



Polonia

Estudios
Latinoamericanos

Sociedad Polaca de Estudios Latinoamericanos

ISSN 0137-3080

Original title / título original: *Between the past and the present: the Ixil Maya and the discovery of rare mural paintings in Guatemala*

Author(s)/ autor(es):

Jarosław Żrałka, Katarzyna Radnicka

Published originally as/ Publicado originalmente en:

Estudios Latinoamericanos, 33/34 (2013-2014), pp. 169-185

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36447/Estudios2014.v33-34.art7>

Estudios Latinoamericanos is a journal published by Polish Society for Latin American Studies (Polskie Towarzystwo Studiów Latinoamerykanistycznych).

Polish Society for Latin American Studies is scholarly organization established to facilitate research on Latin America and to encourage and promote scientific and cultural cooperation between Poland and Latin America.

Estudios Latinoamericanos, revista publicada por la Sociedad Polaca de Estudios Latinoamericanos (Polskie Towarzystwo Studiów Latinoamerykanistycznych).

Sociedad Polaca de Estudios Latinoamericanos es una asociación científica fundada con el fin de desarrollar investigaciones científicas sobre América Latina y participar en la cooperación científica y cultural entre las sociedades de Polonia y América Latina.

Between the past and the present: the Ixil Maya and the discovery of rare mural paintings in Guatemala

Jarosław Żrałka and Katarzyna Radnicka

Abstract

The Ixil Maya area is located in Quiché Department of the north-western part of the Guatemalan Highlands. It has witnessed a continuous occupation since the 1st millennium BC till today. This archaeologically interesting region has provided many important discoveries of rare cultural mixture, with distinct features typical for both Maya Highlands and more distant Lowlands. Recently, the scholarly interest has focused on Chajul, where a few years ago, in one of the local houses, well preserved wall paintings dated to the Colonial period were exposed by the house owner during the process of its renovation. With this extraordinary finding a question emerged – are we able to confirm the cultural continuity between the pre-Columbian settlers and modern Ixil who claim «to be always here»? This paper presents a brief outline of the history of the Ixil Maya. It also presents results of some recent and preliminary studies conducted by Polish scholars in this region.

Key words: Ixil Maya, wall paintings, Chajul, cultural continuity.

Resumen

ENTRE EL PASADO Y EL PRESENTE: EL ÁREA MAYA IXIL Y EL DESCUBRIMIENTO DE UNA EXCEPCIONAL PINTURA MURAL EN GUATEMALA

La Región Ixil se encuentra en el departamento de Quiché en la parte noroccidental del altiplano de Guatemala. Esta región ha sido testigo del asentamiento maya desde el primer milenio a.C. hasta hoy. Esta área, muy interesante desde el punto de vista de la arqueología, ha proporcionado a los descubrimientos muy importantes de una mezcla cultural poco frecuente, con distintas características típicas tanto para el Altiplano Maya, así como Tierras Bajas más distantes. Últimamente el interés de los científicos se concentró en Chajul, donde hace algunos años en una de las casas locales se encontró unas pinturas bien preservadas fechadas para el periodo colonial durante la renovación ejecutada por el dueño de la casa. La cuestión que se plantea es si gracias a este descubrimiento extraordinario podemos confirmar la continuidad cultural entre los pobladores precolombinos y los ixiles modernos que afirman «estar siempre aquí». El presente trabajo muestra una breve reseña de la historia de los mayas ixiles. Además, presenta los resultados de los recientes estudios preliminares que se llevaron a cabo por los científicos polacos en esta región.

Palabras claves: Mayas Ixiles, pinturas murales, Chajul, continuidad cultural.

Jarosław Żrałka ■ Institute of Archaeology, Jagiellonian University in Kraków; e-mail: j.zralka@uj.edu.pl
Katarzyna Radnicka ■ Institute of Archaeology, Jagiellonian University in Kraków; e-mail: katarzyna.radnicka@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Professor Aleksander Posern-Zieliński's interests primarily focused on contemporary indigenous communities in both Americas, including groups that were direct descendants of Pre-Columbian traditions and had not been particularly influenced by the transformations of the colonial era. Much of the professor's attention was devoted to the relationships between archaeology and ethnology, and to the cultures researched by cooperating scholars representing the two disciplines. One of the areas in Latin America where the Pre-Columbian legacy is present among the population, where archaeologists cooperate with anthropologists and reach for ethnographic analogies to better understand their own discoveries, where, finally, the past mixes with the present, is the territory of southern Guatemala and Mexico inhabited by numerous groups of Maya people. The region endured the great collapse of the Classic Maya civilization that had led to the abandonment of the majority of Maya cities in the lowlands in the second half of the 8th – early 9th century AD. Pre-Columbian Maya centers in what is now northern Guatemala, Belize, western Honduras and El Salvador as well as large patches of Mexico became depopulated and have faded into oblivion. Only the cities located in the highlands of Guatemala and Mexico and in the northern Yucatan survived until the times of the Spanish conquest and put up armed resistance against the invaders. After the conquest, a new political and administrative order was introduced in the former Maya lands and new laws, duties and religion were imposed on the indigenous population. Local people started to adopt the new cultural model, undergoing changes and often losing many elements of their identity. Nevertheless, numerous groups of the Maya people, especially those living on the peripheries of major political transformations, managed to retain much of their traditions and beliefs, and even today they offer a unique research opportunity for both anthropologists and archaeologists. One such group are the Ixil Maya from western Guatemala, who are the subject of this paper. Thanks to the extreme inaccessibility of this region - which is situated in high mountains or mountain valleys, and its distance from the Spanish and Guatemalan authorities, the local people lived for several hundred years in pervasive cultural and political isolation. The example of the Ixil Maya allows us to demonstrate how the elements of the Pre-Columbian legacy interweave with customs and elements of a new culture, imposed on the indigenous people by the Spanish conquerors.

2. The Ixil Maya today

Today, the Maya are one of the largest indigenous Indian groups in Central America. Their population is estimated to exceed 6 million people, and living mainly in Guatemala, Mexico and Belize. They speak more than twenty different languages, comprising over a hundred dialects. In Guatemala alone, indigenous people who are almost entirely represented by the Maya constitute 40% of the whole

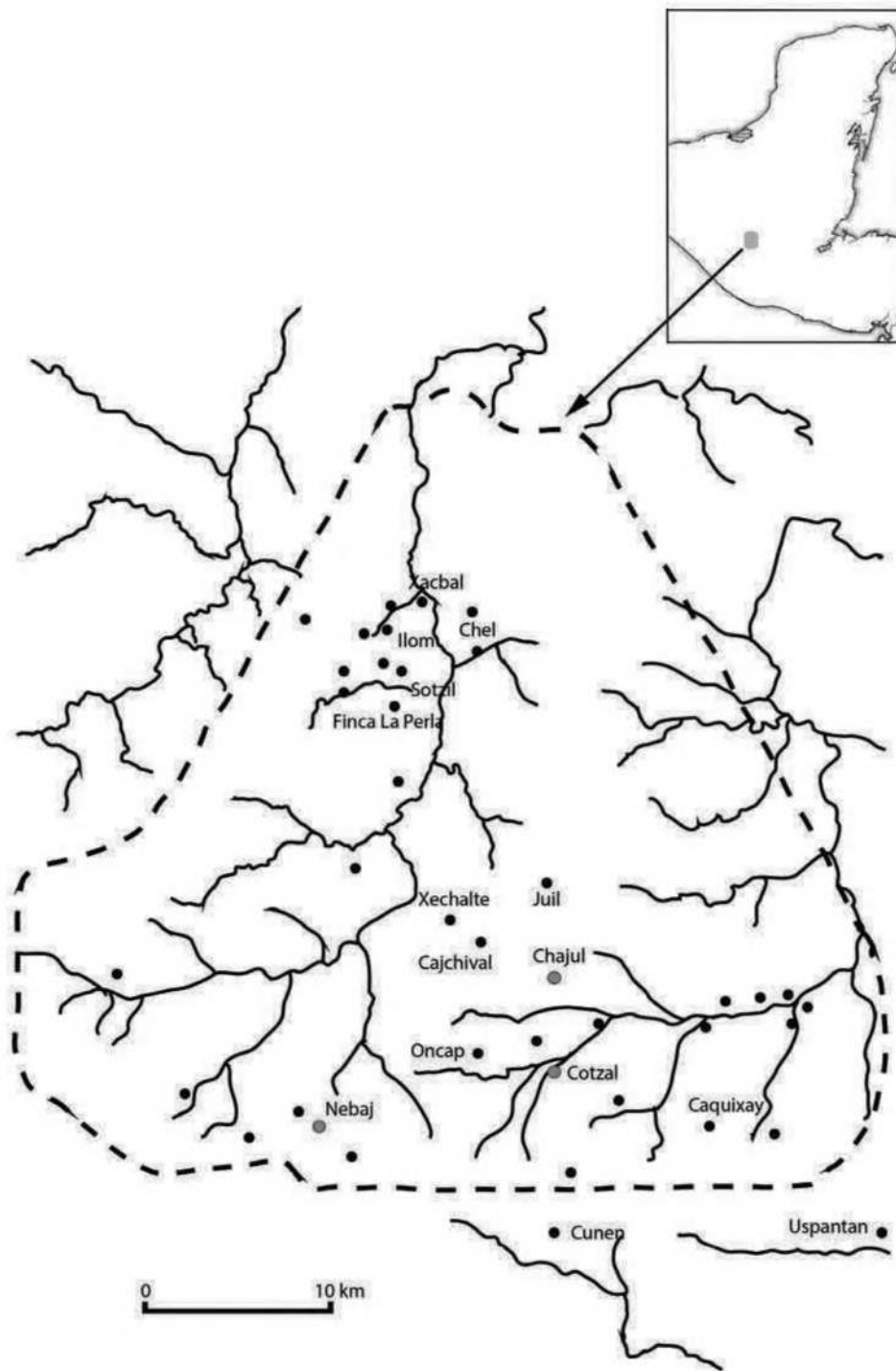


Figure 1. Schematic map of the Ixil region indicating modern cities and major archaeological sites.

population of this country (see <http://www.ine.gob.gt/index.php/estadisticas/caracterizacion-estadistica>). The Maya live primarily in the southern, mountainous part of Guatemala and represent several language groups. Among the most important are K'iche', Kaqchikel and Mam. One of the languages belonging to the Mam group is Ixil. The Ixil Maya inhabit the northern part of the El Quiché department in Guatemala (Fig. 1), near the Cuchumatanes mountains (Sierra de los Cuchumatanes).

The Ixil Maya communities are clustered around three municipalities, sometimes referred to as Ixil Area or the Ixil Triangle (the latter term was used by the Guatemalan authorities during the civil war). These are San Gaspar Chajul, San Juan Cotzal and, the largest of them, Santa María Nebaj, which plays a central role. Nebaj hosts several organizations (such as for example Funda Maya or Fundación Ixil) involved in revitalizing local traditions and raising funds to finance the development of the region.

In 2010, the population of the three centres of the Ixil Area was estimated at 154,300, of whom 83% were termed *indígenas*, or native Maya people. Most of the residents of Chajul and the nearby localities lead a modest life based on farming, sheep breeding, or weaving. Their textiles often fetch a very high price on the metropolitan markets, where they enjoy popularity, especially among foreign tourists. However, only a small proportion of the money goes into the pockets of the producers. Part of the Ixil Maya population is dedicated to coffee cultivation, especially in the lower parts of the territory. Some of them have their own crops, and others are employed on large coffee plantations (such as *finca* «La Perla», *finca* «San Francisco» and others) or in coffee production. For many years, coffee cultivation was the main source of income for the Ixil Maya families, but the recently recurring plagues had significantly deteriorated the situation of the local population, bringing them to the limits of survival¹.

As in other parts of Guatemala, a large section of society lives in poverty, with an estimated 85% of the Maya living below the poverty line. For the majority of children, education is limited to the first few classes of primary school, after which they leave education to help their parents in everyday work. Approximately 50% of children have limited access to education.

The Ixils are a closed society, who attach great importance to their traditions. The language they use in everyday life belongs to the Mayan language family; Spanish is a foreign language, and many do not speak it at all (this applies especially to women – men need to have at least a working knowledge of Spanish as they trade with other regions). The differences between particular Mayan languages can be very significant (as it is the case with the language spoken by the Ixils, which belongs to the Mam group, and the language used by their neighbours, the K'iche' Maya, which represents another group), so Spanish is often used as a kind of communication bridge for various Maya groups. There are also significant differences between the dialects of the Ixil language used in the three municipalities of the Ixil

area, although they are for the most part mutually understood. Due to the presence of the Maya K'iche' communities in the Ixil Area, such as Xolcuay (Chajul Municipality) or Villa Hortencia (Cotzal Municipality), there is also a numerous group of inhabitants of this region who speak K'iche', or both K'iche' and Ixil.

Most of the Ixil women wear traditional costumes: beautiful red skirts made of a long piece of cloth wrapped several times around the waist, colourful embroidered *huipil* blouses, and headbands with dangling pom-poms. The colours and patterns on blouses worn by women identify the place they come from. The Ixil men also wear their own traditional costume, although far less frequently. It consists of red and black braided jackets, white trousers and white shirts. According to Franz Termer who visited this region several times in the 19th century, this type of jacket was inspired by the 17-18 century Spanish officers' costumes (Lincoln 1942: 104).

The Ixil region was badly affected by the civil war in Guatemala between 1960 and 1996. The guerrillas from *Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres* (Guerrilla Army of the Poor) used the mountains of the Quiché department as their shelter. The mass elimination of native Indian civilians by the Guatemalan army left a severe mark on the people of the Ixil Area.

3. Archaeology and history

Little is so far known about the past of the area inhabited by the Ixil Maya. The region abounds in archaeological sites but most have not been sufficiently investigated thus far. However, it is known that they were important political and cultural centres of the Ixils in the pre-Columbian period. These centres were bustling with life, and maintained trade relationships with both people from the highlands and with those from the Maya lowlands.

Among the Ixil sites that have been archaeologically researched, Nebaj should be mentioned as the first and most important. It was excavated between 1946 and 1949 under the auspices of the Carnegie Institution of Washington and the direction of Ledyard Smith. During these investigations, Nebaj was mapped and many tombs, offerings as well as vestiges of architecture were discovered in several major constructions named Mounds 1, 2 and 6 (Smith and Kidder 1951). Unfortunately, since 1949 no work has been carried out there and, as our recent reconnaissance proved, the site is now threatened by the constant ploughing of the local people. The Carnegie Institution of Washington also patronized the archaeological surveys of several other archaeological sites in the Ixil area, including the important centre of Juil/Huil (Smith and Kidder 1951: 4). Further studies in this region were conducted by Richard Adams in 1965, east of Nebaj, between Cotzal and Chipal Rivers (Adams 1972; Becquelin *et al.* 2001: 1).

Another important site of the Ixil region, although much smaller in size than Nebaj, is Xacbal located in the northern part of Ixil area. It was first visited in

1927 by the German scholar Franz Termer who named and described the site. In 1931 he reported the discovery of many vessels found in two tombs at Xacbal (Becquelin *et al.* 2001). However, no archaeological work was undertaken at Xacbal until recent years when between 2008 and 2010 a salvage archaeology project (*Proyecto de Rescate Arqueológico Xacbal* [PRAX]) directed by Guatemalan archaeologist, Juan Luis Velásquez, was carried out there. Within the framework of this project, some excavations were performed as well as the restoration of several buildings (Fig. 2); Xacbal and its peripheries were also surveyed. This work proved that the site was inhabited from the Middle Preclassic until the Late Postclassic period (ca. 500 BC-1530 AD) being an important commerce and political centre located on the trade route connecting Maya Highlands and Lowlands (Velásquez 2010, 2012; Hermes and Velásquez 2014).

Another important work in the Ixil area was conducted by the *Centro Nacional de Investigación Científica de Francia*. During this research, the upper Xacbal valley was surveyed and new sites were reported and mapped (among them Sotzil, Chel, Ilom and Chajul). Limited excavations were also carried out (Becquelin *et al.* 2001: 179-181). However, no other archaeological work was undertaken in this vast territory despite the presence of numerous sites, many of which are located close to or directly in the area of modern Ixil villages and towns.

As far as historical sources are concerned, we know very little about the Ixils. Our poor knowledge stems primarily from the fact that very few native documents or Spanish chronicles have survived that would shed some light on the early history of this people. The most important document which mentions the Ixils is the famous *Rabinal Achí*, although it depicts the reality of the 14th and 15th century AD (*Rabinal Achí* is a drama from the 15th century, discovered in Rabinal in Alta Verapaz department by French scholar named Charles-Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg in 1855). The drama deals with the conflicts between the residents of Rabinal and the city of Utatlan, the capital of the K'iche' Maya. *Rabinal Achí* mentions the son of a king of the K'iche', who is referred to as the prince of Cunen and Chajul (Smith and Kidder 1951: 7; Cardoza and Aragón 2008). These accounts suggest that before the European conquest the Ixil were subordinated by the K'iche' Maya and that Chajul was one of the leading centres of the Ixils. These territories were most likely conquered by the K'iche' ruler named K'iq'ab' the Great (who ruled ca. 1435-1475 AD).

The conquest of the Ixil lands took place soon after Spanish conquistadors, led by Pedro Alvarado, seized control of what is now southern Guatemala having defeated the two major political forces of that time, namely the K'iche' Maya and the Kakchiquel Maya (Colby 1969: 40; Van Akkeren 2007). The first expedition launched in Ixil lands in 1529 brought the conquest of Chajul and Nebaj. They regained at least temporary independence in 1530 after the Spanish suffered defeat in their attack on the city of Uspantan (the first capital of the K'iche' Maya). How-



Figure 2. General view of Xacbal (photograph by Jarosław Żrałka).



Figure 3. One of the Chajul houses built on a platform faced with stones and bearing central stairway (note the wooden columns on the façade of the building). Photograph by Robert Słaboński.



Figure 4. The interior of Lucas Asicon's house with wall paintings visible in the foreground. The photograph features the wife and daughter of Lucas Asicon (2011). Photograph by Robert Słaboński.



Figure 5. Fragment of a wall painting from Lucas Asicon's house depicting a procession of richly attired personages. Photograph by Robert Słaboński.

ever, the city was attacked again and captured in the same year, and the Ixil lands controlled by the K'iche' fell once again under Spanish control. The Ixils, with forces numbering 4,000-5,000 warriors, tried to put up resistance and fought two battles near mountain passes. However, Nebaj was finally taken by storm and Chajul surrendered (Smith and Kidder 1951: 7-8; Colby 1969: 42; Becquelin *et al.* 2001: 13-14). The Spanish victory was followed by the organized evangelization of native Indians, led by the Dominicans. At the same time, the local population was resettled and concentrated in three cities: Nebaj, Chajul and Cotzal. These demographic movements resulted in the abandonment of numerous old villages of pre-Columbian origin and the concentration of people in major centres, where they were easier to control. However, many native Indians still remained on the peripheries of major centres and functioned in isolation from European influence. The names of numerous villages are known from which people were resettled to the cities, and in some cases they can be identified with archaeological sites of today. We know, for example, that the inhabitants of eleven different villages were moved to Chajul, of which at least some, are known to archaeologists.

The conquest opens up a new chapter in the history of the Ixils, a chapter when a specific culture takes shape, which is often called *cultura indígena tradicional*. This term applies to the tradition that merges two basic elements: one of pre-Columbian origin, which survived regardless of the conquest and which included rituals, beliefs and traditions of ancient Indians (such as the contemporary use of the Maya calendar), and the second one, which brought new trends and customs to the local culture from the Spanish missionaries and laymen governing these lands from the 16th century. The above term differs from another one: *cultura indígena modificada*, used to describe the native Indian population who underwent deep acculturation by the Europeans. The period when *cultura indígena tradicional* formed falls within the range between the 16th century and the year 1887, when the first mestizo settlers (*ladinos*) arrived in Nebaj (Smith and Kidder 1951: 8; Adams 1972: 24-25; Becquelin *et al.* 2001: 15). From that moment, the process of acculturation of the local population has been much more intensive (which implies an evolution towards *cultura indígena modificada*) and continues until today. However, it should be emphasised that the Ixils were (and still are) extraordinarily attached to ancient traditions and have successfully resisted foreign influences. The mestizo groups started to infiltrate the region on a larger scale only in the early 20th century, when they started to settle and work on coffee plantations.

As far as the ethnographic studies of Ixil Maya are concerned, the most important studies were carried out by such scholars as Gustav Bernoulli (Smith and Kidder 1951: 4), Otto Stoll (1884), Franz Termer (1958), Benjamin Colby (1969, 1976; see also Colby and Colby 1981) and Jackson Stewart Lincoln (1942, 1945). Among the more recent works on the Ixils one should mention *Between Two Armies*

in the *Ixil Towns of Guatemala* written by David Stoll (1993), focusing primarily on the issue of the civil war, or *Ixil: lugar del jaguar: historia y cosmovisión Ixil* by Ruud Van Akkeren (2005).

Nowadays we can also witness a kind of ancestral tradition «renaissance», frequently animated by the indigenous organizations present in the region. It mainly consists of the revalorization of the traditional authorities carrying rods (sometimes adorned with the Maya glyphs), called *alcaldes indígenas* or *q'ésal tenam*. On the other hand we can also observe a movement towards Maya spirituality, calendar counting and the reestablishment of the main Maya traditional celebrations, in the presence of the priests that continue to accomplish them until today.

4. Chajul

Chajul, the head town of the Chajul Municipality, is a place where the elements of indigenous and Spanish tradition are very tightly interwoven. This can be observed not only in local customs but also in architecture. Many of the houses we see today are built on stone-coated platforms and have a central staircase leading to the interior (Fig. 3); these closely resemble Maya constructions of the pre-conquest era known from archaeological excavations. The majority of the houses are provided with a columned portico at the front, similar to those known from colonial architecture in Mexico and Guatemala (e.g. in Antigua Guatemala). However, columns in the front were also a widespread element in Pre-Columbian architecture in the Maya area and other parts of Mesoamerica, especially in Late Classic and the entire Postclassic period, i.e. before the conquest.

As mentioned, in the light of historical sources, Chajul was one of the largest and most prominent Ixil centres after the conquest, to which many people were displaced from nearby villages. According to the 1693 chronicle entitled *Recordación Florida* (Becquelin *et al.* 2001: 13 after De Fuentes and Guzman 1933, 3:58-64), people from eleven indigenous villages had been resettled to Chajul, among which the following place names can be identified: Huyl (the archaeological site of Huil/Juil, and at the same time a hamlet near the Chacalté village), Ylom (Ilom, in the commune of Chajul), Chaxá (a hamlet near the village of Xemal), Honcab (the archaeological site of Oncap or a hamlet called Joncab, in the immediate vicinity of Chajul) and Chel (a village in the commune of Chajul) (Becquelin *et al.* 2001: 14). Until today there exists in Chajul an archaeological site with low platforms dating from the Pre-Columbian era, which are the relics of pre-conquest architecture (Becquelin *et al.* 2001). However, these structures have not, as yet, been investigated by archaeologists. It is also likely that some of the houses presently inhabited by the Maya have been built on relics dating back to Pre-Columbian architecture or to the times shortly after the conquest.

5. Murals in Lucas Asicona's house

Several years ago, during the renovation of one of the houses at Chajul, a surprising discovery was made which has shed a completely new light on the history of the Ixils and their beliefs. In 2003 a man named Lucas Asicona removed the outer layer of lime plaster covering the walls in one of the rooms of his house and uncovered some colourful murals (Fig. 4). Originally, the polychrome most likely covered all four walls of the room, but one wall was unfortunately demolished during the renovation of the house.

One of the first scholars who saw the murals was Ruud van Akkeren. Subsequently, Guatemalan Institute of Anthropology and History (IDAEH) dispatched its representatives to see the paintings and to prepare a short report about this discovery. Afterwards, the house was also visited by Lars Frühsorge who published the first news about the paintings from different Chajul houses in *Mexicon Journal* (Frühsorge 2008). Lucas Asicona himself also made an announcement about this discovery in an attempt to attract the attention of the Guatemalan authorities. In 2012, the topic of murals was further publicised by the authors of this article. As a result, the National Geographic Society posted news accompanied by many photographs featuring murals and taken by Robert Słaboński. Subsequently, information about this interesting discovery appeared in many popular scientific magazines, among them the American journal *Archaeology* (see Zorich 2013).

The murals, probably executed in an *al fresco* technique when the plaster was still wet, feature a yet unidentified ceremony. A group of dancer-sacrificers dressed in sophisticated costumes (spotted cloaks with the representation of a white bird, decorative headdresses, heeled shoes with pointed toes) is shown with their arms upraised. In their hands they carry elements that are hard to be identified but which resemble human hearts, each with a fragment of aorta (Fig. 5). Moreover, one person holds what seems to be a bottle. The procession is accompanied by a small group of musicians with a large drum and flutes, dressed in full Spanish costumes – doublets with puffed sleeves and ruff, short capes worn over one shoulder, high hats with broad brims and shoes with low heels and pointed toes, the same as those worn by the dancers (Fig. 6). On the third wall censers with burning sacrifices are depicted – sparks (which resemble flowers) can be seen flickering all around² (Fig. 7).

The figures are very skillfully and dynamically rendered, but at the same time no individual traits are marked. The faces are almost identical, marked by a thin line of beige colour and with a large eye shown in profile, which reminds one of a mask. This apparent mixture of styles is really intriguing. On the one hand there are Indian costumes worn by some of the figures (long cloaks with the representation of a bird, sophisticated headgear typical of pre-Columbian art) and, on the other, there are elements of Spanish costume. However, it seems that these are not Spaniards playing music to the Indians during their ceremony, but only an adaptation of Spanish dress.

Information provided by Lucas Asicona during an interview carried out by the authors in 2011 indicates that the house was built in the 16th century, just after the construction of the nearby church. Moreover, Asicona argued that the murals were made not long after, possibly by the same people who created paintings in the Chajul church (the latter paintings are almost completely destroyed). In his opinion the artists who made murals were from Cobán (a city located now in Alta Verapaz department, north-east of Ixil Area). The costumes worn by the musicians seem typical of 16th century fashion, although analysis of the dress suggests that some elements (for example, the high hats, black tailcoats with high and stiff collar as well as tight and long pants creased down to the ankles) may be also dated to the 19th century (Małgorzata Skowron, personal communication 2011).

6. Other murals at Chajul

Apart from the house of Lucas Asicona (which Lars Frühsorge denominat-ed House 3), there are murals in at least three other houses at Chajul (c.f. Frühsorge 2008). In 2011 the authors of this article managed to get access to one of them belonging to «Don Gaspar», where the murals are not as well preserved as those described above. The same house had been previously visited by Frühsorge (2008) and named House 1. The murals survived on the northern and western walls of the main room of the house. The scenes seem similar (a procession of figures in ritual costumes, nearly identical censers with flickering sparks), but they are rendered in a somewhat clumsy style and with far less detail (Fig. 8). Among the figures one can notice the quetzal - the sacred bird which is now a symbol of Guatemala and whose feathers were highly valued by the Maya notables and rulers.

In the third house (bearing no. 2 according to Frühsorge's numeration), the murals are also preserved in poor condition but one can see once again a procession involving several individuals with similar capes as those painted in the house of Asicona as well as the remains of a censer with sparks emerging.

Similar murals were once to be seen also in a fourth house, which no longer exists. Having been unable to come to an agreement, its owners decided it was better to demolish the house and share the land. The poverty of the region, and also the lack of awareness among local people may lead to the destruction or damage of other murals as well. It cannot be excluded that similar murals may be found in the majority of old houses at Chajul.

In 2011 we managed to visit one more house, belonging to Francisco Raimundo. Fragments of murals were visible only in a few places, where the latest two layers of lime plaster broke off to reveal a colourful polychromy. Removing the latter layers of stucco would allow for the full exposition of the paintings which, as suggested by an initial examination, are very well preserved.



Figure 6. The mural from Asiconá's house depicting three musicians wearing Spanish dress and an individual with mixed Maya-Spanish elements of attire seen on the right. Photograph by Robert Słaboński.



Figure 7. Painting from Asiconá's house representing two censors with flower-like sparks.



Figure 8. Wall paintings from the house of Don Gaspar (note a censer with sparks seen on the right, and representations of two quetzals on the left). Photograph by Robert Słaboński.

It seems very possible that some of the wall paintings described above (except these from Asicon's house which were found recently) were already seen by Benjamin and Lore Colby since they mention murals in their 1981 publication. Unfortunately, no illustration of them was published by the Colbys (Frühsoorge 2008: 31).

7. Interpretation of the murals

The scenes depicted on the murals from Chajul defy any easy interpretation. The outfit and instruments of the musicians or the masks worn by the sacrificers make one think of the traditional dances from the K'iche region, such as *Baile de la Conquista* or the previously mentioned drama of *Rabinal Achí* (Frühsoorge 2008). This latter dance is a tradition rooted in pre-Colonial times. It is a drama that deals with events taking place in the K'iche' region during the 15th/16th century. One of the important characters mentioned in *Rabinal Achí* is Prince Cawek, lord of Cunen and Chajul. However, it should be emphasised that the above interpretation is not the final one and the representations on the murals require thorough investigation. It remains unclear whether the objects in the hands of the sacrificers are indeed human hearts, what role is played by the dwarf with a cane who

appears in several places and why the musicians are dressed in complete Spanish costumes. The history of Lucas Asicona's family, as the other families that live in the houses with murals, should be traced back in as much detail as possible, to ascertain the position of his ancestors in the local hierarchy and their role in ritual dances.

No detailed studies of the murals have been conducted so far, apart from the comparative analysis of the dress worn by the figures depicted. It is necessary to analyse the chemical composition of the stucco on which the murals are painted and to establish a precise chronology that would allow us to confirm or refute the age suggested by oral tradition.

Until 2011, the murals were known only to a small circle of people, mainly the scholars to whom Asicona showed the frescos; the issue gained broader publicity thanks to their on-line publication in National Geographic News.

Covered only with old newspapers in a kitchen that is still used by the Asicona family, the murals are in a constant state of deterioration. Their preservation, and perhaps even moving them to another place, is necessary to prevent smoke from the kitchen stove from blurring the colours, thus causing this unique masterpiece of art to be irretrievably lost.

8. Conclusion

The Polish 'episode' in the research in the Ixil Maya lands began three years ago and, thus far, has resulted in several visits paid by the archaeologist to Nebaj, Chajul and Ilom. Contacts have been established with organizations supporting the preservation of the Ixil Maya culture and the improvement of their standard of living (Fundu Maya, Fundación Kumool etc.), with local authorities, and with indigenous Indians themselves – with Lucas Asicona and other owners of houses where mural paintings have been discovered. After a series of meetings and the exchange of correspondence, a group of three anthropology graduates from Kraków (Monika Banach, Dominika Nowak and Joanna Schuster) have spent several months in Chajul and Ilom. In the nearest future, we expect to begin conservation works in Lucas Asicona's house as well as archaeological investigation within the framework of a broader interdisciplinary project aimed at researching the Ixil past and the alleged cultural continuity in the region.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to Lucas Asicona for all information concerning wall paintings from his house and provided during our conversations that took place in 2011, 2013 and 2014. We would also like to thank Monika Banach for her valuable comments concerning an earlier version of this text.

Notes

- ¹ It must be emphasised that the problem affects only small coffee cultivators, who do not have the economic opportunity to use fumigation.
- ² The latter objects might also represent an early version of the so-called *bombas* – that are nowadays used by the Ixils during different festivities and ceremonies. They consist of metal vessels to which petards or small bombs are inserted to make a loud explosion.

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