

**Richard Wilson.** *Maya Resurgence in Guatemala: Q'eqchi' Experiences.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995. xii + 372 pp. \$17.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8061-3195-5.



**Reviewed by** Alex Taylor

**Published on** H-LatAm (January, 2000)

As a consequence of rapid political and social changes, nation-states around the world are being transformed into multiple collections of self-competing ethnic, cultural, and economic units. One example of the transformation of traditional political and economic structures by the growing influence of "ethnopolitics"[2] is provided by the "resurgence", during the 1980s and early 1990s, of Maya cultural activism in Guatemala.

Several scholars from various academic disciplines have attempted to explore the events that set in motion Maya revival during that period.[3] Almost all the scholars who have tackled this particular subject seem to agree on the historical, economic, political, social, and cultural roots of Maya ethnic revival. However, they lack agreement on the terminology that best describes its initial development, its subsequent short and long term goals, and more importantly, its day-to-day individual and collective expressions throughout Guatemala, in both urban and rural environments. Carol Smith, for example, refers to this renewed cultural and political indigenous movement as an expression of "Mayan nationalism". [4]

Other academics and Maya activists simply call it "the Maya movement", while more than a few prefer the term "pan-Mayanismo". [5] In his own anthropological study of "ethnic revitalization" among the Maya Q'eqchi' of north-central Guatemala, Richard Wilson prefers the simpler and less controversial term of "Maya resurgence". Before discussing and describing in greater detail Wilson's work, it is necessary to offer a brief overview of the factors that contributed, in the 1980s and 1990s, to the Maya ethnic revival in that Central American country.

Throughout its colonial, independent, and contemporary history, Guatemala has experienced constant turmoil. Social, political, economic, and armed conflict is the rule rather than the exception. However, Guatemala, more than almost any other region in Latin America, has experienced ethnic, cultural, and social confrontations between the Ladinos (heirs to the Spanish colonial power) and the descendants of the first inhabitants of those lands, the Maya. Those conflicts had devastating effects on the Guatemalan Natives.

For most of their history of contact with the Ladino minority, [6] the Maya have suffered widespread social, economic, cultural and religious exploitation. Frequently, for the Maya, that exploitation has meant forced labour, outright slavery and brutal taxation, but, with as much frequency, the Maya have also been victims of psychological and verbal abuse. Clearly, social inequality has been the main characteristic of Indian-Ladino relations in the past. Indeed, inequality is still the main feature of those social relations. While historical inequalities greatly influenced the discourse, strategy, agenda, and goals of those who embraced Maya cultural activism in the last two decades, they did not contribute on their own to spark the fires of indigenous ethnic revival in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The catalysts that resulted in the "resurgence" of Maya cultural and political activism in Guatemala are fairly recent.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, indigenous groups of the Guatemalan highlands experienced a wave of state-sponsored terror unparalleled in the country's modern history. In the early 1970s, when Guatemala's left-wing guerrilla organizations attempted to restart their struggle against the Guatemalan military government and military-controlled state institutions, Highland Indian communities became, for both the military and guerrilla organizations, valuable pools of new recruits. The guerrillas, having experienced a number of serious political and military setbacks because of their inefficient political, social, and economic strategies, attempted to correct the mistakes of the past by convincing the Indian communities that the only solution to the nation's problems was the one provided by the revolutionary option. In response, the military attempted to eliminate popular support for the guerrillas by launching a campaign of terror against the Indian communities of the countryside. The attempt on the part of the military to undermine the ethnic, cultural, and social identity of the Indian communities was intended to repress opponents and instill a sense of Guatemalan identity and national-

ism in the minds of the indigenous people. The army sought to convince the Indians to reject the revolutionary options promoted by the insurgents. However, neither guerrillas nor government succeeded in their objectives. In the process, Mayan cultural activism emerged as an alternative ideological basis for resistance.

In *Maya Resurgence in Guatemala*, Richard Wilson explores the day-to-day expressions of that cultural revival among the Maya Q'eqchi' of the north-central regions of that country. Composed of nine chapters, Wilson's study provides the reader with some of the same arguments on the issue of Maya cultural activism offered previously by individuals such as Demetrio Cojti Cuxil, Enrique Sam Colop, and Carol Smith. He blames, for example, both the leftist guerrillas, the military-backed government, and dominant "Ladino" society for most, if not all, of the ills that have affected, and that are still affecting, indigenous communities in that country. His analysis also reflects subsequent views on the subject put forward by academics such as Edward F. Fisher and others. Still, the similarities between his analysis and those provided by others are less obvious at the microlevel of his explorations on the subject. And, here is where the reader can find Wilson's greater contribution to a greater understanding on the subject of Maya resurgence in Guatemala. The reason is that by exploring the regional and communal economic, political, cultural, and religious expressions of Maya resurgence among the Q'eqchi of Alta Verapaz, Wilson also uncovers some of the difficulties that Maya elites [7] face in the "imagining" of a pan-Maya nation and ethnic identity.

In their struggle to create a new pan-Maya identity, Indian nationalists like Cojti Cuxil have attempted to demonstrate that despite their ideological, political, economic, communal, and religious differences, there is only "one" Maya people and that their historical destiny is to create a pan-Maya nation. But, to achieve their ultimate goal,

the promoters of pan-Maya nationalism have to persuade Guatemalan Indians to exchange their community-based allegiances for a pan-Indian loyalty. It is only by comparing the findings of case studies like Wilson's against those who tackle the issue of Maya cultural revival from more general perspectives [8] that the seriousness of ethnic, political, economic, linguistic and religious divisions that permeate the different Guatemalan Maya groups becomes clearer.

As Wilson suggests in his study, to main source of religious, social, cultural, and political loyalty for the various Guatemalan Maya groups is the "community". Still, for the purposes of this review, attempting a definition of community (as related to the Guatemalan Maya experience) is complicated by a variety of reasons. Guatemala is a country where community can only be defined as an abstract entity in which sources of loyalty do not represent uniform or coherent characteristics. That is, while the immediate physical and social surroundings may define individual loyalty to religious, economic, political, and cultural symbols, it is neither necessarily consistent nor unconditional. In other words, the country's long history of ethnic, economic, social and political conflict has contributed to dislocate social structures to such a point that it is almost impossible to identify a single community (rural or urban) where individual loyalties remain consistent over long periods of time. However, this is an idea that is better served by providing a brief summary of Wilson's main points and arguments, as they have been organized in the study at the center of this review.

While Wilson himself does not organize his study into three clearly defined sections, it can be suggested that the nine chapters of his work are structured into such a division. In Chapter One and Chapter Two, the author explores the theoretical bases for his analytical approach, and the implications that community-based loyalty have for the ongoing efforts, on the part of a group of Maya

intellectuals, to create a "pan-Mayanista" ethnic and cultural identity in present-day Guatemala. What can be considered the "second section" of Wilson's work [Chapter Three, Chapter Four, Chapter Five, and Chapter Six] explores the local Q'eqchi expressions of cultural and ethnic identity in the areas of culture, politics and economics. The "third section" of *Maya Resurgence in Guatemala* is comprised of the last three chapters [Chapter Seven to Chapter Nine]. In this section, the author explores the effects that state-sponsored repression had on subsequent Q'eqchi expressions of cultural and political activism, as defined by their "resurgence", and the ways in which "cultural change" and the "construction of ethnic identity" among this particular Maya group can be explained by existing theories on the subject.

Wilson's major points and arguments can be summarized as follows. In Chapter One ["Conceptualizing Identity"], the author provides an overview of his own academic and personal motives to explore the issue of "Maya Resurgence" in Guatemala, and provides a brief overview of the ideas on the subject previously expressed by scholars such as John Watanabe, Robert Carmack, Sheldon Annis, Carol Smith, and John Hawkins, among others. It can be suggested that in this particular chapter, Wilson's main goal is to provide a theoretical blueprint for his subsequent analysis, as represented by "materialist" vs "relativist" theories on the conceptualization and transformation of "Indian identity" in Guatemala. In the second chapter of his work ["Ethnicity and the Colonized Landscape"], Wilson focuses on exploring the significance and importance of "community" for the formation of a "pan-Q'eqchi' identity. Within this context, it can be argued that Wilson's approach to the subject of ethnic identity formation among the Maya Q'eqchi' of Alta Verapaz is crucial for understanding larger related issues such as the Maya intellectuals' own efforts to create a

"pan-Maya" identity among the Guatemalan indigenous groups.

In "Reclaiming a Colonized Landscape" [Chapter Three], the author explores the ways in which "local communities" are commonly "imagined through interactions with the surrounding landscape". To prove his arguments, Wilson relies on describing the ways in which economic and cultural practices among the Q'eqchi' contribute to the fostering of a "symbolism of production and identity" (p. 52). The author also explores the idea of whether or not ritualistic practices, such as sexual abstinence, fasting, and religious sacrifice, are merely the result of "ancestor worship" or a more significant act of "ethnic resistance". In chapters four and five, Wilson offers a more detailed description of the ways in which Maya "resurgence" is expressed on a day-to-day basis, in areas such as agriculture and the "curing" of human illnesses.

Perhaps one of the most interesting and important chapters in Wilson's work is Chapter Six ["Converting to Religious Orthodoxy"], where the author explores the growing rivalry between Evangelical and Catholic Q'eqchi, and the effects of that religious competition on the "imagining" of a Q'eqchi' ethnic and cultural identity. Wilson's views on this particular aspect somehow reflect some of the views expressed previously by other experts on the subject, and they clarify the reasons why Indian catechists in rural Guatemala became a major target of the Guatemalan military's scorched-earth policies during the 1970s and 1980s. As Wilson states:

. . . in the context of certain continuities in practice and belief, the catechists introduced a fundamentally new way of apprehending the world that made it possible to imagine wider frames of reference such as class and the "pan-Q'eqchi' community". Combined with "rural repression", Wilson adds, "these two events, the catechist program and the civil war, form the histori-

cal background for a new Indigenist movement (205).

Here it is important to point out that Wilson is not too convincing in justifying his use of the term "indigenist" to describe the Maya movement in Guatemala. In my view, a more appropriate term would be "indianista" since the latter reflects more clearly the nature of the Maya movement. On the one hand, one must consider the views of scholars such as Alan Knight in relation to the nature of "Indigenismo":

The attribution of Indian identity began, of course, with the Conquest. It was the European who created the Indian. Thereafter, attributions changed, racial theories came and went, [and] doctrines of 'Indigenismo' developed. [T]hese were primarily the constructions of non-Indians: 'Indian', as a term either of abuse or praise, was conceived and applied by non-Indians. Thus, a colonial elite confronted what was for it a relatively undifferentiated Indian mass; while -- in terms of subjective consciousness -- the Indian mass was divided into a myriad of semi-autonomous communities, often mutually hostile." [9]

In other words, Indigenismo has been widely studied, explored, and analyzed by scholars belonging to a wide range of academic disciplines. In general terms, Indigenismo can be understood simply as "a political formulation, and an ideological current, [which has been] crucial for many Latin American countries . . . , in their [efforts to bring to reality their] national projects, and [their definitions of national identity." [10] "Indianismo", on the other hand, shares similar structural characteristics with "Indigenismo" but transfers control over cultural, economic, political, and social change to the indigenous groups themselves. In other words, while traditional "Indigenista" philosophical views of the relationship between Amerindian groups and the nation-state in Latin America has attempted to control the Indians' "development", Indianista perspectives have been used since the 1960s by aboriginal groups

throughout the Americas to take control of that same process in order to carry it out on their own terms. [11]

In the last three chapters of his work, Wilson explores in more detail the ways in which the Guatemalan military counterinsurgency campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s led to the development of a new Q'eqchi identity, a development that in itself offers clear evidence of an unexpected but welcomed Maya resurgence in that Central American nation. I utilize the term "unexpected" to describe this "Maya resurgence" in Guatemala for a variety of reasons. First, the military campaign against the leftist "subversion" there was also designed to reinforce traditional views of "Guatemalidad" among the Indian and non-Indian population. Second, given the ferocity of the military repression during the Guatemala civil war, the strength of the Maya "resurgence" is even more astonishing. However, as Wilson suggests in the last chapter of his study, the resurgence of Maya culture and political activism in Guatemala also led to a growing polarization among the various Guatemalan Maya groups over what were the cultural, economic, political, and religious factors that defined [and should define] "Mayanness". In the particular case of the Q'eqchi, these developments also led to a growing competition, at both the inter and intra-communal levels, over the factors that defined and should define the Q'eqchi identity.

Finally, it is important to state briefly some of the strengths and weaknesses of Wilson's study of Maya resurgence among the Guatemalan Q'eqchi. As stated earlier, Wilson explores some of the same issues that have been at the center of analyses on the same subject by other scholars and Maya activists. However, the unique value of Wilson's study is best embodied by its focus on the ways in which the Guatemalan Q'eqchi have attempted to express on a day-to-day and communal levels their ethnic identity. More importantly, Wilson's approach to the issue of ethnic identity

among the Q'eqchi provides a much needed complement to previous analyses on the particular issue of Maya activism in Guatemala. Like other studies on Indian cultural, and political activism in Guatemala, Richard Wilson's analysis could be better served by greater reliance on a multidisciplinary approach. Despite its expected and natural shortcomings, Wilson's case study offers a much needed and welcome analysis on the subject of Maya cultural and political activism in Guatemala.

#### Notes

[1]. Demetrio Cojti Cuxil, cited in Richard Adams' "Etnias in an Epoch of Globalization, with Special Reference to Guatemala", paper presented to the Latin American Studies Association's XVIII Conference, Atlanta, Georgia. March 10, 1994.

[2]. For a further discussion on the issue of the revival of the ethnic option as a political alternative for rising ethno-nationalist movements, see "An ethnic revival"? in Anthony D. Smith's *The Ethnic Revival*. Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 8-20.

[3]. For examples see Edward F. Fischer and R. McKenna Brown, (eds.), *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*, first published by the University of Texas Press at Austin, in 1996. This collection of essays offers examples of the various perspectives that have been utilized by several scholars to explore the issue of Maya cultural and political "resurgence". Among the essays included in this edited work are those by Demetrio Cojti Cuxil, Enrique Sam Colop, Irma Oztzy, Kay B. Warren, Nora England, Carol Hendrickson and others.

[4]. See Carol Smith, "Mayan Nationalism", in *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 25:3 (1991).

[5]. Not all the terms that have been utilized at one point or another to describe this phenomenon are included in this review.

[6]. The term "Ladino" serves to describe an ethnic category that includes Guatemalans of "pure" European descent, as well as "Mestizos"

(Guatemalans of both European and indigenous ethnic ancestry), and some "acculturated" indigenous people.

[7]. Paul Brass, in *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, deals with the themes of nationalism and the roles that the elites play in defining national identities, and ethnicity. In page 16 of his work, Brass argues that ethnicity and nationalism are the creations of the elites. They are the ones, he writes, "who draw upon, distort, and sometimes fabricate materials from the cultures of the groups they wish to represent, in order to protect their well-being or existence, or to gain political and economic advantage for their groups as well as for themselves." Brass' work was published by Sage Publications, of Newbury Park, California, in 1991.

[8]. Clear examples of "pan-Mayanistas" are well-known Maya intellectuals -- Demetrio Cojti Cuxil, Estuardo Zapeta, and Irma Otzoy, among others.

[9]. See Alan Knight, "Racism, Revolution, and Indigenismo: Mexico, 1910-1940", in *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940*, Richard Graham, ed., Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990, p. 25.

[10]. "El Indigenismo: Recuento y Perspectivas", *América Indígena*, 50:1[1990], p. 63.

[11]. I explore the issue of "Indigenismo" vs "Indianismo" in the second chapter of "Morning Comes for the Heart of the Sky, Heart of the Earth: The Re-emergence of Maya Nationalism in Guatemala, 1982-1992", unpublished MA Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1995. pp. 19-56.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

**Citation:** Alex Taylor. Review of Wilson, Richard. *Maya Resurgence in Guatemala: Q'eqchi' Experiences*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. January, 2000.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3773>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.