day of birth, but also on experiences throughout life and from the shaping of one's heart during early childhood. Already during pregnancy the mother can receive treatment conducted by a traditional midwife in order to balance the child's *k'u'x*, including sweat-baths and massage (Fischer 2001: 153).

Mother's milk plays an important role in early childhood socialization; that is, the bonding between mother and child, and between the child and the wider community. Mother's milk is

seen as a primordial source of life, just as corn, and a pure and natural food source which is also linked to metaphysical cyclic forces (Fischer 2001: 143). In contrast to rigid European timetables where mothers often are advised to give milk every three hours or so, so that they can get some rest themselves, Maya babies can have milk at any time they want. When I spent time with mothers with babies, they would offer the baby the breast whenever we could hear a little sound from the bundle on her back. The baby is also kept close to their mother all through the day, being carried on her back in a piece of cloth.

Infants are viewed as physically and metaphysically vulnerable, and have to be kept tightly wrapped and protected from dangerous forces (Fischer 2001: 143). Fischer observes that children form very close ties to their mother through the practices of breastfeeding and swaddling, and that this also ties the child to the larger system of social relations and cosmic forces, including the family and the community (ibid: 145). The relationship between humans and cosmic forces are, as we have seen, based on reciprocity and cyclic reproduction, and so is the relationship between mother and child. The mother gives life and milk to the child, and in return she will expect reciprocation with household labour when the child lives at home and later money and help when the parents are old (Fischer 2001: 144). Children have little time for play and games, and they start helping out in the household at an early age. At first household activities might be acted out as play – the little 2-3 year old girl washing some utensils in a small bucket next to her mother who is washing up. Through such play, Maya children are socialized in the unspoken traditions of their people (Fischer 2001). Maya children receive their education in part through growing, preparing and eating corn; girls when they make *tortillas*, boys in the *milpa* where they learn the prayers to their forefathers and how to grow corn and vegetables (Green 1999). The boys also learn “the fundamentals of

subsistence agricultural production, and about the catastrophes of life, how weather can leave the family with too little food to survive in the coming year” (Green 1999: 12).

At the age of 6-7 the children are busy helping their parents and thus also learning how to survive; the boys working on the land with their father while the girls do household chores with their mother. In addition to cooking and cleaning, it is important for the girls to learn how to weave *traje*. I was told that it was necessary for a girl to know how to weave *traje* in order to get married, and Ehlers (1990) refers to visits to the highlands in the 1930's by Osborne, who observed that a girl could risk being beaten by her husband or in-laws or returned to her parental home if she did not master the skills of weaving (Osborne 1965: 226, in Ehlers 1990: 43). In her own study of San Pedro Sacatepéquez in western Guatemala, Ehler notes that such skills are no longer necessary for young women. As the women in San Pedro have the possibilities to earn money from a different range of crafts and markets, weaving is no longer a preferred occupation (Ehlers 1990: 43).

Everybody I talked to agreed that one remains a child until reaching the age of 18, and as long as you are a child your father decides over you. Maya communities are, as mentioned, patriarchal; the woman is seen as subordinate to her husband and does not have much say in family matters. “My son only went to school for three years. His father decided that he should work instead”, one mother said. “I am the father, I make the decisions”, several men said when I asked who was to decide over education and choices of work regarding their children.

One day I met my friend Petrona and asked her to share a soda with me at the local café. Petrona and her husband Graviel were amongst my key informants, and they had three

children: A boy 10 years old, a girl at 16 and the oldest son who was 22. The usually so smiling and relaxed woman seemed distressed, and she told me that her youngest son had problems in school. Last year he had failed his exams and had to take the same grade once more. This year he was having problems again, and she had just been to the school talking to the teacher who had said that if he did not improve he would fail this year too. Petrona cried and said that Graviel would be so angry when he heard about this. He had already said once that if the boy failed once more, he would have to quit school and work instead. It was a waste of time and money going to school if one was too lazy or did not have a good enough head, he thought. I suggested that maybe the boy could work for one year and maybe he would realize that going to school was better, and then work harder and get better grades. No, she said, Graviel would not give him another chance. If he started working, that was it. No more school.

Petrona did not have much influence regarding her son's education. She wanted him to continue in school, but Graviel, as the husband and father, was the one to make the decisions. And although his highest wish was for his children to get a higher education, his youngest son's failure in school meant that he would not be granted another chance. His son had not fulfilled his duties as a good son; instead of working hard to receive good grades he had been lazy and played with his friends instead, and therefore he did not deserve another chance, according to Graviel. This was not an economic issue, as Graviel could afford for his son to continue in school.

Another of my male informants said: "I want my sons to become engineers, but it has to do with respect. If they respect their parents, everything is easier". He explained that it was not

only up to him whether his sons would get an education; it also depended on the children themselves. If they do not respect their parents, but are impolite and do things that are not approved of they will not deserve the right to an education. In order to deserve this right, they have to prove that they can become what is seen as a good person, and act respectfully towards their parents. They have to fulfil their obligations as good children.

Important elements of upbringing were said to be the teaching of God's word, politeness, respectfulness, discipline and responsibility. To teach the child to be a hard worker is essential. A child is supposed to stay indoors as much as possible, go to church, talk softly and politely, greet others, work hard, and respect other people. These are the general values in the society, and what a child must learn in order to become a good person, I was told. It is the child's obligation, and right, to learn this. The parents have the obligation to teach their children these values, and in return they can expect obedient children who help their parents with work.

Family structure

I will now describe the family structure of my informants, with a special focus on women's role in the family. Extended families have been the basic unity of Maya social life since the Conquest and most likely long before (Green 1999). Social relations were kin-based, and families in-law have been important in helping each other economically and in solving conflicts. They formed horizontal bonds which worked as a form of social insurance (Green 1999: 90). A household can be defined as the group of people who eat their meals together (Eriksen 1993). In Guatemala, households are often seen as the group of people who share a

fireplace (hearth); they eat their meals together and usually operate as an economic unit sharing land, income, labour, food and child care (Sheldon Annis 1987: 18). The household is dynamic and flexible, depending on size, capacity of work, the numbers of women versus men, and economic need.

The survey I performed indicated that the average household in San Antonio consists of 6-7 members, sometimes including grandparents. Most households consist of the nuclear family. Quite a few households have a woman as the family head, as they are either widows or their husbands have left them. Out of the 44 households I interviewed, 7 were led by women.

When a son gets married, his father gives him some land and a house (if he can afford to), and the boy starts a family of his own. If the father cannot afford to do this, the son will stay at home with his parents and his new family until he can afford to build a house. One of the children, often the youngest daughter or son, will care for the parents when they are old. If it is a daughter, she will either stay unmarried, or she will marry and start her own family but live with this new family in her parents' house.

Traditionally people would marry very young, the girls at 13-14, the boys at 15-16. They continue to marry young, but about two years later than before. In some areas of Guatemala the parents choose the spouse for their children, but in San Antonio it is up to the young people themselves to find a partner. Quite a few informants told me that they were pressured by their parents to get married and that this was the main reason for marrying so young.

Lucas was one of my key informants, he was a 46 year old farmer and his wife was of similar age. She had given birth to 11 children of which 10 had survived. The children varied in age

from 4 to 26, but none had married yet. Lucas was concerned about this, and often brought it up in our conversations. He had built a small house of concrete, with two rooms for his two oldest sons and their future spouses to share, but it was empty as his sons refused to marry. “They say that it is too much responsibility to have a family, and that they want to wait”, Lucas told me, unable to understand or accept their view. Lucas had married at 16, partly because his mother needed help in the house. His young wife became a helping hand in the household, which only consisted of men in addition to his mother. As Lucas’ daughters now live in Panajachel, his wife needs help in the house herself but this was not of concern to his sons, Lucas stated.

Although Lucas put pressure on his sons, they refused to marry. Respect for elders, which is a very important part of the Maya culture, was an issue that many people were concerned about. The children and young people are supposed to respect and obey their parents and their elders. This was seen as any child’s duty and obligation toward the parents and family. But now the young people seemed to be more independent, wanting to decide more over their own lives.

Women’s role in the family and in the society

The Latin American household is marked by a patriarchal structure; the woman’s sphere is inside the home, and she must defer to her husband in all public matters (Ehlers1990: 136). A woman is not supposed to say anything when men are talking together, and this was clearly visible under the formal interviews I did. When Felipe and I approached a house, the husband would greet Felipe and sometimes me, and they would start talking. If the wife was home she

would stay in the background, neither greeting us nor saying a word. Felipe told me that if a woman would have come forward to greet us, that would have been very impolite. Only when the wife was home alone would she come out to receive us and talk to us.

This can also be seen as a contrast between the private and the public sphere; while the woman is limited to the household and thus the private sphere, the man can move freely in the public sphere (spend time with friends, in the streets or in a bar). Both men and women subscribe to strict definitions of gender roles, and women are socialized to prefer the safety and protection of the family over the hostile world outside (Ehlers 1990). A woman's reputation is connected to how often she is seen in the streets, and good women are not supposed to show interest in the outside world (ibid: 137). Maria often pointed out to me that she never went out but spent her time in her house. She would often add that little Jessica, who was two years old, was taught to stay home too. Since Maria was selling textiles to tourists, she went out all the time, but that was not what she referred to in this situation. What she meant was that she did not walk around in the streets without any visible purpose.

Men are free to spend their wages as they like, with the expectation that they give a reasonable share to their wives. Many women I talked to resented this fact strongly, but seemed to accept it as their fate. While they saved every penny they received and worked constantly for the benefit of their family, their husbands spent money on cigarettes, liquor, and often on other women as well. According to Ehlers, many men live up to the expectations of the *macho* man; one who is unreliable, philandering, drinking and a wife abuser. She argues that women accept this abuse in order to be able to have children and the

much-desired status of motherhood (Ehlers 1990: 7). Children will secure a woman's need for economic and emotional security (ibid: 135). One of my informants said that her wish for her children was that they would provide her with love, care and protection. She had been left alone by her alcoholic husband and had 6 children to take care of.

Ehlers suggests that male dominance, or *machismo*, can be understood as a response to insecure economic conditions (Ehlers 1990: 156, footnote 1). *Machismo* is commonly found in urban settings or rural areas with a scarcity of resources, and it may be that *machismo* increases when women contribute enough to the family economy to rival the male monopoly on production (ibid: 156). In contrast, Bossen points to the equal gender relations among the rural Maya. The Maya household is based on male-female complementarity and mutual dependence, she argues, and men are therefore less likely to misbehave and leave their families than more urban Ladinos (Bossen 1984, in Ehlers 1990: 157).

Generally, the men and women are mutually dependent in San Antonio. The male brings home food and money, the female perform the roles of cooking, housework and childrearing. Still, the women experienced male dominance and suffered under the *machismo* culture of drinking and abuse. I would argue that Bossen might be romanticizing the relationship between Maya men and women. Linda Green sees this kind of relationship based on mutual respect as something of the past, before cash was necessary in the family sphere (Green 1999).

The duties of women in San Antonio are to cook and do housework, childrearing and weaving *ropa típica*. Most houses do not have potable water, so the women have to fetch water at the nearest tap using large pots that they carry on their heads. Clothes are washed in the lake. It

is also their duty to teach the girls to weave, make *tortillas* and do other household chores.

The workload for women is fairly heavy, but not all men appreciate the work they do. Lucas often talked about how he was working hard while all he expected from his wife was that she should make coffee for him when he returned home in the evenings. He never mentioned how she had given birth to 11 children, raised 10, cooked and cleaned as well as weaving their clothes.

Men cannot do a woman's work due to the strict division of gendered roles, which makes a family vulnerable if the wife gets sick. Petrona told me that she had problems with her eyes and should go to hospital to get an operation. But she was reluctant to go to the hospital, because, as she said: "There will be no one to make *tortillas* or wash clothes! It will be too hard and difficult." Her obligations and duties are to take care of the house and her family, and it requires a good deal to make her neglect these duties.

Maria Stern (2001) interviewed 18 Maya women who were all leaders of different Maya organizations (popular/political organizations). These women were not urban academics which is usually the case with leaders of the cultural wing of the pan-Maya movement, but poor women from rural communities. All of them described their situation as one of triple oppression (Stern 2001: 119). They are discriminated against as Maya and as women, and they are suffering from poverty. They explained how the *machismo* 'system' pervades all aspects of life, from when you are born. Girls are raised to become good wives and to learn to suffer the fate of women and serve men, tolerate beatings and preferably not have opinions of one's own (ibid: 121).

The marriage institution was seen by some of these women as representing servitude, lack of control over their own lives and suffering, and some chose to disobey their parents and refused to marry. One of them had to leave the family and village in order to escape the marriage her parents wanted for her (Stern 2001). I also met some women in San Antonio who had chosen not to marry, because, as they said, marriage only leads to problems. “The men in Guatemala are not nice, they beat their wives” and “If I marry, my husband will make all the decisions”, were typical statements from these informants.

According to the judge at the *Juzgado de Paz*, it is very common that men beat their wives, and the women seem to accept their fate. Some women who I spoke to referred to the radio programs broadcast by MINUGUA, and said that they had learned about human rights through this source. One married couple had heard a program about women’s rights, where it was said that men and women were equal, and therefore the man should not beat or dominate his wife. After this they had made changes in their relationship, the wife told me, and they now had a much better marriage. Another woman had also heard these programs, and as she expressed it: “I have learned that if a man beats his wife, he violates her rights. But we have to see this from both sides - maybe the wife has not fulfilled her obligations, and then she deserves beating.” According to this woman, if a woman does not fulfil her obligations as a wife, she can not expect her husband to treat her well. First one has to act as a good and respectful person, then one deserves rights.

Family conflicts

Two case studies can illustrate how conflicts occur both within and between families, and how the diminishment of traditional structures adds to these conflicts. Especially women and children are vulnerable when family bonds are weakened, and husbands and fathers abuse alcohol and are violent at home. Maria's life story also shows how children often are left alone when parents die or families break up.

Maria's family

While I conducted this study, we lived with Maria, age 20, her husband Thomas, age 22, and their little daughter Jessica who was two years old. Thomas' father worked as a baker and also ran a pick-up transport business. When Thomas and Maria married, Thomas was given a two-storey concrete house with four rooms and a pick-up truck by his father, and he worked every second day as a driver taking passengers to Panajachel.

Maria was a strong and independent woman, and travelled in to Panajachel three days a week to sell textiles to tourists, and sometimes she sold to day-tourists in San Antonio as well. She was very successful in her job and made much more money than Thomas did as a driver. She had employed a 16 year old girl to do the cooking, cleaning and to look after Jessica.

One day I was out walking, and I met a woman who invited me in to look at some woven textiles. She asked whom I lived with and I said the full name of Thomas, but she did not know who he was. Then I described his pick-up and his work, and she responded: "Ah, the man who lives with Maria, my daughter". She did not know the name of her daughter's

husband, but I was even more surprised when I realized she had never seen Jessica. Although they live on each their side of the village, it takes less than 10 minutes to walk from Maria's house to her mother's house.

It turned out that Maria had a complicated family history. Some years ago her father died and her mother was left alone with 7 children. Maria's mother met another man after some time. He left his wife and children, and he and Maria's mother moved together in a separate house. He refused to have anything to do with his new wife's children, who were all left alone in their house.

Jerry Goldstein, an American Peace Corps Volunteer who lived in San Antonio for several years, adopted the oldest child Manuel. When Jerry died a few years ago he left most of his property to Manuel. While Manuel was adopted, the oldest daughter got married, and Maria later married Thomas. The four youngest ones were left alone. Manuel helped them with food, clothes and school. Maria had gone to school for four years, but when she was 10 years old her mother wanted her to quit school and sell textiles woven by the other women in the household to tourists instead. That is how her career started. Her sister Paula, who was 15 and in 6th grade, did not want to continue school, but her younger brothers were all in school. Ricardo was in 4th grade, and Israel and José were in secondary school, and they wanted to continue in order to get a career.

Since their mother left them they have not had any contact with her. Maria's mother actually asked me whether I could bring Jessica along so she could meet her, and I asked Maria why she never visited her mother. "Because she left us and never comes around here. It is she who never visits us!" she responded angrily.

I was told by others that this is quite a common situation – if you get a new partner, he or she will rarely accept your children, and your children will have to be abandoned. If the parents leave their children, or die, who will take care of them? Some said that they would most probably grow up with their grandparents. Others said that neighbours would adopt the children, take them in and give them work. And some are left alone, like Maria and her sisters and brothers. My neighbour Ana moved in with her grandmother when her parents died many years ago. Her older sister took odd jobs like washing clothes and cleaning onions to provide for her two younger sisters and grandmother. Ana is now married with two children and lives with her new family in a small house next door to Maria and Thomas, while her two sisters still live with their grandmother.

Maria's brother Manuel took on the role as the provider for his sisters and brothers, and now that he was married, his wife Rosario gave the younger boys food and took on the role as their mother. Although the boys still slept in their own house, they ate all their meals in Manuel's house and hung around to watch TV and play video games. In return they helped with household chores, ran errands, and helped Manuel in his transport business. As Rosario now had her own baby, and Paula was 16 years old, she felt that Paula was the one who should take care of her brothers by making coffee and cooking for them.

Manuel wanted Paula to get an education, but Paula was not interested and had already dropped out from school. Sometimes she went to Panajachel to sell textiles to tourists, other days she was in Maria's house, chatting to the maid who was doing housework. Paula's family were all upset about the fact that Paula had quit school and had a boyfriend. While they wanted her to get an education, she wanted to do the traditional thing and marry at an

early age. One day Paula and Maria had a big fight about this. It became rather ugly, and physical, as they hit each other, pulled each other's hair, kicked and yelled. Paula wanted to make her own choices and live her own life. This was against the will of all her brothers and sisters. In addition she did not provide for or take care of her younger brothers. Thus she was not fulfilling her obligations towards her family. She was not considered a good woman/sister and upset her family.

In addition to the problems between Paula and her family, the relationship with the in-laws was difficult. Maria and Rosario did not get along, and Maria never went over to Manuel's house. Manuel did not like Thomas, and therefore he never came to Maria's house. Such conflicts within and between families were more the norm than the exception in San Antonio. Green refers to how the bonds between in-laws have been important in Maya communities in the past (Green 1999). As one result of the modernization and structural changes, these and other family bonds are breaking up, leaving especially women and children vulnerable. I will illustrate this with the story of Lucas and his family.

Lucas' family

Lucas also had a family where there were many conflicts. His three oldest children (all sons), who were in their twenties, had left for the capital where they were working. Lucas was living with his wife, their smallest son José (four years old), Juan who was in his last year of secondary school, and Santos who was in his twenties. Santos was working with his father in the field, and Juan was also working when he was not in school or busy with homework.

Lucas had four daughters who were all in primary school, and they were living in a small

house in Panajachel with their older sister Rosa (18) who took care of them. The reason why they lived in Panajachel was partly because Lucas thought that the school there was better (he was very critical to the school in San Antonio), partly to make the girls learn Spanish. He thought that when they were living in Panajachel they would speak Spanish to people around them and in school, and therefore learn Spanish much easier than they would do living in San Antonio, where people communicate in Kaqchikel.

During all the talks I had with Lucas, he emphasised the importance of being a good family father, providing education and a good upbringing for his children. He wanted them to be happy, to have good lives, and it was important for him to talk with them – both to teach them good values but also to hear their opinions.

After some time I went to visit the girls in Panajachel, and for the first time I had the chance to talk with some of Lucas' children without Lucas being present. It turned out that his daughters were not very happy in Panajachel. Rosa was lonely and sad, sitting alone all day waiting for her sisters to come home from school. They lived in a gloomy, dark room and did not have enough money to buy food, so they had to manage on just two meals a day. The schoolgirls were hungry and could not concentrate in school, and missed their family and their village. All of them preferred to live in San Antonio. They had no social network in Panajachel, and only spent time with each other. Without Rosa taking care of them they could not live there, and so she was forced by her father to stay there looking after her younger sisters. Rosa had never attended school, as being the oldest daughter she had to help her mother with housework, and now she had to take care of her younger sisters in

Panajachel. Older siblings often help their younger sisters and brothers to obtain an education (Ehlers 1990).

On another visit Rosa was very upset; she cried and told me, in her halting Spanish, a long and complicated story that conflicted very much with the story previously told by Lucas. Instead of being the responsible man he wanted me to believe he was, it turned out he was drinking a lot, he was regularly beating and kicking his wife, and he had not paid the rent for the room in Panajachel for the last four months. The reason why the oldest children had moved to the capital, I was told, was internal conflicts. They could not accept the quarrelling, the drinking, and the mistreatment of their mother, but there were also conflicts over land and money. His oldest sons had been working on the fields for years, as well as contributing money for investments by their father Lucas. Still they never received any salary, they hardly received money for clothes, and in the end they left in order to find properly paid jobs and freedom. Even worse; the last week he had been drinking heavily, sleeping in the streets and had sold a piece of land for Q8000. This was land his sons regarded as family property, land that they were entitled to, and they became very upset when they got hold of their father and only found Q3000 in his pockets. The rest of the money was gone.

Lucas' son Santos went to *Juzgado de Paz* and told the judge he wanted both his father and the man who had bought the land jailed unless the deal was made invalid. As the land was in Lucas' name, he had the right to do whatever he wanted with the land, and the judge could only talk with Lucas and the buyer to try to find a solution. In the end the buyer accepted to sell the land back to Lucas for Q9000.

The judge at the *Juzgado de Paz* said that wife beating and alcoholism are very common problems in San Antonio. Fights and quarrels over land are also common, and can result in sons physically assaulting their father. This is a new type of conflict, the judge thought, as in the past the sons would have to respect their father's decisions without objection. Also, conflicts would have been sought solved with the help of elders, the family and the *cofradias*. As the elders and the *cofradias* lose their status and role as conflict solving agents, there is no one to help in solving conflicts. That will be the role of the *Juzgado de Paz* in the future.

Changes in social relations

Rosa was concerned about the fact that they did not have contact with any of their relatives, and she felt lonely and vulnerable without a network that could help her and her sisters. They did not have contact with any of their grandparents, aunts or uncles, due to various conflicts that had occurred over the years. As none of the children were married, they did not have any family in-law. As mentioned, extended families have been very important in Maya social life. Social relations have been kin-based, and families in-law have been important in helping each other economically and in solving conflicts. Actually, the Kaqchikel language does not have a word for friend or friendship, and I was told that people in the past only used to relate to their families (and still do, for the most part). As Felipe, my interpreter told me; when he grew up and there was no electricity to provide light at night, they would get up at 4 am and work all day, eat dinner, and go to sleep just after dark, around 7-8 pm. There was very little socializing except for within the immediate family, where an important pastime was storytelling. Life consisted of work, sleep and eating, and there was no time for socializing.

Social relations among the Maya have been reshaped and weakened through different processes, such as privatization of land and through the introduction of Catholic Action. Green argues that as the regional economy had become highly market dependent by the 1950's, and as cash was now essential to subsistence production, a new economic differentiation arose which altered the delicate balance of local power (Green 1999: 94-95). Where *campesinos* before had produced for their own consumption (subsistence production), they now had to produce for the market in order to earn cash (commodity production). The material and symbolic bases for cultural and historical continuity were destroyed, and the power of the elders was undermined. Green describes how the introduction of low-cost chemical fertilizers in the 1960's resulted in altered relationships in rural communities. First the harvests doubled and tripled while fertilizers were cheap to purchase. Some farmers earned a good deal of money and took over traditional Ladino positions as middlemen in their communities. This challenged long-term local economic and political structures that supported Ladino domination in these communities, and this did lead to conflicts and violence (Green 1999: 48).

With the declining importance of subsistence production, the social relations between men and women were also altered, as the value attached to gendered labour changed (ibid: 94-95). The domestic work done by women, such as weaving, has been devalued and marginalized, and women are increasingly dependent on men as wage earners. As cash has taken on an increasingly important role in the domestic economy, this has led to increased social vulnerability for women (ibid: 97). Green also argues that as the mutual dependency between men and women has weakened, the mutual respect and cooperation which used to

characterise Maya marriages has diminished, and men have increasingly exhibited irresponsible behaviour such as drinking and abusive practices (Green 1999: 94-97).

During the armed conflict, local factionalism which had existed in and between communities for centuries, was manipulated and exploited by the army. This contributed to a breakdown of the existing social structure (Green 1999). The demise of local indigenous social structures, such as the *cofradías* and the extended family and kinship networks, created spaces in which internal political violence could operate (Green 1999: 42). The breakdown of structures such as linkages among and between families has resulted in women being more socially and economically vulnerable (ibid: 93). As seen in the example above - when this difficult situation occurred in Lucas' family, there was no one to turn to for help.

Summary

In this chapter I have attempted to show the context in which my informants live. As we have seen, San Antonio is a fairly isolated village where agriculture and the relationship to the soil and the corn plant is still very important. Most men work as *campesinos* or as manual workers, while women generally stay home and take care of their families. Very few women have paid work. Children are socialized into the family life and the community by weaving (girls) and working on the *milpa* (boys). While working alongside their parents they learn both to survive and also about the importance of hard work, respect and reciprocity. By working on the *milpa* one stays connected to the forefathers, and if one shows respect and fulfils one's obligations towards the ancestors and the local deities, one can expect protection and a good harvest in return. In Maya cosmology, respect towards one's parents and

forefathers, and reciprocity between the living, the dead and spirits, are of crucial importance. Together with cosmic balance and equilibrium, these principles are necessary in order for continued survival. Survival is premised on a collective enterprise, and the community is dependent on each individual behaving according to what are conceived as right principles.

An important principle in the Maya worldview is reciprocity; one has to fulfil one's duties and obligations in order to deserve anything. A child has the right to a good upbringing but must in return act as a good daughter or son, and fulfil his or her obligations. Graviel's youngest son is an example of how children can lose their right to an education. He had failed his exams the previous year and would not be granted another chance if he failed again. It seems that it is the fathers that make decisions in their families, also concerning whether their children shall attend school or not. But when the children grow older, they might oppose to their fathers decisions, as in the case of Lucas and his sons. I have tried to show how family bonds are generally weaker than they used to be, and how decline in respect for the elders and changes in traditional structures can lead to open conflicts between family members.

In the next chapter, the relationship between rights and duties will be investigated more closely, as will the relationship between human dignity and poverty. I will attempt to find how the people in San Antonio understand rights in the context in which they live.

Chapter 3: Human rights in a local context

“Human rights are when you have done something wrong, and the judge lets you go. Everybody has rights, even the criminals.” Male, 45 years old, San Antonio.

In this chapter I will look closer at the everyday struggle for people in San Antonio, and their notions of human rights in the context of how they live. As Richard Wilson (1997) points out, the political, economic, and historical contexts in which human rights are violated and defended are essential in understanding local interpretations of rights. The historical context has already been outlined, and in this chapter I will bring focus to the economic and social situation of my informants. First I will briefly describe in which degree my informants had heard about human rights, and how Felipe and I were able to discuss rights with them despite the fact that there does not exist a term for ‘rights’ in Kaqchikel. Then I will outline the anthropological debate on human rights and the cultural relativism/universalism debate, with special focus on the call for contextualizing human rights and studies of local variations in interpretations of these rights.

I will further explore poverty, discrimination and the prevailing fear and uncertainty present in the everyday life of my informants. These are factors that I find necessary to take into account in order to understand the local interpretation of rights. I will also try to see human rights in relation to the Maya worldview and the strong focus on obligations and reciprocity. Within each section I will discuss my informants’ opinions on human rights.

In Guatemala, human rights became a part of public and everyday vocabulary in the 1980’s, with the peace talks and the involvement of the UN, and as the fight for socioeconomic

changes and human rights were important issues for the guerrilla movement. As David Stoll notes:

“When I spent a year in Nebaj in 1988-89, Ixils never used the term human rights in public. Even in private, Ixils usually associated it with la subversion, and several years later some of them still wanted nothing to do with it. “Why? We don’t need it,” a young evangelical told me. “It just means divisions, quarrels, discussions, it’s not good for anything.” Yet, in the meantime, human rights had become part of everyday vocabulary in town, and more often than not the term was being used approvingly” (Stoll 1993: 295).

Still, few of the people who I talked to in San Antonio, and especially women, had heard about human rights at the time of my study. This might be due to the relative isolation of the town, and also because San Antonio was not directly affected by the counterinsurgency.

There is not much information on human rights in the mass media. There are two newspapers that dominate the market; El Diario and Prensa Libre. El Diario is the most popular newspaper amongst rural people with little education, perhaps due to its focus on simple language and graphic photos, sport and sensations. It seldom prints articles on issues relating to the war, the peace process or human rights. The other newspaper, Prensa Libre, prints articles concerning these topics frequently, but this paper is seldom read by the locals in San Antonio. Since a large part of the indigenous population is illiterate they depend on radio and TV for information. Television broadcasting is heavily influenced by the Government and thus provides very little unbiased information and is for the most part dominated by Mexican soap operas. Most radio programs are either religious or focus on playing popular music. MINUGUA broadcasts programs over the radio with information concerning its work and the topic of human rights, and the few women in San Antonio who had heard about human rights had done so from these programs.

Of the people I spoke to, some men had heard about human rights during meetings in various organisations, or in discussions with other men. Since many of my informants had not heard of human rights, and there does not exist a word for ‘right’ in the Maya languages, Felipe used the Spanish word *derecho* when we interviewed people, and explained the questions in more understandable terms in Kaqchikel. So even though the informants had not heard of the concrete terms ‘children’s rights’ or ‘indigenous rights’, we were able to get quite articulated opinions and understandings of such rights.

Human rights debated

According to the UN Declaration on Human Rights, human rights are individual rights, indiscriminate and held equally by all. Underlying this is the basic premise that each human being is a free and autonomous individual, deserving respect and dignity (Espiehl 1998).

Human rights are recognized for all human beings precisely because they are human. Another fundamental principle is the concept of universality, based on what the Declaration on Human Rights defines as ‘the inherent dignity and the equal and unalienable rights of all members of the human family’. It is generally taken to be synonymous to what Locke, in the 17th century, meant by natural rights: rights simply held by virtue of being a person (Donnelly 1982). The Vienna Declaration of 1993 confirmed this presumption of human rights as universal, stressing that ‘the universal nature of these rights and freedom is beyond question’ (Symonides 1998: 567).

Human rights have been criticized for being a western concept, rooted in western ethics, traditions and norms. In this view, the UN Declaration on Human Rights is perceived as an

ethnocentric extension of absolutist western values. The declaration has also been criticized for not being universal, in that all societies and countries do not share the concept of human rights. This debate started already in 1945 when the UN started the work on establishing universal human rights, and is still going on. Dembour, for example, argues that those who are convinced of the righteousness of human rights standards exclude the experience of 'the other', and therefore such an approach is arrogant in her view (Dembour 2001: 58).

According to her, it is highly problematic to assume that there exists a natural law and to rely on an absolute source (God, nature, the universe), which she asserts western philosophers have done, and to post eternally valid principles. In her opinion, it is wrong to assume that everyone will come to the same conclusion as to what natural law is; that "...what appears natural to one person may not appear so natural to another" (Dembour 2001: 57).

Despite this view, Dembour is, according to herself, not in favour of cultural relativism as societies are neither as homogenous nor as static as they are often perceived to be (ibid: 58-59). Cultural relativism emerged as a reaction to cultural evolutionism, and stresses that all cultures have their own inner logic, and that it is not possible to understand a single society without knowing this logic (Eriksen 1993). Relativism, as defined by Herskovits, is "a philosophy which, in recognizing the values set by every society to guide its own life, lays stress on the dignity inherent in every body of custom, and on the need for tolerance of conventions though they may differ from one's own" (Herskovits 1950: 76, quoted in Kovic 2005: 96). Relativists believe that cultural diversity precludes the possible existence of universal moral standards, and can therefore not accept the concept of universal human rights. While universalism makes comparison possible, relativism grants sensitivity to diversity. According to relativists, human rights are seen as socially constructed and political

rather than immanent and universal. There can be no essential characteristics of human rights existing outside discourse, history or agency (Richard Wilson 1997).

Relativism has been widely criticized for being too tolerant, accepting everything in the name of culture. As Richard Wilson points out: “Herskovits was saying that even if the political system is abusive, cultural values [...] could be invoked to restore a balanced social order” (Wilson 1997: 2). Symonides states that: “The acceptance of the right of everyone to have different cultural identities, the recognition of cultural specificities and differences is viewed sometimes as ‘justification’ of cultural relativism. This approach is not only wrong but is also dangerous” (Symonides 1998: 567). And he argues that human rights cannot be seen as a western product any longer, as human rights “were developed by and belong to the whole international community, they are now the common heritage of humankind” (ibid: 556).

Dembour agrees with this, and criticises cultural relativism for “obscuring the fact that the spread of the modern state makes human rights relevant throughout the world” (Dembour 2001: 59). She states that some values must be universal, and argues for a stand somewhere between relativism and universalism; to accept human rights and still call for a concept that allows local circumstances to be taken into account (ibid: 70-73).

Since the first Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the concept of human rights has been developed and extended. They now recognize the need for taking into account national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious heritages. They now encompass rights for particular groups such as women, children and indigenous groups, and specific cultural rights for minorities. In addition to new accords, declarations and covenants which widen the scope of human rights, information technology spreads the knowledge of

human rights to isolated countries and groups (Symonides 1998: 567). As new groups learn about human rights declarations and accords, they also learn to use them in order to gain and promote their own rights. As the anthropologist Christine Kovic points out: “The universal/cultural relativism debate regarding human rights must be reframed, given that contemporary indigenous communities appropriate international human rights language as they struggle to defend their rights” (Kovic 2005: 96). She gives examples of this in how indigenous Hawaiians appeal to the UDHR as well as the U.S. Constitution in their struggle for land, and how indigenous people throughout Latin America have referred to universal human rights accords to gain support for their demands.

Kovic finds that human rights commonly are presented in dichotomies – individual versus community rights, economic versus political, culturally relative versus universal, Western versus non-Western. These dichotomies may obscure more than they illuminate, she argues, because different understandings of rights are not exclusive but interactive. Rather than focusing on the universal/cultural relativism debate, she finds it more fruitful to examine the historical, political and economic context of specific human rights cases, and to map the ways rights are understood and used in specific contexts. Of special importance are economic and social rights, since it is here that many human rights abuses take place (Kovic 2005: 96-97).

Maya identity and the “others”

Before I move on to contextualize poverty and fear, I will try to clarify the terms ‘Maya’ and ‘indigenous identity’. Of the 12 million people in Guatemala, the Maya population consists of 40-60 % of the total population – different sources operating with different

numbers. Most scholars seem to agree that the Maya actually constitute about 60 % of the population, and according to Linda Green as much as 65 % (Green 1999). The Maya population speak one of the 21 different Maya languages, and have since the 1980's been referred to as the Maya both by the leaders of the pan-Maya movement and by foreign scholars, mainly because the term *indio* (Indian) was seen as discriminating (Bendixby 2001: 156). In addition to the Maya, the population consists of three other main groups; Ladino, Garifuna (African and Maya mixture) and Xinca (an Indian group speaking a Mexican language). In addition there are smaller groups of immigrants from Europe and Asia.

The Maya people do not perceive themselves as Maya, and my informants referred to themselves as *indígenas* or as Kaqchikeles, but never as Maya. The Maya see themselves as members of a local community first, and thereafter as members of their language group. They do not actually have a tradition for shared identity as a group (Schackt 2001: 204). For people in San Antonio it is the *pueblo* San Antonio which they feel strongest allegiance to, thereafter the Kaqchikel group, and then there is also a common identity with the entire indigenous population as a whole. But this wider group identity is mainly seen as an opposite to "the others" (Ladino). When talking about how they are being exploited and discriminated against, they would use the terms "us" (*nosotros*) and "them" (*los otros* or *ellos*).

The population in Guatemala is often referred to in terms of two groups only; Maya and Ladino. Ethnicity and identity in Guatemala is a complicated matter, and the Maya/Ladino division is not necessarily based on ethnic criteria. According to Schackt, these two groups are mainly negations of each other and a social classification system rather than ethnic

realities (Schackt 2001: 204). Maya are usually defined by cultural markers like their traditional dress, indigenous language, *costumbre* and community allegiance. While the term Ladino was originally used on offspring between the Maya and Spanish, today the term is used more as a contrast to the Maya; a Ladino is not Maya, he or she speaks Spanish, uses western clothing and generally has a higher living standard and has received a higher level of education. The Maya population is seen as poor, while the Ladinos are conceived as being wealthier. But of course many Ladinos are poor, and some Maya are well educated and/or rich. The Maya/Ladino relation has been unequal and hierarchical since the Spanish Conquest, with different laws for the two groups up until 1944 (Schackt 2001).

Although some see this division of Maya/Ladino as social rather than ethnic, I will argue that for many people in Guatemala (mainly the Maya), it is *experienced* as ethnic. My informants described how they are being discriminated against in almost any interaction with Ladinos simply because they are indigenous. Ethnic classification can have the function of creating order in a society and for such a system to work the participants have to believe in it; they must believe that there are real differences between another group and their own. This depends on the use of stereotypes (Eriksen 1993). I experienced the use of stereotypes by both Maya and Ladinos; for example, while the Maya could see the Ladinos as rich and lazy, the Maya would often be described by Ladinos to be backward, dirty, stupid and dangerous.

Ethnicity can be seen as socially and culturally defined - depending on what is socially relevant, and this can differ with the context. It is not the cultural differences as such that are important, but these differences in contrast to other groups (Eriksen 1993). The Maya have constructed a bounded culture based on moral conventions built through contrasting an

indigenous “us” to a morally inferior “other” (Ekern 2003). Although my informants would emphasise discrimination and poverty, they also focused on the high moral standard the Maya live by, and their worldview was expressed in terms of pride. Felipe and others described the Maya as respectable and having high moral standards, as “good” people, usually in opposition to “the others” who were perceived to be less good and living according to a different set of values and morals.

I also experienced that people expressed pride and dignity regarding their soil and the work on their *milpa*. For Felipe, who is a teacher, the land and manual work was still very significant to his identity. Often he would walk far up into the hills at the end of the day, to work on his father’s *milpa* until dark. “We know how to work the land and we can work all day, the Ladinos can not last more than a few hours”, he said to me. He asserts the dignity of working the land, and his identification of himself as a *campesino* persists and reaffirms the value of his own work. He expressed great pride in the strength of the Maya, how they are able to do hard manual work for hours and hours. The Maya see themselves as strong and hard working, and this is an important part of their identity.

As Barth points out, it is the boundaries between ethnic groups that are essential. Although there might be a flow of people and information across such boundaries, the boundaries can still persist if they have social relevance. Barth sees ethnicity as a social process, dynamic and open for choices (Barth 1969). In Latin America it is for example possible for an indigenous person to mask his indigenous identity and appear as a Ladino (*mestizo* is the equivalent term used in other Latin American countries) if he masters the language and cultural codes of the other group (van den Berghe 1975). As will be described in chapter four,

José from San Antonio could move between different roles. In San Antonio he was a Kaqchikel, although a modern one in western clothes, and in the capital he would pass as a Mexican mestizo. He claimed that he succeeded in making people in the capital believe that he was from Mexico, and the reason was that he had learned the cultural codes of the Ladino and to speak Spanish the way they do in Mexico.

In the 1960's, Lappish people in Norway were stigmatised and experienced discrimination. Harald Eidheim found that they often downplayed their Lappish identity when they were in public arenas. In shops, on public transport and in other public places they spoke Norwegian and acted as Norwegians, while at home they spoke Lappish and played out their Lappish identity (Eidheim 1969). The same is the case in Guatemala, where most Maya men, as noted earlier, have abandoned their *ropa típica* and are now using western clothes instead. When using western clothes, no one can see where they are from, while *ropa típica* is a marker of their Maya identity as well as the exact village they live in. Changing clothes is a survival strategy to escape some of the discrimination the Maya experience.

The dichotomy between Maya and Ladino was brought up in most conversations and interviews I had in San Antonio, especially when the conversation involved poverty, discrimination and (lack of) land. While they described themselves as poor and discriminated against, yet hard working and with high morals, the Ladinos were portrayed as rich, discriminating, cheating and physically and morally weak. When I asked what they saw as Maya culture, some said that they (the Maya) were poor while others were rich. Poverty was a part of their identity. Many emphasized how they saw lack of education as a reason for their poverty; while the Ladino had always seen education as important, the Maya had

ignored education and continued to farm the land. As a result they were still suffering. Others pointed to economic exploitation as the reason for their poverty; Ladinos had stolen their land and continue to exploit the Maya to day through low prices on their vegetable products and low wages.

Discrimination was a major issue in most conversations, both in informal talks and in formal interviews. When asked whether the Maya ought to have special rights (indigenous rights), some pointed out that we are all equal and therefore entitled to the same rights (women, children, indigenous) and therefore there is no need for special rights for any group. Others saw freedom from discrimination and racism as a right particularly important to the Maya.

The few informants with a higher education focused on the right to practice *costumbre*, speak their language and use their traditional dress, as specific rights important to the Maya.

Poverty

Economic exploitation and poverty were also brought up in almost every conversation, and are relevant for how the Maya understand human rights. Economic rights were treated as a central issue in the peace process, and after 1996 there was a general optimism amongst the poor in Guatemala that the living conditions would get better. This has not happened. The general conditions have actually worsened, especially due to the drop in the international prices on coffee and bananas. Many small farmers experienced that what they received for a crop was no more than their fertilizer costs. Several farmers in San Antonio destroyed their coffee plants in order to try a different type of crop for the next year, hoping that would pay off. They are not only dependent on the local or national economy; they are also part of the

wider, global market. Articles concerning corruption frequently appeared in the newspapers, and it was frustrating for many to see how much of the international aid that came with the peace process disappeared into the pockets of politicians, both nationally and locally. 4-5 years after the Peace Accords had been signed, many people in San Antonio could not see any difference in their standard of living. Since the social conditions had not improved, people were becoming disillusioned, and many said that they did not feel that they had any rights. Human rights were only for the rich, for “the others”.

Most people in San Antonio see themselves and each other as poor, but what exactly is poverty? There are different approaches and definitions concerning poverty, ranging from seeing poverty as income related, to more subjective assessments of relative deprivation (Douglas 1982). Relative poverty means being deprived if compared to the rest of the society, so that one does not have the means to fill one’s social role (Townsend 1993: 36). A third approach considers poverty as restriction of choice, and according to Douglas this approach is best suited for anthropological analysis (Douglas 1982: 16).

The conventional measurement of poverty is that of income compared to a poverty line (absolute poverty). The most commonly used poverty line is US\$2 a day, with US\$1 a day considered extreme poverty. Using this definition, 56 % of the population and 76 % of the indigenous population in Guatemala lived in poverty in 2000, and 16 % in extreme poverty (World Bank 2006). The Human Development Index (HDI) is a tool used by the UN to measure a country’s development, using income levels, life expectancy figures and education levels. In the year 2000 survey, Guatemala ranked as number 120 out of a total of 174 countries. Guatemala had the hemisphere’s second lowest HDI, after Haiti (IACHR 2001).

The situation of land ownership can also give an idea of the distribution of wealth and resources: 2 % of the population owns between 65 and 70 % of the arable land (Green 1999).

Unni Wikan sees poverty in more relative terms; it has more to do with how people perceive their own life situation, and how others respond to it, than their actual biological needs.

People can live relatively comfortably, and still perceive themselves, and be perceived by others, as poor. A precondition for poverty is differences in the material standard within the population – to see one's own lack of goods, one has to be able to compare oneself with someone who has a higher material standard of living. Still, one can live a life that others see as poor, while oneself has a different value system and thus finds this lifestyle normal. It is only when richer and poorer agree upon the definition of who is rich and who is poor, and when lack of goods becomes shameful and people feel themselves a social failure, that the actual situation of poverty arises (Wikan 1995).

In San Antonio and the Atitlán lake area in general, economic differences are very visible. This is one of the most popular tourist areas in Guatemala, so western tourists are very much present in everyday life. The *capitalinos* (people from the capital) have built luxury holiday homes all around the lake shore, and often arrive in helicopters during weekends and holidays. During their stays they enjoy themselves in speedboats and do water sports such as water skiing, and there is obviously a pronounced contrast between this lifestyle and how the locals live.

Even within the village there are rather large differences in living standard. Those few who have become wealthy have large 3-storey houses, cars and boats and can send their children to private boarding schools in the city. The majority, though, have just enough to get by, and

every day is a struggle to survive. The average income is about US\$3 a day for manual workers, women earning substantially less. Their diet consists of little more than *tortillas*, eggs, beans and herbs, and their children are visibly undernourished. Most people in San Antonio stated that they were poor. People generally communicated the desperation they felt, and money was a recurring subject in just about any conversation, both formal interviews and informal conversations. Low salaries, the high cost of fertilizers, food and wood were of major concern. Corruption, both nationally and locally, economic exploitation of the poor, and scarcity of land were also central issues.

Poverty as context

"We had only tortilla and chillies to eat. Thank God for those chillies!" Graviel.

I had called in on a social visit to Graviel and his wife Petrona, and while Graviel and I were seated around a table, Petrona was sitting in a corner making *pulseras* (friendship bracelets). We were talking about the past, and he started to tell me about his childhood. They were several children, and while Graviel was very young his father left and his mother had to manage alone. Graviel's older brother started working to make sure they had food to eat, but as the quote above shows – it was a poor diet.

When Graviel was 5-6 years old he started working as a labourer himself, and was treated more or less like a slave by a local Maya landowner. He worked long days, from dawn to dusk, and if his work was not to the land owner's satisfaction, Graviel would be beaten. He never had the chance to go to school, and one of his highest wishes for his three children was for them to obtain an education and a profession. His oldest son Roberto was already an

accountant, and they were hoping that he somehow would be able to go on to university. His daughter Griselda was 16, and after much persuasion from her parents she had started secondary school. At first she did not want to continue studying after primary school, but changed her mind. The youngest son was still in primary school, and as described in chapter two struggled with his exams and would not get another chance to complete primary school.

According to Mary Douglas (1982) there is a taken for granted connection between goods and the protection of dignity. Poverty is a restriction of choice that reinforces itself over time and has lifetime consequences. An example of this is Graviel's situation – he never received an education because of his poor family conditions, and still struggles from the consequences of being illiterate. He feels ashamed and helpless in his role as a politician and as a businessman. He was amongst the poorest in San Antonio when he grew up, but managed to improve his situation over the years, according to himself because of hard work. Today he has a small textile business with 8 persons working for him; they weave materials for him and he sells it to a middleman who takes the textiles to Quetzaltenango (the second largest city in Guatemala). Graviel is also a member of the *municipalidad* (town council), but he admitted that there was not much he could contribute with, as he had hardly seen anything of the country and was unable to read and write. Although he was very grateful to have been elected, he also felt rather helpless and struggled with low self-confidence in this position.

As Douglas points out, the consequences of poverty can be life long (Douglas 1982).

Perhaps the most important consequence of Graviel's poor background is illiteracy – this was a marked handicap both in his business dealings as well as in his position as a member of the *municipalidad*. He would have liked to expand his business, but had problems finding

new markets for his textiles. He felt that it was difficult to travel to other parts of the country, approaching new people and selling his products.

Education is important for people's self confidence, but also in order to secure democracy and political participation (Marit Solstad 2001). An educated person can more easily relate to the wider society outside one's community, stay informed, take part in elections and hold political office. Not only is Graviel illiterate, his Spanish is halting and he is not used to travelling outside his area. When he does, he experiences discrimination and feels subordinate in meetings with Ladinos. He has gone to the capital on several occasions, trying to find information for Roberto about scholarships and the possibility of studying medicine in Cuba, but finds it very hard. To find information is difficult, for one thing, but he also feels rejected on the grounds on being Maya. "They don't want us", he told me, "not in the universities, not anywhere else".

One widow I interviewed was living in a bamboo hut with her 6 children. She was very thin, her *traje* close to being rags, and she looked tired and much older than her age. Talking about lynching and whether that was acceptable or not, she said that it was wrong, but so was stealing, and she could only pray to God that she would not have to steal in the end to be able to feed her children. Being poor can lead to situations where you have to break norms, values and the law in order to survive, thereby making the shame of poverty more pronounced.

Poverty is experienced as dehumanizing, as it disables a person from living what is perceived as a human, worthy life. Some informants commented on themselves living almost like animals - to live without a minimum of economic security, without basic necessities such as

food, medicines and proper housing, is a violation of human dignity. One woman said that the indigenous (*nosotros*) must be of very little value to others, since they are so poor. If they had any value, why would the poverty continue? If they were seen as human, how could “the others” possibly treat them so badly, and the Government neglect to help them?

The need and wish for structural change was central to my informants in San Antonio. When asked about what they thought were their special rights as Maya, they would point to the need for better health care, better housing, work, just salaries, and access to land. A 33 year old illiterate man said:

“The Government should give us better schools, books and equipment. There are resources in Guatemala, but they are badly distributed. The ones who own fincas are very rich, but they never bought the land – they stole it from us! The rich use their wealth and power to repress the poor even more. International help never arrives where it is meant to – it gets lost in the capital and to the alcaldes [...] Our children need clothes, food and education. Children’s rights are important, they will prepare the child for the future.”

This criticism of the rich refers to how the Spanish and the Ladinos had taken private and communal land from the Maya, and can also be seen as criticism of the present unjust politico-economic system, where most Maya live in poverty without any means of improvement. He also refers to the scarcity of land, which has not improved since the signing of the Peace Accords (IACHR 2001). Corruption is another concern, and he also expressed the need for better schools, books etc. in order to give the children a better future. Poverty is experienced as a structural, national problem, where the Government fails to provide proper living conditions for all of the population. Poverty is also experienced as coinciding with ethnic divisions; “us” (Maya) are poor and exploited while “the others” (Ladino) are rich and exploiters. I shall now turn to the economic realities and personal conflicts in San Antonio.

The social meaning of poverty and wealth

One day when I was sitting outside my room, Maria and her neighbour Ana joined me along with their children. We sat around the table having a conversation, when suddenly Maria asked me if I did not find dirty children like Ana's daughter Roberta (4) disgusting. Maria was very concerned about hygiene and put pride in keeping her daughter Jessica clean, often telling me how Jessica would change clothes 2-3 times a day. Because Maria made good money, she could afford to keep a maid who washed clothes and dishes, cooked and took care of Jessica. For a poor woman like Ana, who lived in a little bamboo hut and only had the little money her husband brought home from doing intermittent jobs, even buying soap could be difficult to manage. Also, her hut had no source of potable water and she had to carry heavy jugs on her head from the nearest publicly accessible tap. Keeping her children clean at all times was probably not a prioritized or easy task for her. Maria was very successful in her job selling textiles to tourists, as she has both an outgoing personality and good language skills, and was not afraid of approaching strangers. In Ehlers video from San Antonio (1991), Maria and her family were interviewed, and already then, 10 years old, she appeared as a confident girl neither afraid of the tourists nor the film crew. At the time of my fieldwork, Ana could not work as she had a newborn baby in addition to Roberta. Ana was quite shy as well, and it would be difficult for her to approach tourists. Normally she took odd jobs like washing clothes for other women, which paid very little. But according to Maria, Ana was poor because she did not want to work; she prefers to rest ("*ella solo quiere sentarse*"). Maria described Ana as lazy and unable to take proper care of her children, while Maria viewed herself as hard working and responsible, and that was the reason why her family could live as comfortably as they did.

Just as important as to pinpoint others poverty and the reasons behind it, was to emphasize why oneself has more money; because one works hard. Money should result from hard work and be deserved. On several occasions, people referred to Maria's brother Manuel, who, as mentioned earlier, inherited a house and money from his adoptive American father in the 1990's. Manuel bought a truck, a minibus and a van, and was one of the important actors in the transport business in San Antonio. Manuel grew up poor, he and his sisters and brothers were abandoned by his mother, and he was lucky to be adopted. That he always took care of his family and now works very hard does not make up for the fact that the money came 'easy' to him – the general opinion seemed to be that he did not deserve all this wealth. As several men in San Antonio said, with disdain: "His father was poor like me. And look at him now!" This was the case with the other wealthier people in San Antonio as well; many said that all the people in town with houses consisting of two or more stories, had obtained their wealth through corruption and dishonest methods.

Wealth was often alleged to arise from corruption and dishonesty, and the wealthy did not necessarily earn respect in the community. In Ehler's video from San Antonio (Ehlers 1991), the *alcalde* and Jerry Goldstein (Manuel's adoptive father) said that the different leaders of the cooperative have all been corrupt, and after leaving their positions due to accusations of corruption, these men had built large houses and purchased cars. During my stay, it was often stated and generally accepted that also the *alcalde* was corrupt, and along with the other newly-affluent he was the object of jealousy and gossip.

Many people I spoke to felt that the wealth was no longer distributed in the same way it was some decades previously. As described in chapter two, there existed traditions where

people with the social and economic ability would undertake *cargos* (obligations) and use their resources on public ceremonies and other tasks for the community. I often heard comments about how everyone now was busy working for themselves, instead of working for the community. Gathering of one's wealth for oneself and one's family, without sharing, did not necessarily lead to respect and status. On the other hand, money could now be used to raise one's living standard. Better houses, potable water, toilets and showers, and a better diet was a possibility for at least some. In Kovic's study of displaced Maya in Chiapas, Mexico, who converted from Catholicism and are now members of evangelical churches, Kovic writes that people expressed satisfaction as they were now able use their money to better their lives and buy food instead of sponsoring expensive *fiestas* (Kovic 2002).

As we have seen, wealth does not necessarily lead to respect from the other members of the community, and is often seen as a result of egoism and bad behaviour. To be seen as a good and respectable person, one has to act in accordance with certain moral values important to the Maya, and respect is a key word in this regard.

What is a good person?

When people in San Antonio describe others, they emphasized that desirable qualities include honesty, respect, and whether one is hard working and responsible towards the family. Christian morals are valued highly. If you are poor but live by these standards, you are seen as a good person. On the other hand, if you are rich but there is a question mark as to whether you have earned your money through honest means, or if you have simply been lucky (like Manuel), you are not necessarily perceived as a good or respectable person.

The Kaqchikel word closest to dignity is *'jab`ël'*, which means excellent, good, dignified.

"K`o jun jab`ël q`opoj" means "there is an excellent young girl", which will also imply that she has dignity, and that everything about her is good; there is nothing to criticize about her.

One who is *'jab`ël'* deserves respect. You do not deserve respect just because you are human, or just because you are wealthy. You have to earn it by being a respectable and good person.

Stener Ekern has done fieldwork on local politics and organisational work in Totonicapan in Guatemala, and has observed that an important requirement for acceptance in one's community is to work, and those who 'fail' in the society are those who do not work. The expression was that people without work "show no respect" (Ekern 2003: 279). Ekern finds that the term 'respect' summarizes Maya morals very well; all members of a community must submit to a set of prescriptions for good behaviour defined as 'respect', and when everyone does this, balance is ensured. Respect can only be gained through correct behaviour (ibid: 278).

Universal human rights are inherent rights to every individual, independent of whether they have behaved well or not. This is in opposition to the Maya understanding of rights, which is dependent on good behaviour and fulfilment of one's obligations. Maya communities can not accept that individuals put their own interest first, the interest of the community is always more important (Ekern 2003). To ensure balance, every individual has to behave well. The UN and other human rights organisations put stress on the right to a process of justice for alleged and proven criminals. Many of my informants found this difficult to understand; How can criminals have rights, those who have been stealing and performing other antisocial

acts instead of working? As one of my informants said: “Human rights are when you have done something wrong and the judge lets you go. Even the criminals have rights!”

Ekern observes that there is little compassion for those who do not succeed in accumulating respect, and that there are no inherent rights. If one does not act respectfully, one does not have rights. According to Maya morals, rights and freedoms can not be discussed in isolation from corresponding obligations. Individuals deserve respect when they have acted well and fulfilled their obligations towards their community (Ekern 2003). This is also the case for children, who have to work hard and behave respectfully in order to deserve, for example, an education. All my informants expressed that it was their children’s right to learn to act respectfully and become respectful persons. I shall now go more in depth on how people viewed childrens’ rights.

Children, poverty and rights

Article 24 of the UN convention of the Rights of the Child states: “State Parties recognize the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health”. Article 27 points to the responsibility of the parents: “[...] the parent(s) [...] have the primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child’s development.”

Guatemala signed the Declaration on the Rights of the Child in 1990, and the Declaration on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1995. Technically, treaties and conventions accepted and ratified by Guatemala have precedence over internal law. However, very little has been

done with the severe social differences and problems in Guatemala, and thus also to help reinforce the rights of the child. In 2001, 35 % of all children under 5 years were malnourished (The World Bank 2001). In San Antonio, both the teachers and the nurse pointed to malnutrition as a dominant health problem. At the health post I could see small children who should be able to walk, but who were far too weak to stand on their feet. In school, the children had problems concentrating, and were visibly tired.

To satisfy the children's biological needs was communicated by the parents as being important; to give them proper food, clothes and provide good housing. The problem is that for many people it is difficult to provide these basic necessities due to poverty. When the father earns only Q20 a day, and has an entire family to provide for, proper food and health care can be difficult to provide. A visit to a doctor and a course of antibiotics can easily cost the equivalent of one or two weeks of earnings. The State has the responsibility to ensure medical services, both treatment and prevention. Still there is no doctor in the San Antonio, only a nurse. The State has vaccination programs both for children and pregnant women, but people are reluctant to use public health services. The nurse said that she had been around the *pueblo* informing about vaccinations, nutrition and vitamins, but saw very limited results. People are reluctant to make use of the public health system, and to take medical and nutritious advice. This is partly because they are used to their own traditional healers and midwives, who use different principles in relation to both sickness and treatment/healing. The other reason is stories about how the army and Government used 'medicines' to poison or sterilize the Maya during the civil war.

The school offers free *atol* (a drink made of maize, sugar and water) that has vitamins added, but again people are reluctant to accept it. Only 50 % of the children drink it, according to the headmaster. Usually it is their parents who discourage the children from accepting the *atol*, out of fear that it is poisoned. The same happened when the nurse had received thousands of free vitamin pills to hand out at the health post; very few wanted them. Both experiences from the war period, poverty and a general scepticism towards the modern health system work against better health for the children. Malnutrition is a problem for newborn babies since the mothers are themselves malnourished and their milk does not contain enough nutrients (Ehlers 1990). The custom is to breastfeed babies for the first year without supplementary soft foods and cereals, so babies who are born undernourished continue to be so after birth. The strong notion of corn as the only 'real' food may also encourage a limited diet, and those of my informants with higher education stressed the importance of a varied diet for their children to develop properly and stay healthy.

In the formal interviews I did in San Antonio, one question I asked was what they considered as important rights for children. Almost everyone emphasised that school education was important, and that children should learn to work hard, respect others, stay at home instead of roaming the streets, and respect the word of God. It was pointed out that a child has the *right* to learn to be a good person, and how to survive on their own through hard work and good behaviour. The parents have the *obligation* to give their children the necessary skills needed for survival; being a hard worker and a good person with the right values so that they are able to cooperate and co-exist with the other members of the community. The children need to learn respect for others and particularly towards their parents and the elders, and if they do not show necessary respect they might lose their rights, such as the right to an

education, as exemplified by Graviel's son. While the poor people with no or little education focused on work, respect, education and a good upbringing, the respondents with a higher education mentioned that children should be able to play and watch TV. That is to say, children have the right to leisure, rest and play, which correspond to article 31 of the Convention on the Right of the Child. The wealthier people could afford to let their children use time on playing and also had money to buy toys, games and TV. People with higher education also wanted their children to obtain an university degree, and expressed that education was a way to develop as a person, learn new ideas and maybe use the education to help their community to develop further.

Those with a higher education found physical punishment to be both unnecessary and wrong, and they preferred to talk to their children instead of beating them. Among the respondents with less education, physical punishment was generally seen as a necessary element in the upbringing of children, and only a few said that they preferred to talk to their children and explain why the child's actions were wrong. As mentioned earlier, some women had heard about human rights on radio, and it was interesting to see how people reacted to such information. One woman told me that she used to beat her children when they had done something wrong, but after she heard a radio program about the rights of the child where it was said that it was wrong to punish children physically, she had changed her tactics. Now she preferred to talk to them and explain what they had done wrong. Another woman said the same thing; she had listened to a radio program about children's rights as well as attending a meeting organised by the local health post, where they talked about the same issue. As a result she had stopped using physical punishment on her children.

When I asked my informants about children's rights, they often responded that children come innocently into this world as a result of a union between a man and a woman – a child never asks to be born, and therefore the parents have to take care of them. One woman said that God gives us children, but not in order to make those children suffer, therefore their rights are important. Others said that if they provide well for their children now, the children will help their parents later. As one woman said: "I do not know about children's rights, I have never heard about this. But children serve the adults as well, so their rights must be important." Lucas said more or less the same thing, that parents have the right to harvest the fruits of a tree, meaning that the children should help their parents when they are old enough. This seems to refer to the reciprocal part of any relation in Maya worldview; one can not have rights without obligations. For the parents to be able to expect care and help when they grow old, they will have to take good care of their children when they are small and in need of help. Lucas actually said that although children do have rights, it was important that the children did not know about this. If they did know that they were entitled to rights then they would misbehave and it would result in chaos.

Drunkenness and violence is a problem in San Antonio, also amongst young people, and many parents expressed worries about their children's future in a society where respect and social norms are breaking down. They were wondering why so many children were being rude, not talking to their parents, abusing alcohol or drugs, or stealing. Some seemed uncertain about the right way to raise children; maybe they had failed since the children in San Antonio had so many problems with alcohol and violence. In the past, physical punishment was both normal and accepted, now they learn that physical punishment of children is wrong. One man remarked: "In the past, if children were roaming the streets, we would take them to the

alcalde and he would whip them. Now what can we do?” According to Solstad, education is important in times when traditional structures are breaking down - people need to take part in the knowledge which will form the future. Only by doing so can they see continuity between what has been, what is and what will come. This continuity between the old and the new can give a sense of security (Solstad 2003: 100)

Personal conflicts and fear as context

I will now turn to the description of how violence, conflicts and fear are contexts in which people in San Antonio live. Some of these conflicts can be seen as a consequence of competition over limited resources. Fear and uncertainty also relate to the difficult life situation of so many poor people, such as sickness, starvation and accidents due to poor housing and inclement natural conditions.

“Fear destabilizes social relations by driving a wedge of distrust between family members, neighbours, and friends. Fear divide communities by creating suspicion and apprehension not only of strangers but of each others” (Green 1999: 55). Fear, racism and violence are nothing new in the Guatemalan society – this has been the case especially since the Spanish invasion in the early 16th century. Still, the political violence and repression that took place in highland Guatemala during the counterinsurgency was particularly brutal. According to Green, there is a relationship between the historically-based structural violence of inequality that suffuses Guatemalan society, and the political violence: “The delicate, intricate bonds that held communities together – if only tenuously during this century – have been severed by the microeffects of both structural violence and the militarization of daily life, which

continues even though the local military commissioners and civil militias have been demobilized” (Green 1999: 10). By structural violence Green refers to poverty and unjust distribution of resources. She continues to argue that the violence seen in highland communities cannot be understood without considering the “utter devastation of families and communities in a world where community members denounced their neighbours as subversives to the army (or less often, as spies to the guerrillas) because of interfamilial feuding and where widows saw their husbands killed or disappeared by an army in which their own sons served as soldiers” (ibid: 10).

Felipe, my interpreter, told me about a horrifying experience that he had in 1981: “I was travelling in a bus when suddenly the army blocked the road and forced us all out. This was in Los Enquentros, a busy cross section on the Pan American Highway. They stopped all the traffic, forced everyone out of the vehicles and gathered us together in a big group. We were told the importance of not supporting the guerrillas; if we did, the same would happen to us as to this man that they held captured. Then one soldier cut the man in two with a machete, from the head down”.

For me, the strongest experience of my fieldwork was to witness and experience the level of fear that pervades the society, even five years after the so-called peace. Although there was no real violence (related to the insurgency) in San Antonio during the war, due to the town being classified as something like a neutral zone for both the guerrilla movement and the army, the people are still marked by what they have seen and heard. Very few women travel outside the lake area, but many of the men have traded onions and other products like straw mats, going to the capital or market towns around the highlands selling their produce. On

these travels they must have had many fearful experiences similar to the one Felipe had, as well as frequent routine checks by the army where the Maya would stand out as suspects.

In some towns and villages around the lake, killings and disappearances occurred almost every night during this period, and to hear gunshots from the hillsides were perfectly normal.

The hills and villages above San Antonio were guerrilla territory, and a dangerous area to move around in. Some of my respondents referred to how violence and problems occurred about 15 years earlier, when some men came back from the army. They had weapons and organised small groups which were violent and carried out criminal actions such as theft.

Young men from the town became soldiers in the army, others in the guerrilla movement, leading to tension within the village and between families. As described in chapter one, civilian men had to patrol their communities and basically spy on their friends, family and neighbours and report to the army if they saw or heard anything suspicious. Being a military commander or in the Civil Patrol could also be a way to gain power, and there are several anthropological reports of how the violence was manifested locally.

Paul and Demarest (1988) did a fieldwork in San Pedro, a Tzutuhil village across the lake, where local military commanders and secret agents were responsible for the death of 23 Pedranos (people from San Pedro) in the early 1980's. The killings were rooted in greed, personal disagreements, conflicts and the fight for power. Still today many Pedranos have to live nearby the ones responsible for the deaths of their fathers, husbands and sons – they meet them in the church, in the local shop on the corner or in the market (personal information from a Pedrano). To understand these dynamics, and the fact that people from one village were guilty in having their neighbours killed, one has to see this in a historic

perspective. “Religious competition and vigorous political infighting were features of San Pedro life for decades before 1980 without producing violence. They arose in the past and were settled by means short of murder. What disrupted peace in San Pedro was not the presence of different divisions but the army’s recruitment of agents and spies that had the effect of exploring these cleavages” (Paul and Demarest 1988: 154).

The result of all that happened in this period is a general atmosphere of distrust and fear. Although I had heard stories of how it was for outsiders to come to San Antonio 7-8 years earlier (when teachers had errands around the village, people ran inside their houses, and refused to open their doors), I hardly understood this in the beginning. I did have problems coming into contact with people, and I certainly detected scepticism when I was walking around in the village. Still I didn’t understand this fully before I hired Felipe to be my interpreter, to walk around with me interviewing people throughout the village. First of all it surprised me how nervous Felipe was; after all this was the village he had grown up in, and he knew or recognised almost everyone. After doing 2-3 interviews he was totally exhausted and we had to call it a day, and this continued for several days. Then he told me that this was the most difficult job he had ever done, as he was really nervous and worried about how the people would receive us, if they would become angry thinking we were spies for the Government. Felipe was actually afraid that people in San Antonio would react to our inquiries with violence and lynch us.

Often Felipe had never been on the little trails we were walking, as you are not supposed to walk around unless you have a reason for it. That explained why I had been frequently asked, in a rather unfriendly tone, what I was looking for, while walking around in the town on my

numerous walks. Often we were received well, however, although some men were a bit unfriendly and did not want to be interviewed. Very few invited us in. Mostly we stood outside the house, or even outside the fence, while the other person was inside the fence and we could hardly see one another.

In Ehlers video from San Antonio we can see how difficult it was for the crew to make a film about everyday life. People turned their faces away, left, and even threw rocks at the film crew. In the end the crew gave up, and interviewed a few people instead of filming in the village. One of the men they interviewed described how afraid some of the people were when the road was finished and a bus service began. Every day when the bus arrived in San Antonio people would hurry home as they were afraid that strangers would enter the village and rob them. The *alcalde* took the film crew to visit a family who lived isolated up in the hillside, and they were friendly and welcoming. Ehlers made a comment of how tempting it was to romanticize and wonder whether this was how all Maya were prior to the Conquest (Ehlers 1991).

It seems that fear has penetrated the social memory of the Maya in Guatemala. Connerton (1989) has defined social memory as images of the past that commonly legitimate a present social order, created out of social activity of commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices. The Maya population has experienced violence, discrimination and poverty for many centuries, and it can seem like these structures have become internalized not only in individuals but in the whole group. To keep distance and remain silent can be seen as a survival technique that is passed on from one generation to the next as part of a common memory of past suffering.

Green (1999) describes how terror and fear had become embodied in a group of widows in a Guatemalan village, who were all the victims of the terror. Some watched as their husbands were killed, others lived in a state of not really knowing what happened to their loved ones, who disappeared years ago. People knew that underneath the basketball-field in their community, there was a mass grave. For these widows the terror and fear had become embodied, surfacing in the form of insomnia, nightmares, chronic headaches and ulcers.

In San Antonio fear and conflict is very much present in everyday life and penetrates all levels of normal existence. Jealousy pervades the society, and competition over limited resources can result in fairly aggressive behaviour. Maria was once beaten and scratched by another saleswoman, and I soon came to realize that the women had each their areas where they could sell their products to tourists. A group of 6 sisters had a monopoly on the area around the church, where they sold very well. Still they were often complaining to me about the fact that they were not allowed by other women to sell down by the football-field where the tourists came off the boats. And as they had enemies everywhere in the village, they were afraid of leaving their area.

In fact they, and many others, had invisible barriers that they would not cross, for fear of reactions from other people. On my very first day in the town I met one of these sisters outside her house and talked to her for a while. After a while I wanted to continue my walk through the village, but she stopped me and said that I could not walk further down that road. I asked why, and she responded that that was another part of town. I did not understand what she meant and said that I could not see any reason why I could not go there, and she said that maybe I could go there, but she certainly could not. Later this happened to

me on other occasions as well; if I was out walking with someone we would suddenly have to choose an alternative route because they could not walk this or that road, as they had enemies there. It seemed that there were invisible boundaries in the landscape that dictated navigation and movements around the village. In their geographical movements people were limited by where their personal enemies were, by where they could fetch water, wash clothes and buy groceries. To move outside ones 'territory' could be perceived by others as spying.

One afternoon we were on our way home from Panajachel. As we were to leave Panajachel, the driver of the pick-up we were in had an argument with the driver of another pick-up. They were discussing who's right it was to go. Normally they had strict schedules and had to wait in line to pick up passengers, but this day something was not quite correct. Probably the other pick-up driver took passengers although it was not his turn. Anyway, on the way to San Antonio the other pick-up suddenly came up next to the car we were in, and tried to push us off the road. While our driver, who was only 20 years old, had tears running down his face the rest of the trip, the other passengers said nothing about the 'accident'. As we drove in to the village we passed the other pick-up, whose owner also lived in San Antonio. Some of the passengers on 'our' pick-up greeted and smiled to the other driver, although he almost had us all killed a few minutes earlier.

It was later explained to me that such conflicts between the pick-up drivers were quite normal, just as there are conflicts between the women who sell textiles to tourists. The reason why the passengers did not show any reaction to the incident was probably because they did not want to get involved in these conflicts or that they had personal relations to that particular driver.

My fieldwork took place just after a devastating earthquake in the neighbouring country El Salvador had killed thousands of people, and so the small earthquakes you get all the time in this region took on another dimension. One day I was sitting on the stairs of the old stone church dating back to the 16th century, talking to some children and women. As we sat there, a boatload of American tourists came in, and they soon came up to the beautiful church where we sat. An earthquake suddenly shook the church and the locals and I rushed out while the Americans stayed on inside, clearly amused by the novelty of it all. But to the villagers this was just another aspect of their everyday life that was filled with fear, worries and uncertainty. San Antonio is situated on a steep slope. About two weeks earlier, after a couple of weeks of continuous rain, an avalanche levelled several houses and killed four people as well as resulting in serious injury for a number of others. During the same period a number of rockslides containing enormous boulders blocked the road to Panajachel, and all were nervous about the pick-ups on the road, whether they managed to get past or were hit by these rockslides. For the next few days the rain continued, and for those who had to go in to Panajachel for various reasons, these were not relaxing journeys.

People live in an almost permanent state of uncertainty. Drought, avalanches, sickness, death, whether you have money for food and medicines or not – everyday is a struggle to survive, and the future is very uncertain. Many find it difficult to trust anyone; people would frequently tell me that you cannot trust the Government, the army or the police, and that even the local *alcalde* and members of the *municipalidad* are corrupt. The poverty and structural violence are important factors in understanding the conflicts that exist in so many communities in Guatemala. In addition, the decline in traditional structures like the *cofradía* can have produced important social changes and undermined the hegemony of elders and

weakened the ways in which community life was reproduced. The traditional system of authority produced social stability, and the breakdown of community institutions along with the loss of ancestral land “must have produced widespread suffering among the Maya, as the material and symbolic bases by which for centuries they had conveyed their past through their present to their future was effectively destroyed” (Green 1999: 13). One effect is, as noted earlier in this chapter, that individual opportunism might win out over community cooperation, leading to envy and internal violence. Also, the *cofradías* prevented violence and provided mediation in conflicts that arose both between community members and within families. Today such conflicts can lead to violence and murder, as seen in the high number of lynchings the last few years.

Lynching and crime

In the recent years, one of the most serious situations in Guatemala affecting the right to life, is that of lynchings. In a lynching, mobs of up to hundreds or thousands of local people converge on a suspected delinquent. From 1996, when this practice became pronounced, to mid-2000, MINUGUA registered 310 lynchings or attempted lynchings (IACHR 2001).

Lynchings can be seen as a response to the inefficient judicial system in Guatemala, and a response to the breakdown of traditional systems of mediation and consensus. One of my male informants expressed it this way:

“In the past, conflicts were solved by the help of neighbours, the council of elders and the alcalde. The person who had committed a mistake had to ask forgiveness, and the problem was solved. Today conflicts last for years, people become enemies and sometimes it ends in murder. The process of justice is too long, people have to work in order to get food, they do not have time to meet at the Juzgado de Paz and wait for the long judicial process. Lynching is a good way of setting an example for the children and the young ones.”

In general, delays in processing and deficiencies in the quality of work performed by the institutions administering justice is a pronounced problem in Guatemala. As mentioned earlier, public confidence in the judicial system is very low. Impunity in Guatemala is structural and systematic, and perpetrators of past and present human rights violations are not held accountable. Fewer than 10 % of violent homicides reach the courts and even fewer are actually tried (IACHR 2001: 81). This high level of impunity is itself one of the most serious human rights violations occurring in Guatemala today (IACHR 2001). As the UN Special Rapporteur warned: “Impunity is a cancer; if it is not arrested and excised it will slowly but surely destabilize society” (Report of the UN Special Rapporteur, §145, in IACHR 2001: 75).

In a system that does not ensure effective investigation, prosecution and punishment, neither the rights of victims nor those of alleged perpetrators can be duly respected and protected. The lack of an effective response by the judiciary signals to the population that popular justice is an acceptable alternative to the rule of law and due process. Lynchings have been concentrated in areas of greater poverty and lower indicators of human development, and in areas most affected by the internal conflict and counterinsurgency strategies (IACHR 2001: 86). Although usually thought to be so, lynchings are not always spontaneous. Of the 90 cases tracked by MINUGUA during 1999, 38 attacks had been organized and planned ahead of time (ibid: 87)

In 1997 (before the police came to San Antonio) three men were subject to lynching in San Antonio; one died while the other two managed to escape. They were accused of being criminals - it was said that they had been stealing, as well as having raped a woman. I was

told how a couple of men had rang the church bells one day (a signal for everyone to gather) and thereafter the three thieves were chased. While two of the men escaped, one was tied with rope, had gasoline poured over him and alight. In the aftermath of the lynching new conflicts were created between the ones who had performed the lynching and the families of the victims.

In the formal interviews I did in San Antonio, one of the questions was regarding how people viewed lynching. Of the 43 people I interviewed, 31 were against lynching, 4 were positive and 8 were uncertain whether lynching was right or wrong. The ones who were against often explained it religiously; the act of lynching was against God's will, only God can take life, only God can punish. One man said that lynching was wrong and against the will of God, and the proof of this was the drought that had followed the lynching. Other reasons given were that the judgement and punishment were the responsibilities of the Government. One of the respondents was personally affected by the lynching, as he was in the family of one of the three. He was of course against lynching, and said that it was the Government's job to lead a thorough investigation and punish criminals and ensure justice.

The ones positive towards or uncertain about lynching argued that the judicial system in Guatemala was too slow, and poor *campesinos* did not have the time for this prolonged process, as they had to work in order to get food. People also referred to how easy it was to pay a fine and be released from jail, and thus criminals who could afford to pay a fine did not receive appropriate punishment with this new judicial system. One man explained:

“Human rights destroy the traditional laws and other traditions. The result is absence of justice and law, and people are getting tired of the lawlessness and chaos. This results in strong reactions like lynching. In earlier times the alcalde was the one who investigated crimes and decided the punishment, and the punishment was often meant to be shameful. Whipping in public, having to carry out work for the town like sweeping the streets or making tortillas for

everyone, are examples of punishment carried out in earlier times. If a man had killed someone, he would himself receive the death penalty.”

Criminality was an issue of great concern, and people often referred to the 1970's and 1980's as a good period with little crime because the criminals were effectively killed (by the violent regimes of Ríos Montt and Lucas García). Punishment carried out in the community used to be shameful and something everyone could observe. If the punishment was carried out as a *cargo* (for example making *tortillas* or cleaning up community areas) it would also be useful to the community. As this man saw it, chaos and lawlessness occur in a situation with no justice and law, and people get tired and react violently. He understands lynchings to be a result of the introduction of human rights, which are seen to be destroying the traditional laws and rules of the Maya.

Generally, many were still positive to the death penalty, as long as it was carried out by the appropriate authorities and not by a mob. Now, the criminals had too many rights, people argued, and therefore crime flourished. Ekern observes that human rights deal with relations between states and individuals, and are constructed more for nation-states than for indigenous communities on the margins of a national society. Thus the system of human rights, and Maya communities with their ideas of personhood and collective identities, form two distinct different cultures (Ekern 2003: 288). For the Maya, “[...] human rights are categorised as yet another “alien authority” [...] on par with the Guatemalan state and its Ladino tribunals” (Ekern 2003: 286). People expressed that they saw human rights as a system of values and morals brought upon them from outside, a system that in many ways seemed alien to them. One man in San Antonio who was a catechist explained how he had been to meetings with a priest where they had discussed human rights. They concluded that while some human rights were good, some were actually harmful to the Maya communities.

Further, most human rights were not implemented and were merely words. The leaders of organizations, also Maya leaders, were sitting in the capital in their fancy offices talking about human rights, but very little actually happened. They had for example never seen any of these projects that Rigoberta Menchú organized for Maya women.

Obligations or rights? The need for restoring harmony

In Kaqchikel, there is no word for ‘rights’, instead one says that someone has to, or should, do something for you. Felipe gave me some examples of how this might be expressed. If someone for example trespasses or builds a fence on your property, then your focus will be on the other party’s duty, and on the obligation of the community to help you solve this problem. One would maybe say that the *municipalidad* should do something about the problem, and make sure that other people respect your property. The expression “*Ri q`atb`äl tzij k`o chi ngorto` chupam ruk`ayewal*” means that the authorities have to help in solving this problem. If someone particular is unreasonable to you or treating you badly, again one would focus on the other persons duty, in this example the other person has the obligation to behave well (all according to Felipe).

While the human rights discourse focuses on rights, the Maya focus on duties and obligations. Kovic describes how participants in workshops on human rights in San Christobal, Mexico, were asked about their views on human rights. “Some rights, such as the right to “cooperate in the community”, are obligations (or reciprocal responsibilities) rather than entitlements”, Kovic observed. One participant expressed: “In knowing our rights we

have the obligation to demand that others respect them so that we can change society”

(Kovic 2002: 111).

According to Benjamin Son, a Maya leader of a organisation in Guatemala, it is important to have focus on both rights and obligations simultaneously (in Ekern 2000). The problem is, he continues, not lack of rights, but how obligations are not fulfilled. That way, the damage does not get repaired. When someone breaks the law, then this damages the balance of order and harmony in the society, and this balance has to be restored. As described in chapter two, the cosmic harmony is of great importance to the Maya.

Esquit and Ochoa (1995) describe the inner logic of Maya law: First, the normative system refers to an original Order made by the Gods and preserved by the ancestors. There seem to exist prototypes of all behaviour, which have to be followed, and it is the elders who can guide the community in these rules. Further, the world is a balanced and harmonious whole, and all actions of all men must preserve this harmony. Last, the society is an integrated part of this balance, and stands above the family and individual (Esquit and Ochoa 1995, in Ekern 2000: 34).

Everybody has to show respect and obedience to the rules and laws that ensure the survival of the society. To break the Maya law can be dangerous to the entire society, as the community depends on the actions of each individual. Earlier I have referred to a man in San Antonio who saw drought as the direct result of the lynching in the village, and in chapter two I described how one man saw a connection between the lack of respect for the soil and ancestors, and the reduced crop yields. When some actions disrupt the balance of harmony, the consequences can be serious to the entire community.

Traditionally conflicts would be solved by mediation between the conflicting parties, performed by the elders, the *cofradía* or the *alcalde*. The goal was to restore the balance and again bring order to the society. Through the Spanish law system, the goal is to identify a person and the action of crime rather than repairing the damage (Ekern 2000: 36). According to Ekern, the Maya tradition sees religion, law, politics, education and administration as a whole, integrated system; a moral community. In contrast, the new institutions (the church, schools, NGO's, courts and the State) take on a responsibility for children's education, the punishment of criminals and other forms of social governance, and thus traditional authorities lose their responsibility for the society's collective life and order. In contrast to the traditional focus on the community as a whole, human rights are individually orientated (Ekern 2000).

In the national elections of 1999, the right wing party FRG (which was behind much of the violence in the 1980's) won almost 70 % of all votes. To human rights activists and many scholars this election victory seemed contradictory and impossible; did people want those who caused so much suffering to take office in the Parliament? Ekern suggests that the reason why this happened is the way the Maya view moral law (Ekern 2000). Again and again I was told by my informants how little crime there was in the 1980's, and how they longed for this to reoccur. During that period the criminals were effectively killed by the authorities, I was told, and that was the right thing to do in order to restore peace and order. As Lucas said to me one day: "Criminals are not humans, they are like reptiles which we have to get rid of, as when one removes the weeds in the vegetable garden."

Summary

In the past, conflicts would be solved by mediation and consensus between the conflicting parties, through the traditional hierarchies such as the council of elders and the *cofradía*, and in that way harmony would be restored. If serious crimes had been committed, punishment would be carried out; also serious punishment, like the death penalty. After the introduction of the *Juzgado de Paz* three years prior to my fieldwork, people felt frustrated and alienated by the new system. The process of justice felt prolonged and inefficient, and people did not have time for all the meetings and delays in process. Neither did they feel that peace and harmony were restored by the ways of the new system, or that guilty parties either locally or nationally received their just punishment. Respect is essential to the Maya, and only those who work and behave well actually show respect, and thus deserve respect. There are no inherent rights, and the interest of the community will always be more important than the interests of individuals. Maya communities depend on each individual and their good and respectful behaviour. This is in great contrast to universal human rights and the focus on individuals and their inherent rights on the simple basis that they are human, and which are independent of a person's behaviour.

Although very few of my informants had heard about human rights, they had opinions about what their rights were. Usually this would be expressed as other people's duty to perform some action, or would be expressed in the form of something they felt lacked, for example, respect, education, good housing or money, instead of directly saying "I have the right to..." There is no word for 'right' in Kaqchikel, and the focus is rather on obligations and duties than rights. One's right to private property is for example expressed as the duty of others to respect one's privacy.

The everyday struggle against poverty and discrimination is a context by which people in San Antonio understand their rights. They experience human rights abuses as an integral part of daily life, experienced as poverty, discrimination, and insecurity due to criminality rather than isolated events that can be described in legal terms. Dignity and poverty are closely related, and many feel that they live a dehumanized life. Their life is a constant struggle to obtain enough food to feed their children, and however hard they are working they have very few possibilities to improve their lives. The competition for the few resources available leads to jealousy and conflicts, making social relations difficult.

Many expressed disappointment about the Peace Accords and the implementation of human rights, as they experience the same problems as before. The poverty is equally prevalent, the criminality is rising and the general sense of vulnerability and lack of control over one's life and future is strong. One human right is the right to freedom from poverty, and while many of the Maya see their own poverty unchanged, there are wealthy people that are seen to gain their wealth through dishonesty and who are not punished. The conclusion many make is that they, the Maya, do not have any human rights. Human rights are for the rich and for criminals, who can now easily escape punishment due to an inefficient judicial system and corruption.

One effect of poverty is restriction of choice, which can have lifetime consequences. Graviel is one example, suffering from illiteracy in his roles as a businessman, as a politician and when he tries to obtain information about possibilities for his son to receive a university education. Education was communicated by my informants as one way of improving their lives and to escape poverty. Education was also said to be an important right of a child. In

the next chapter I will describe the school in San Antonio, and look more closely at the causes for the low level of attendance in school.

Chapter four: Conceptualizing education

"I want my daughter to get an education, so she does not end up like me." Illiterate informant.

During an interview, a woman who could not speak Spanish tried to explain to Felipe and myself how difficult and humiliating it was for her to relate to the outside world: "When I go to the doctor I can only smile, I do not know what the doctor is saying – maybe he is making fun of me." Although some of my informants had been 2-3 years in school, they had not learnt much, ostensibly because of problems with the language. While they could only speak Kaqchikel, the teachers only spoke Spanish. Several informants explained to me how helpless they felt without education – how difficult it was to communicate with "other people" (Ladinos), how isolated they felt, how difficult it was to get a job. Often people said: "I don't know how to speak, I can not express myself." Most of the people I interviewed expressed that their highest wish for their children was for them to learn how to read and write, and to be able to speak Spanish.

To be literate and able to communicate in Spanish can result in increased self-confidence and allows one to function better in the larger society, relating to authorities, officials and people in general outside San Antonio. My neighbour Ana only went to school for one year. She could neither read nor write, but spoke Spanish well enough for us to have frequent conversations about many different topics. Still, when one of her daughters became ill and had to be taken to the doctor in Panajachel, Ana had to bring along Maria (who we stayed with) for translation. As both Ana and Maria explained to me; Ana could not communicate with the doctor. To me this seemed strange as she could speak Spanish quite well. Later I

came to realize that this had to do with low self esteem in interaction with authorities and Ladinos, principally due to the discrimination the Maya feel that they continually experience. This is especially a problem for those who never attend school.

A child's right to education is seen as important by Governments, NGO's, and the UN. According to the Guatemalan Constitution, the population has both the right and obligation to receive education. In 1992 a national plan was drafted which stated that education should include everyone, and that the indigenous population should be taught their mother tongue during the three first years of school. The Agreement on the Identity and Rights of the Indigenous Peoples included a reform in the educational system, aiming to increase the number of children attending school and to change the cultural content, making the school culturally relevant also for the indigenous population (Solstad 2001). The aim was to make the school multicultural and multilingual, but little has been done in this regard. One aspect of the school system is that Maya children feel discriminated against and alienated in school, both by the teachers and by the content in their schoolbooks where their culture is presented as old-fashioned and uncivilized.

Solstad argues that education is necessary in order for the population to participate politically and thereby develop a democracy (Solstad 2001). Benedict Anderson also focuses on skills in reading and writing as an important mechanism for the members of "imagined communities" to gain knowledge about the national cultural codes. This knowledge will help the members of the society to function as citizens and to develop a common identity which in turn leads to solidarity based on a sense of belonging (Anderson 1983). For this to happen

in Guatemala, the school must try to eliminate discrimination and help the Maya children to develop their identity and self-respect (Solstad 2001).

When I asked people what they thought about education, almost everybody said that it is important. Education meant better jobs, higher salaries, better living conditions, and that the children will be more knowledgeable and function better in the society. Some said that education would lead to an end to problems like poverty, and others said that it meant that one would have a possibility to choose one's future. Similarly, to learn Spanish was said to be very important in order to communicate with people from outside the town, to go to the doctor, travel outside the area, and sell products in markets or to tourists. Although people communicate the importance of education, the statistics that I will present in this chapter show that about half of the children drop out from school during the first 2-3 years. I will try to find some explanations behind the high dropout rate.

In this chapter I will describe the school in San Antonio and try to find out what education actually means for the people in San Antonio. To survive in this society, what are important qualities, knowledge and strategies? What are the central values in this society, and what do the parents want their children to learn in school? I will also describe how two young people have chosen paths radically different from their sisters, brothers and friends when it comes to education and way of life, and look at how much room there is for a personal choice in the shaping of one's future. For both Alba and José, education is a way to change their lives as they both want to live different lives than their families. But as we shall see, their end goals are different; while Alba wants to return to San Antonio, José wants to use an education to get away from the community.

The school system in Guatemala

Officially, all 6 year old children are obliged to attend Pre School (*pre-primaria*) for one year before they enter primary school (*nivel primaria*) for another 6 years. After completing primary school, the pupils can continue in secondary school (*nivel medio*); first for three years of general education in *el básico* and then continuing for 2-3 years in *el diversificado* where one learns a profession.

Marit Solstad 2001:

Nivel Preprimaria: Preschool for 6 year-old children, obligatory according to the constitution of 1985.

Nivel Primaria: Grade 1-6. Obligatory.

Nivel Medio consists of two components: *Ciclo Básico*; general education from 7th to 9th grade, obligatory. *Ciclo Diversificado*; 2-3 years of more specialised education (accountant, teaching etc.).

Nivel superior: university level education. Guatemala has 6 universities; 5 private and one public.

97 % of the schools at primary level (*Nivel Preprimaria* and *Primaria*) are public in Guatemala (Solstad 2001), and in San Antonio they are also public. The Government is supposed to provide books and necessary equipment, but there was a shortage of books in

the school in San Antonio and the parents had to supply some of the books and pay additional costs themselves. The registration fee was Q20 each school year.

El Básico in San Antonio is not public but organized as a co-operative. The cost was Q50 a month, about 6 US\$ at the 2001 exchange rate. Additional costs for materials and other expenses could be another Q50, and on top of that came expenses for books.

To put these costs in a perspective, a minimum day's salary was Q20-25. Many men in San Antonio earned this as they were working for others as manual workers. Others earned substantially more; a pickup driver usually earned around Q130 a day, a woman who sold textiles to tourists could earn Q300-500 a day. On the other hand, a poor woman who washed clothes or wove *traje* for other women in town earned only Q40-50 a week.

In Guatemala, schools have been used as a tool to 'civilize' the Maya population, and to assimilate them into the modern, westernized Ladino culture by teaching Spanish and presenting the Maya culture as backward (Solstad 2001: 88). Solstad refers to informants who experienced discrimination and were rejected by their teachers because of their Maya language, and how they were forced to speak only Spanish in class. As such, the pursuit for a national identity has actually widened the gap between Ladino and Maya rather than creating a common identity (ibid: 88). Solstad asserts that school has often held little interest for the Maya, and not long ago parents would hide their children when the teachers came to the Maya communities to get children to enrol in school (ibid: 97). Not only did the children experience discrimination, it was also difficult for them to succeed in school due to language problems, the contrasts between the children's real-world situation and what was communicated through the school books, and the alien structure in the school (Solstad 2001).

My informants described how the past generation had been against school, and seen it as something alien to them. One of my female informants said: “School was for ‘the others’, not for us”. This has changed to a certain degree, and most of my informants wanted their children to go to school for at least 4-5 years. For some, school was still seen as something alien. The cover story of chapter one referred to José and his father, who had refused all his other sons to go to school, because he wanted them to farm the land instead. For him, a school education was seen as irrelevant for a farmer.

The school books I inspected referred to and reflected the western culture of the Ladinos – children wearing western clothes, eating food at tables (many poor Maya do not have much furniture, and eat sitting around the fireplace) and generally acting in ways different to the world of Maya children. The Maya population was portrayed in such a way as to imply that their way of living was backward. The Maya leader Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil notes that the Ministry of Education acts as if all the students in Guatemala were urban and Ladino, and that the teaching materials fail to point out “Maya contributions to the region, to the country, and to humanity, nor do they teach features of Mayan daily life” (Cuxil 1996: 41). He argues that the educational system denies the Maya knowledge of their own history and ethnic reality, and that “schools operate as a state organ par excellence, carrying out the ethnocide of the Maya in the interest of the state” (ibid: 40). He finds that the educational system reproduces ignorance of and disdain for the Maya and their culture, teaching distorted facts and prejudices about Maya history, culture and civilization in a manner which is insulting and “creates and practices aggressive ethnocentrism and racism” (ibid: 41). The school system can be seen to create and reproduce racism and discrimination instead of promoting understanding and respect between Ladinos and Maya.

On average, 50 % of all children in Guatemala complete 5th class (UNDP 2000, in Solstad 2001). For rural children and especially Maya children, the number is much lower; only 30 % of children living in rural communities complete primary education and, in the case of indigenous children, only 20 % complete the primary level of education (UNHCHR 2003).

When children experience in school that their language and culture are discriminated against, this can lead to a rejection of the school and a high drop-out rate. Many of the children I talked to explained that they were bored in school, that they did not understand much and that they did not like school. One of the children living next door to us was 8 years old and in 1st class. When I observed him in class, he was shy and did not seem to understand much of what the teacher said. When the teacher asked him questions, he could not answer the questions, and looked ashamed and out of place. When he was playing at home though, he was confident, outgoing and lively. Many of the children I observed in school were passive and shy, and very few actually seemed to enjoy school and be able to participate in an adequate manner. When the children did group work, only a few in each group participated, and the rest would stand there observing those who did the work. Girls were generally more shy and passive than the boys.

Solstad argues that because the school in Guatemala methodically discriminates against Maya children and downplays their culture as backward, the children will follow either of two paths: they can lose interest and leave school, or they can continue and believe in what they are taught. The children who continue, she says, will lose respect for their parents and their cultural references. Some of her informants had expressed concern about how their children, who could read and write, took control in their families (Solstad 2001).

Demetrio Cuxil wishes for major structural changes in the school system, even different educational subprograms for Maya, Ladino, Garifuna and Xinca (Cuxil 1996). In the Maya subsystem “ school subjects should include the language, science, technology, history, civilization, culture, arts, literature, and regional economy of the ethnic community to which Maya students belong [...] Teaching students about the culture of their community contextualizes their identity while protecting them from alienating cultural intrusions” (ibid: 39). Cuxil also calls for study grants and educational credit programs for Maya students at primary, secondary and post-secondary levels (ibid: 40)

The school in San Antonio

At the time of this study, the classes at primary level in San Antonio were divided between a morning session and an afternoon session, as the school building was too small to take all the children at once. In the morning session classes were from 7.30 am to 12.00 pm, and in the afternoon from 1.30 pm to 6.00 pm. There was one headmaster responsible for the morning school and another responsible for the afternoon school. The pupils in the secondary school also used the same building and attended their classes in the afternoon. The secondary school had a third headmaster.

The headmaster of the primary school that had classes in the morning, Vicente, admitted that it was not easy to run a school in San Antonio. The building was too small, the classrooms were too small and each class often had as many as 40-45 pupils. The government did not provide books or other equipment, and there were conflicts between the teachers. About half of the teachers were Maya, the rest Ladino. I did not see this myself, but the headmaster and

his brother Felipe told me that while one group (Maya) tried their best to improve both the teaching and methods, and make the best out of what they had, the other group (Ladino) was reluctant to put in extra effort and make changes. Quite openly they would make remarks like: “Why shall we work with these *indios* – they only kill each other anyway! What do they need an education for?” Thus the teachers were divided in two factions, with little communication between them, and the division went quite strictly along a Maya/Ladino line. The Ladino teachers were generally young, living in Panajachel and commuting to San Antonio every day. They could not speak Kaqchikel, so all the teaching would be in Spanish, even in preschool classes (except the one bilingual preschool class).

Another problem for the headmaster was to relate to the parents, and to handle their objections. Many parents did not, for different reasons, send their children to school. The school performed a survey a few years previously, and found that while they had about 800 children in school, an equal number of children in the village did not go to elementary school at that time. They might have been in school for a few years, or they might never have been to school. Although the elementary school is obligatory, there is no enforcement in this regard – it is entirely up to the children and their parents whether they attend the school or not. The parents who do send their children to school often have opposing opinions to those of the teachers and headmaster. Vicente said that he was afraid to provoke the parents and the population in San Antonio, as he was afraid of their reactions. As mentioned earlier, lynching has become a serious problem in Guatemala, and has also occurred in San Antonio. Also, if the parents opposed the teaching, they might take their children out of school. Many parents only want teaching of mathematics and Spanish, as they find the other subjects a waste of time. If there were any extra costs coming up, maybe in relation to a special day or

to cover materials for a project, the parents could be very reluctant about giving the extra money. This could be the case even though the parents were relatively affluent, and probably this has more to do with the general attitude towards the school and the teachers than about money.

How many children attend school?

As I shall try to illustrate in a table, the number of children who drop out during primary school is dramatic.

Grade	Boys	Girls	Total
Preprimaria (preschool)	63	55	118
Primaria (1st class)	117	119	237
Segundo (2nd class)	71	61	132
Tercero (3rd class)	60	52	112
Cuarto (4th class)	43	35	78
Quinto (5th class)	27	17	43
Sexto (6th class)	32	23	55
Primero básico (secondary school 1st year)	6	3	9
Segundo básico (2nd year)	9	1	10
Tercero básico (3rd year)	11	0	11
Total:	369	305	674

As we can see, the number of pupils in 1st class is relatively high, 237, and there are equally many boys and girls. Already during the first year about 100 pupils drop out; in 2nd grade

there were only 132 pupils. During the first 3 years, 50 % of the children had already stopped attending school. In 6th grade the number had dropped to 55 students, and thus almost 75 % had dropped out since 1st grade. At that level there were more girls who had dropped out than boys; 32 boys still attended school, while only 23 girls continued to do so. From 55 pupils in sixth grade, there were suddenly only 9 in 7th grade, or *primero básico*. The drop-out was quite dramatic from 1st grade (237 pupils) to 9th grade (11 pupils). While 26 boys attended secondary school (*el básico*), only 4 girls did the same.

The teaching of Kaqchikel

The limited access for indigenous peoples to enjoy education in their mother tongue and to use their mother tongue in their dealings with public authorities, is a major concern of the UN High Commissioner (UNCHCR 2003). According to the Ministry of Education in Guatemala, it is important for the indigenous population to receive bilingual teaching the first three years, but little has been done to ensure this.

Research shows that children with bilingual teaching perform better (Solstad 2001). By bilingual education I mean the teaching of a Maya language, not teaching subjects such as geography using Kaqchikel. Still, according to Solstad, the teaching of one's mother tongue makes it easier to learn other languages, in this case Spanish (Solstad 2001). Many parents did not share this view and felt the teaching of Kaqchikel, in addition to being a waste of time, was confusing for the children, resulting in them learning less Spanish.

In San Antonio only some children received teaching in Kaqchikel. One reason is the fact that few teachers speak Kaqchikel, another is lack of resources, and a third reason is that the

parents oppose Kaqchikel teaching. About one third of the parents that I interviewed were against the teaching of Kaqchikel, preferring only the teaching of Spanish. The reason they gave was that Spanish is absolutely necessary for the children to learn in order to function in the Guatemalan society. Kaqchikel they learn to speak at home anyway and therefore the teaching of Kaqchikel was considered a waste of time.

Solstad remarks that the teaching of Maya mathematical elements can also make it easier for Maya children to understand standard math; the Maya think in twenties, and when they learn math using Maya elements, the number 36 is explained by $20 + 16$ (Solstad 2001). The teaching of the Maya worldview and principles might be of help in other subjects as well. Bilingual teaching can also strengthen childrens' self respect and identity, and help them succeed in school since they will experience that their own culture is seen as important too (Solstad 2001).

Felipe was the only teacher teaching Kaqchikel, and he taught Kaqchikel in every class in the morning session, two lessons a week. In the afternoon session there was no Kaqchikel teaching, as there were not enough resources to pay for another teacher. Felipe's salary was not paid by the government, but by a Kaqchikel foundation (Kaqchikel Moloy; Fundacion Kaqchikel) which works for the spread of the language. As well as teaching pupils to read and write Kaqchikel, Felipe taught the traditional Maya calendar, the counting system based on 20's, Maya values, and excerpts from the ancient Maya books like the Popol Vuh. In the beginning the parents were very negative to this teaching, but Vicente (the headmaster) had worked hard to convince them that it is a good thing to be able to read and write your own language. The parents' negative attitudes toward the teaching of Kaqchikel are interesting, as

the Maya intellectuals see the revival of the Maya languages as a central issue in their fight for cultural rights. As mentioned earlier, their aim is to fight for the survival of the 21 Maya languages as well as making at least one of them co-official. They also try to unify each language, for example making all the Kaqchikel speakers speak one form of Kaqchikel instead of the many minor variations that now exists between the towns and villages (Fischer 2001). Maya activists seek to raise the Maya's consciousness of their roots, and Maya languages are seen as a link with the past and as a link to authenticity. While dress and religion have been influenced by the Spanish since the colonization, the Maya languages are seen as 'real', although there has been an influence with borrowed words (McKenna Brown 1996).

Although Maya languages are still spoken actively by an overwhelming majority of the Maya population, an increasing number of Maya children do not speak a Maya language any longer. McKenna Brown did research in four Kaqchikel communities in order to identify the shift generation; that is, those who spoke Kaqchikel to their parents but Spanish to their children, thus triggering a language shift to Spanish. The shift generation made up 25 % of his informants, while more than half of the respondents used both the languages with both parents and children (McKenna Brown 1996). If his respondents are representative for the Kaqchikel and Maya population, a quarter of this population speak Spanish to their children.

As McKenna Brown notes, many parents speak only Spanish to their children because they see this as necessary in order to prepare their children for the school system and to master the intricacies of the dominant bureaucratic system. They recall their own traumatic experiences in the school when they did not master Spanish, and do not want their own children to suffer the same experience. At the same time, they believe that the children will

automatically learn the Maya language when they grow up in a Maya community. McKenna Brown suggests that what is needed are strategies to help people use both languages at home, and especially how to teach children Spanish in a family that speaks a Maya language (Brown 1996).

Kay B. Warren gives an example of how language as strategy and political statement has been used differently between generations. In the 1950's, Don Gustavo only spoke Spanish to his children, so that they would function better in the society. One generation later, his son No`j does the opposite; he only speaks Kaqchikel in his family compound so his children will start out as monolingual Maya speakers. He is a Maya activist and very conscious of his Maya background. He also insists on using the Pan-Maya version of Kaqchikel, which strives toward regional standardization and avoids common Spanish loan words (Warren 1998). My interpreter Felipe did the same as Don Gustavo did; he spoke Spanish to his children instead of Kaqchikel. Although he was a Kaqchikel teacher and conscious of the importance of his native language, he prioritised teaching his children Spanish as he saw this more important for their chances to succeed later in life.

In San Antonio all the children speak Kaqchikel, and I don't think there are any families who speak only Spanish at home. They are not negative to their language as such; on the contrary - they are proud of the language and see it as an important cultural marker. All the Kaqchikel speakers belong to the same language group, and identify themselves as members of their group more than with other Maya. When they prefer their children to learn only Spanish in school, it is a strategy to improve their children's opportunities in life. They have seen for themselves how important it is to speak Spanish when dealing with "the outside world". As

they themselves are not fluent in Spanish, they can not teach their children Spanish, and the only place to learn this is in school. To learn how to read and write Kaqchikel might seem unnecessary, when hardly anything is printed in this language. The activists have a vision that this might change in the future. For the Maya population, who are concerned about basic needs and an improved life situation, this is an academic wish of little relevance.

The parents' attitudes towards the school

Most people seemed to have a rather negative attitude towards the school in San Antonio. My neighbour Ana said: "*Aquí los profesores solo pasean*" – referring to how she thought the teachers were just passing the time and not doing their work properly. Others said the same thing; that the teachers were lazy, not really working and only interested in cashing in the wages. The headmaster Vicente told me that many parents come to the school with such complaints, and he takes them around to the classrooms to show them that the teachers do work. But the attitude of the Ladino teachers referred to earlier in this chapter might show that the parents are right – some of the Ladino teachers do not see the point in teaching the Maya children. Felipe also told me that it had been a big problem that the teachers came too late in the morning, went home early and did not work very hard. Other complaints from people were that the teachers do not control and look after the children, and this resulted in frequent fights between the pupils.

The teachers, on their side, emphasized how rude and ill behaved the children in San Antonio were compared to other places. Even the Maya teachers said this. Miguel, a Maya teacher from Panajachel, said that he wanted to quit his job and find a new job in Panajachel because

he was tired of working in San Antonio. The people here are very demanding, he said, and never satisfied. While he knows that he does a good job, people never show any gratitude or appreciation, he said. The children in San Antonio are rude, and when they start in secondary they can be almost impossible to handle, according to Miguel, and on days like the local *fiesta* it can be dangerous as the boys might want to fight with their teacher (often with a knife). While the parents in Panajachel teach their children to greet their teacher, hardly anyone greeted him in San Antonio, neither students nor their parents, when he was walking in the streets.

The teachers in secondary school had complained to the parents about the ill-behaved boys, and especially the female headmaster was having problems. Lucas, one of my informants, had a son in secondary school. Lucas was very critical to the school and the teachers, and felt that it was the teachers' responsibility to discipline and control the students. If the headmaster could not do this, he or she should not be a teacher or headmaster either, he argued. This can be seen in relation to the strong work ethics of the Maya and the focus on hard work. It is the teacher's job to teach and to keep discipline in class, and if they fail to do so they are not doing their job properly, and thus they do not necessarily deserve respect.

Contextualizing education

When I asked what they wanted their children to learn in school, people responded that it was important to learn to read and write, to learn mathematics and to learn to speak Spanish. The few respondents with higher education thought that other subjects also were of importance. Most people felt that if one masters the basic skills of reading, writing, speaking

Spanish and performing basic arithmetic, and is able to do manual work, one would be able to manage well enough and feed a family. But can this explain why so many children drop out from school after 2-3 years? Does one learn these skills in so short a time, taken into account the language problem most of these children meet when they start school? Many of my informants had been 1-3 years in school themselves, without learning much.

Almost everyone responded in the same way to the question of what they wanted for their children: that they would become good workers, respectful and responsible people, and take good care of their families. They should learn to respect their parents, the elders and other people. Very many responded that they wished for their children to get a better life than themselves, learn to read and write, that they would become good persons and stay away from alcohol, drugs and stealing. Many emphasized the importance of learning and respecting the words of God, and some wished for their children to follow a career. These wishes correspond to the answers given to the question of what good human values are and what a good person is like: Someone who works hard, who is responsible and takes good care of ones family. One should respect others, not steal, kill or harm others in any other way.

Most parents emphasized discipline as being among the most important things to teach a child. To have discipline means to respect and obey elders in the society, including parents. Respect is an important value for the Maya, and is connected to the way the communities functioned previously with the traditional hierarchies of elders and the *cofradías*, and the strong focus on maintaining the traditions and *costumbres* of the forefathers. The school has traditionally not been teaching Maya values, and is not perceived as relevant for such

teaching (Solstad 2001). Maya values and culture are something the children learn at home, through working and interacting with their parents.

One female informant said to me: “Our parents and grandparents thought education was for those who did not want to work, for the lazy ones. And for us, the most important thing is to farm the land.” In the introduction of chapter one, we met José, 18 years old, who had struggled very hard to obtain an education although his father was a big landowner. This is one example, but there were others as well who said that they could not afford to keep their children in school more than a few years, although they had shops and land, relatively large houses, TV’s and stereos and clearly could afford to prioritize sending their children to school if they wanted to.

As we saw in chapter three, the focus on agricultural, manual work is still strong among the Maya. The connection to the forefathers, *los antepasados*, is maybe most strongly felt through working the *milpa* (cornfield) and weaving the *traje*. Maya principles of reciprocity and obligations to both the living and the dead, based on a relationship with land, continue to be expressed through work (Linda Green 1999). The relationship to the soil is important, but the pride of one’s ability to work hard is also important in a society where they have been discriminated against for centuries and been told that they are useless, stupid, dirty and uncivilized. In a way this is like a double-edged sword – the Spanish, and later the Ladinos, have reputedly seen the Maya as good enough only for hard work, almost as beasts of burden. Some informants emphasized the fact that while they have to struggle and work hard for nothing, and live their life in poverty and misery, “the others” (Ladinos) have easy lives, being supported by the Maya. At the same time they are proud of this ability to do hard,

manual work. To be hard working is one of the finest values a person can have, and this was continually expressed in everyday conversation. “*Ella solo quiere sentarse*” (she only wants to sit), meaning that she is lazy and not wanting to work, was a fairly negative description of someone. On the other side, if someone said “*él siempre trabaja muy, muy duro*” (he always works very hard) it meant that the man was a very good man.

Literally everyone in the interviews pointed to the importance of teaching their children to work hard; this was just as important, or more so than giving them an education in school. People actually phrased it as a child’s right to learn how to work. This is interesting, as the UN focuses on the child’s right to not have to work (The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 32). I have to point out that while some children do have to work to support their families, many children in San Antonio do not work out of necessity. It is more as an element in the upbringing, learning how to work and to become a responsible person. Many emphasized that whatever work they were going to do, it was very important that they did it well. The daughters have to learn to cook, to weave and do other housework; the boys should learn at least one manual job like farming or carpentry. Not only do they have to learn to work, but to work hard. Most boys work in the field for half a day every day, and often all Saturday. If they are in school from 7.30 am. until 12.30, they have a lunch break before they work in the fields until dusk. That leaves little time for homework, rest and play, and the teachers complained that most boys were tired and unprepared in school. Still, for the people in San Antonio it might seem more important that the children learn how to work, so they are prepared for their life and capable of supporting themselves and a family, than to obtain theoretical knowledge.

I continually heard the expression “*perder el tiempo*” (to waste one’s time). While working is highly valued, to be seen to waste one’s time is very negative. This was something I could hear almost daily, in different situations, and observe as well. If Maria had visitors, she would not invite the woman in, make coffee or sit down to chat. On the contrary, she would continue what she was doing, either peeling potatoes, weaving etc., and the guest had to sit down wherever suitable or follow around. If I met someone that I knew on the street, we would only talk for so long, as standing in the street talking is regarded as both a waste of time and bad behaviour. Doing formal interviews could be difficult, as they should be over rather fast in order not waste people’s time, and after a few questions some people lost their patience and simply left us.

For the children this strong focus on work and wasting one’s time can result in pressure from their parents. If they have problems in school or fail their exams, parents can feel angry and refuse to pay for another year, as exemplified by Graviel and his son in chapter two. It is seen as a waste of time and money if the child does not perform well in school, and the child should rather do manual work and earn money. This is also connected to the notion that education should be deserved. Several parents said that their children had the obligation to learn, and if the child did not receive the teaching properly, the parents would get angry and upset. If one does not have a ‘good head’ and work hard enough, one does not deserve education, and it is a waste of time going to school.

It is not a new thing to go to school – some people in the older generation also went to school for 3-4 years. But for the Maya to take higher education is a new thing. While high value is placed on manual work, office jobs have been something that “the others” (Ladinos) have

done. Except for the new generation of Maya teachers, there are few examples of Maya with higher education in San Antonio. The ones who do have higher education, have moved to Guatemala City or Quetzaltenango. Neither the nurse, the dentist, the judge, the judge's assistants or the police are from San Antonio, and except for the nurse and the judge's secretary, they are all Ladino. For the children there are few role models from their own community who have higher education and higher-status jobs.

Tracy Ehlers observed that in San Pedro Sacatepéquez, a thriving Maya town west in Guatemala, very many people send their children to school although the parents did not receive much of an education themselves. She found that all of the 80 women she had interviewed had sent their children to school. 67 % of the children had completed primary education and many children continued attending secondary school (Ehlers 1990: 37). The reason why more or less illiterate women sent their children to school was that education was seen as a profitable resource, and individuals in San Pedro have utilized schooling to become teachers, lawyers and professionals. As many of the well-educated people remained in San Pedro to work or establish business, they were role models for the others as well as developing a vital and pluralistic society (ibid: 37).

For the people in San Antonio, there was no clear connection between an education and work. Even with an education you might still not be able to find a job, as the unemployment rate in Guatemala is high. And Maya are discriminated against in the employment market, both in regard to obtaining employment and with regard to salary. In 1989, research showed that the Maya, on average, earned 46 % less than a Ladino with the same qualifications (Psacharopoulos 1993, quoted in Solstad 2001: 103). For the manual workers in San

Antonio, there are usually jobs available, although there are slower periods with less work. If you are a good worker, you can usually just manage to support your family, although work might be scarce, especially if you have no land of your own. Therefore many parents expressed a wish for their sons to learn a trade and become a carpenter, an electrician or similar.

Lucas, who had a son in the 3rd year of *el básico*, was wondering what to do the next school year. His son wanted to continue studying computer science in a college in Panajachel, but Lucas was uncertain of how smart it would be to let him do that. Although Lucas had Q50.000 in the bank, he felt that the cost of Q50 each month was too much. It was not certain that his son would find a job after completing his studies, and then what? As a farmer one would always have the food one produces, he argued.

In the marginal situation many families are in, using all surplus resources on education might seem like a waste, as there is no way of knowing that education will lead to jobs. Some parents mentioned that instead of sending the child to school and then perhaps not being able to pay for medicines if the child becomes ill, they want him to work so he can contribute some money to the family and thus provide security in case of need. Education can be seen as a risky investment that might not give any results. For some of the parents who did have a shop or a small business, and were thus relatively affluent compared to the majority in town, education was thought to be an unnecessary expense, in terms of both time and money, as the children are expected to contribute to the running of the business. The parents have managed without much education, and might think that their children will too. Others, especially women who were alone because their husbands had left them or died, put all their

efforts into giving their children an education. As they are the ones who suffer the most from poverty, maybe they perceive that education is one of very few ways out of the misery. Many of the single mothers receive support from “*el proyecto*”, an aid project run by an American organization that provides support to the poorest in town, mainly single mothers. Part of this support is meant to help get their children through elementary school, and to buy bricks for new and better housing. Although this support makes it much easier for the single mothers to send their children to school, they additionally seemed to be even more enthusiastic about school than the others in town. They seemed willing to do just about anything to get their children through school, although the family could do very well with some extra income, which they would have received if their children had been working instead. As one single mother said to me: “My children do not want to go to school, they want to work and earn money instead. But I force them, and now they go to school and work a half day.”

Theoretical knowledge is not valued highly in this society. Education is only seen as a means to a better future, but does not have a value of its own – it is thus negatively motivated, and can be seen as rather diffuse and vague by some. On my question of what they thought the state ought to do for them, many responded that what they needed most was education for their children. When I pointed to the fact that there was already both primary and secondary school in San Antonio, they specified that it was a centre run by the Government where they could learn a practical trade, like carpentry, that they wanted. The ones who said this were often men who, although they said education was important, only planned to let their children finish elementary school. They did not see the point in taking secondary school, as the extra years of school do not lead to a profession. When they said that education is

important, they thought of the teaching of a concrete trade, not just theoretical teachings. If one knows a trade, there are usually opportunities for jobs and better salaries. Some parents also emphasized the need for economic assistance and scholarships in order to help their children attend school. This is also in line with Cuxil's demands for a better school (Cuxil 1996).

Other reasons why children do not go to school

The difficult economical situation of the Maya is of course one of the reasons why so many children are not in school. Many people told us that the reason why they never went to school was that their family was too poor, there was too much work to be done at home, or that the father in the family was an alcoholic and therefore did not have the money or the interest in sending his children to school. Although it does not cost more than Q20 each year to attend primary school, the books and materials are an additional expense. Also, if the children work instead, their salaries, although small, will help on the family budget. Some of the really poor children explained that they wanted to work instead of going to school, so they could help their mother and have more resources to pay for food and wood.

In some families, the parents said they needed their children to help them with household chores. Another reason why many young people quit school early is because of sexual morality. The more tradition-bound part of the population does not like, or accept, that girls go to school after a certain age. Many girls complained about the gossip they experience from people in the village as they grow towards the traditional age of marriage (14-15 years) and

yet are still attending school. This is part of the *machismo* culture where girls should prepare for marriage, and women's sexuality should be controlled.

One woman we interviewed told us that she herself never went to school because there was too much work to be done at home. Therefore she wanted her own children to get an education. As we talked more it turned out that she wanted her sons to get a career, while her daughters only should study until 6th grade. She and her husband were worried that if the girls continued in school, they might have boyfriends. She had one girl in 6th grade now, and she was worried whether the daughter was acting properly towards the opposite sex. The mother had an agreement with another girl in the same class to act as a 'spy' and report to the mother about the behaviour of the daughter. Another of her daughters had just finished 6th grade and wanted to go on to *el básico* (secondary school), but her parents refused. As it is important that the girls are virgins when they get married, and especially important to prevent pregnancies outside wedlock, they thought it would be better if the girl stayed at home helping their mother with housework until she married.

Some parents wanted their children to go to school, but experienced that the children themselves refused to go. Quite a few children did not like school, and preferred to stay at home. A few mothers told us that their youngest child (mostly girls) did not want to go to school because the child was so attached to her mother. They found it difficult to force the child to go, and the result was that the child stayed at home. Another mother admitted that she was very attached to her youngest son and wanted to have him at home, so she did not send him to school.

The age of the students varies very much within one class. In 2nd grade the youngest are 7, while the oldest might be as old as 12. This is a problem nationwide (Solstad 2001). The reason is that some parents do not allow their children to go to school at the age they are supposed to start, but might give permission some years later. Other children might not want to go to school when they are small, but change their mind later. Yet another reason is that many children fail to pass the exams and thus have to repeat the class again the next year. This happens fairly often. When the students are not in the same age group, different problems arise. The younger students are vulnerable to teasing, beating or general harassment from the older ones. Many said that the reason for giving up on school was that they were harassed by other children. The intellectual level and the level of maturity will vary, and the older ones might feel bored and out of place amongst children several years younger.

For illiterate parents it is very hard to gather information about educational possibilities and scholarships. They know that there exist different options, but seldom manage to obtain the necessary information. As mentioned earlier, Graviel has a 22-year-old son who is an accountant. He wanted to continue studying and become a doctor, and Graviel had taken several trips to Guatemala City to sort out how this can be done. He spent a good deal of money on these trips, but had not managed to find out much. When I told him of the public university San Carlos, Graviel was surprised to learn that there existed a public university, he had never heard that before. Others we talked to had the same problem. Some had children in secondary school at the moment, and wanted to give them the chance to study more. But they did not know how to get information about affordable schools, scholarships and the cost of living on campus, and this posed an effective hindrance to fulfilling their ambitions.

Sending children off to the bigger cities to take higher education involves high living costs, and is something very few can do anyway.

Different choices

As we have seen, few children in San Antonio make it through elementary school. Very few get as far as *el básico* or further. I will show how two young people from San Antonio use education as a way to better their lives. Although what they want to obtain in the end differs, their method is the same.

Alba was 20 years old at the time of my study, and one of the first women from San Antonio to obtain a university degree. She studied law in Quetzaltenango, and was lucky as her family supported her in her choice, and her older sisters helped her out economically from the money they made on selling textiles to tourists. Still, she felt the jealousy and negativity from others in the village when she returned to San Antonio to work and visit her family each weekend. “They don’t want anyone else to get ahead, they want to keep equilibrium, the status quo”, she told me.

Alba had four older sisters, and only one of them went to school (and then only for two years as she did not like school). Alba had to go all the way to Chichicastenango (a town several hours away) for *el básico* (secondary school), as the one in San Antonio didn’t exist at that time. She stayed there for three years with girls from all over Guatemala, something quite courageous for someone from a town where so many children don’t even want to go to the local school. As we have seen, most girls stop attending school during the elementary level, very few finish secondary. The ones who do finish secondary school often have the

wish to become secretaries or teachers. Alba wanted to become a judge, not only out of personal ambition but also because she saw that Maya towns like San Antonio had the need for Maya in high office. As mentioned, she came home to San Antonio each weekend and maintained strong ties to the village as well as her family this way. Her identity as a Maya and member of the Kaqchikel group was strong, and she always wore her *traje*, also in university. As she said, she was proud of being a Maya.

José has been introduced in the beginning of chapter one. He almost forced his father to give him an education, while his brothers accepted their father's wish for them to become farmers. His father was a man who easily could afford to give all his sons an education, but felt that school was irrelevant for them since they were farmers. José dressed in a very modern and 'hip' manner, worked part time for the only foreigner in town (a potter from the USA who stays for some months each year), and managed to get work in the capital when he wanted to. When he was out of San Antonio he told everyone that he was from Mexico, in order to escape the discrimination the Maya usually experience in meetings with Ladinos. He found San Antonio very boring and limiting, and wanted to get away, meet people and work in interesting jobs. For him it was important to have the choice not to live as his father, that is, in the traditional way as a farmer, struggling with heavy, manual work. For him, almost everything Maya and traditional was negative. Outside San Antonio he succeeded in pretending to be a Mexican, and could actively choose his own identity.

Summary

In this chapter I have described the school system in Guatemala and the school in San Antonio. From communication with the teachers, parents and the children themselves, I found that there are a number of reasons why so few children attend school and complete their primary education.

My informants generally expressed a strong wish for their children to attend school and learn to speak Spanish and to read and write. Many experienced humiliation and difficulties when they had to relate to the wider society outside San Antonio as they did not speak Spanish, and they did not want their children to go through the same. Many people in San Antonio live in poverty, and the cost of books and equipment can be difficult to manage in addition to missing out on the money the child would earn if he or she worked instead. Some families also need the help of their children in household chores, both on their *milpa* and in the house.

It also seemed that the school itself and the educational system in Guatemala function in such a way as to reinforce discrimination and racism through both the teaching materials and the attitudes of the teachers. In the school books the Maya are portrayed as backward and uncivilized, and they do not learn about their own culture and civilization in a positive manner. In addition to the problems the Maya children experience due to language, they feel both alienated, discriminated against and have problems learning. The lack of success and failing of exams results in children having to take classes over and over again, and this again results in a great variation in age and maturity within each class. Older children feel bored and harass the younger ones, and the parents feel frustrated when their children fail and have to repeat their class. It is the children's responsibility to work hard and perform well, and if

they fail they will not earn the right to continue school. It is seen as a waste of time to attend school if the child does not perform well, and time is better spent working. As everything else, school education has to be earned and deserved through hard work, respect and fulfilling of one's obligations. Another point is that school traditionally was seen as something only "the others" or the lazy one's attended. It was not for the Maya who had to work on their *milpa*.

As most of those from San Antonio who do have a higher education have moved away, there are few role models, and it can be difficult to see that an education actually can lead to work. San Antonio is also a rural village with few work possibilities outside the agricultural sphere. The unemployment rate in Guatemala is high, and Maya are often discriminated against in the work market. Some therefore see education as a risky investment which does not necessarily lead to work. Theoretical education has little value on it's own and is seen only as a strategy to get a better life; work, higher salaries, the possibility to move to other places and choose a different life. What is seen as important in this community is to learn to become a hard worker and to be a good person with high morals. Weaving, working on the *milpa* and other domestic work are skills the child has to learn while working alongside their parents. One can not learn these skills in school, and therefore most children who attend school also work half day, so that they learn to survive on their own.

Chapter five: Concluding comments

Several anthropologists have stressed the importance of studying human rights in local contexts, in order to develop an understanding for differences in interpretations of human rights. Schirmer argues that human rights are not acted out in a vacuum, and if human rights are to play a sustaining role in protecting individuals from harm and injustice, human rights organisations and legal communities must contextualize perceptions and practices of rights (Schirmer 1997: 181). In this thesis I have focused on how human rights are understood in the rural community of San Antonio Palopó, and how people interpret human rights in a context of poverty, discrimination and violence.

Human rights are individually held and inherent for all people, and seem in some ways to conflict with the Maya worldview. The Maya still live (at least in part) in accordance with a view which puts stress on the importance of cosmic harmony and balance. In order to maintain balance, a Maya community depends on certain behaviour from all its members, and the interest of individuals should not come before the interest of the community. Reciprocity and respect are essential – between the ancestors and the living, between the gods and man, between parents and children, and between all individuals. If some members of a community do not respect the soil and the ancestors, the whole community might suffer drought or crop failures. Respect and work is closely related – only those who work earn respect.

To be Maya is to be hard working, and only from hard work does one have rights. Therefore, criminals and others with anti-social behaviour are not necessarily conceived of as being entitled to rights, since they are breaking the moral and social codes. In the past, people who had broken the law would receive a shameful punishment for everyone in the community to

see, and harmony would be restored. With a new and inefficient judicial system, criminals often do not receive punishment, and people interpret this as a contradiction; while they themselves live in poverty and uncertainty due to a high level of crime, the criminals are not being punished. They conclude that human rights are for the rich and for criminals, not for ordinary people like themselves.

Also children have to act in accordance with Maya morals. If they do not work hard enough in school or do not succeed with their exams, they do not deserve to continue receiving education. They are seen to be wasting their time when they could work and earn money instead. Although education is communicated as something important and positive that can lead to a better life, the percentage of children who do attend school is very low. I have tried to show how the traditional ways of looking at work and education influence people's choice in this matter. Education has traditionally been seen as something for "the others", or for the lazy ones who did not want to work. For the Maya population it has been, and still is, important to respect and farm the land, to grow corn and follow the traditions. It is also seen as crucial to socialize the children into becoming good persons that are responsible, respectful and hard working. Maya values are not traditionally taught in school, and the school is therefore thought of as irrelevant for socializing children, and the knowledge of their culture and language is better learned from being with ones parents and grandparents.

Almost all the children in San Antonio spend considerable time working – the girls together with their mother weaving and doing housework, the boys with their father in the *milpa*. While it is the parents' obligation to teach their children everything necessary in order to survive, it is the child's right, and obligation, to receive this teaching. It is considered a child's

right to learn how to work, as well as to receive an upbringing where one learns to become a good, respectable person. The child does not have an automatic right to go to school. He or she has to deserve this right, from fulfilling the obligations of respect towards the parents, and from good behaviour.

Most people in San Antonio live in poverty and struggle to manage, and they communicate that they see education as a way to escape poverty. For different reasons, which I have tried to show, many still consider 4-6 years in school enough in order to obtain the necessary skills needed to survive. They focus on mathematics and Spanish as the subjects that they want their children to learn, as these are subjects that the parents can not teach their children themselves. The other subjects taught in school were, by many, considered a waste of time, including the teaching of Kaqchikel. The things one learns in school and at home are quite different, and are often seen as complimentary. But for many it is difficult to see the point in sending their children to school, as they do not learn a trade there. Education is not seen as valuable in itself, but is understood as an instrument to obtain a better life. It is hard for most to understand how a long, theoretical education can lead to jobs and a better life, when there are so few examples of this in the local community. In the end, what most parents choose is to let their children attend elementary school only for a few years, often no more than 4-5 years, as they think that by then the children should have learnt enough Spanish and mathematics to survive and manage on their own. Due to the difficulties of language, many children struggle to pass their exams and actually learn very little. This, in turn, leads to reduced motivation and a sense of failure, and also to reactions from their parents who get upset and may refuse to bear the expense, in both time and monetary terms, of allowing

schooling to continue. Maya children also experience discrimination from Ladino teachers, and will from their textbooks see that their own way of living is seen as backward.

Some parents explained that while they wanted their children to attend school, their children refused to go and wanted to stay at home instead. Some children were bored in school, or were harassed by other children. Some were so attached to their mothers that they wanted to stay at home. When the children did not want to go to school, the parents obviously found it difficult to force them.

José and Alba are examples of young people who opposed the limitations which their family and surroundings directly or indirectly placed upon them. They both managed to take control over and change their lives, and used education actively in order to improve their life situation. José opposed his father's decision and fought for his right to attend school. It had taken him many years to complete primary school, but he never gave up. Now he was aiming for secondary school (*el básico*) and hopefully higher education later. He was curious and wanted to use an education in order to get away from San Antonio, to meet people from different places and to find interesting jobs. He also wanted to escape the traditional life as a farmer and the discrimination he experienced as a Maya. As he explained; he was ashamed to be Maya. For him, education was a way to shape a new life somewhere else as a Ladino.

Alba, on the other hand, was proud to be Maya, and always dressed in *traje*. While keeping her identity, she wanted to enter a space in the society usually occupied by "the others". Her university education would allow her to get a meaningful and interesting job and at the same time be able to help her community. Maya communities need indigenous people in high office and central positions who are familiar with their local culture and language.

The traditional and social structures in San Antonio and other communities in Guatemala are changing, and people experience violence, conflicts, alcohol abuse and disintegration of families as major problems. They are worrying that their children will end up as criminals, and expressed concern about what was the right way to bring up children in today's society. Solstad argues that education can be important in times when traditional structures are breaking down. By taking part in the knowledge which will form the future, people can see continuity between what has been, what is and what will come. This continuity between the old and the new can give a sense of security (Solstad 2003: 100). If the school in Guatemala would start to respect Maya children's identity, and become culturally relevant also for the Maya, this would help the children to develop stronger self respect. This would probably result in greater enthusiasm and higher attendance, along with better results. Then the parents might also become more enthusiastic about the school and feel that it is relevant also for them and their families.

I am not in a position to postulate that education is either important or necessary for the Maya children, but Solstad does have a point when she argues the importance of mastering the knowledge of the future. To be able to speak Spanish and communicate with the wider society is important, both in practical terms of actually achieving results in business, political positions or to obtain medical help, but also to avoid the experience of shame and helplessness when one is not able to communicate. When one is able to read and write, one can also follow news and political discussions in one's society and participate in elections and even hold political positions. Some might argue that the important skills necessary to survive in San Antonio are to be able to work hard, to show respect and act according to a Maya code of good behaviour. This might be right, but some people would like to choose

their own path in life, a life different from their parents and forefathers, and that is difficult without an education. Poverty in Guatemala is prevalent, and it is difficult for those without an education or professional skills to obtain work. Education can help the Maya to improve their lives and escape poverty, just as my informants were hoping for.

Appendix 1

Vocabulary

Adobe – bricks made of sun-dried soil used to build traditional houses

Alcalde - major

Aldea – cluster of houses or a very small village

Anima - spirit

Antepasados – forefathers, ancestors

Campesino – subsistence farmers growing corn, coffee and vegetables

Capitalinos – people living in the capital (Guatemala City)

Cargo – obligations and duties towards the community, often performed within *cofradías*

Cofradía – religious brotherhoods

Comedor – small café, eating place

Corte – the skirt in traditional Maya dress

Costumbre – Maya traditions, including ritual sacrifices

Fiesta – often used on the annual celebration of the patron saint of each Guatemalan town

Huipil – the female blouse/ top in traditional Maya dress

Indígena – indigenous, used here to describe the Maya

Lago - lake

Ladino – a term used on Spanish-speaking Guatemalans dressed in western clothes

Municipalidad – town council

Minicipio - township

Pueblo – village, small town. Can also be used on Maya groups or the Maya population in Guatemala

Pulseras – friendship bracelets made by the local women and children and sold to tourists

Ropa típica – “typical dress”, see *traje*

Susto – strong fear

Tamales – a traditional delicacy made of a paste of rice, vegetables and /or meat wrapped in leaves and steamed

Tortilla – flat pancakes made of corn and water

Traje – traditional Maya dress specific for each community

Appendix 2

Survey (translated from Spanish)

This is a survey about the life here in San Antonio Palopó. It is anonymous and you do not have to say your name. Thank you!

1. Man Woman Age:
2. Are you married?
3. If married, how old is your wife/ husband?
4. What kind of work do you have? And your wife/husband?
5. How much do you and your family earn during a week?
6. How many years did you attend school? And your husband/wife?
7. Can you read and write? And your husband/wife?
8. Do you have children? If yes, how many?
9. If you have children, how old are they?
10. How many of your children are in school, and which grade are they in?
11. If you have children who do not attend school, why is that so?
12. Do you have children who attend *el básico*? If yes, how many children?

13. Do you have children who are studying in the university or *el diversificado*?

14. Are your children able to decide whether they are going to attend school or what kind of work they want to do, or do you as parents make these decisions?

15. How many years would you like your children to study in school? How many years for your sons, and how many years for your daughters?

16. Do you think that education is:

very important important not important not certain

Can you explain further?

17. What kind of upbringing do you want to give your children at home?

18. What kind of duties or work do your children have?

19. Is it necessary or right to punish children physically when they have acted wrongly?

20. Are children entitled to special rights? If you think they are, what kind of rights would that be?

21. Do you think that children's rights are:

very important important not so important not certain children do not have special rights

Can you explain further?.....

22. What do you want for your children?

23. In Guatemala City there are children who live on the streets. What do you think is the reason for this? What solutions do you see to this problem?

24. Are you indigenous? Do you think that the indigenous population should have special rights?

25. If you think that indigenous rights are important, what type of rights do you find particularly important?

26. What are important human values to you, or in other words, what do you see as a good person?

27. What do you think about lynching?

28. In the school here in San Antonio they teach Spanish and Kaqchikel. What do you think about the teaching of Maya languages?

29. What is Maya culture to you?

Appendix 3: Map of Guatemala



Appendix 4: Photos from San Antonio



Left: Two school children from San Antonio. Right: An old man in his traje.



Left: A 16 year old girl preparing onions for the market. Right: The leader of the cofradía San Nicholas with San Simon outside the church at Easter.



A school class are performing on mother's day, while their mothers are eagerly watching.



The village of San Antonio.



The view from San Antonio; terrace fields, lake Atitlán and volcanoes in the background.



A farmer working his land.

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