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Friends of the Lake?
The Megacollector Conflict and the
Revindication of Tz'unun Ya'
Timothy May

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Geography, Durham University

January 2021

Friends of the Lake? The Megacolector Conflict and the Revindication of Tz'unun Ya'

Timothy May

Abstract

There is growing recognition that radical ontological difference underlies Indigenous communities' opposition to extractivist development within their territories, particularly as they increasingly turn to a 'rights of nature' discourse to articulate their resistance. Scholars writing from the perspectives of political ontology and decolonial theory excitedly posit the possibility of the pluriverse emerging from the 'ontological openings' (de la Cadena, 2015a) and 'decolonial cracks' (Walsh, 2018) that these struggles are forming in the project of modernity. While such accounts are useful in elucidating how such struggles are more than 'mere resource conflicts' (Coombes et al., 2012a), they also risk reifying ontological difference and losing sight of their pragmatic functions. More than just a matter of academic debate, over-stating the ontological difference of Indigenous opposition to extractivism is a 'cosmopolitical risk' (Cepek, 2016) that has the potential to limit Indigenous communities' aspirations for self-determination. As a consequence, this research suggests a way forward can be found in 'ontologizing political economy' (Burman, 2016) whilst also paying closer attention to ontological ambiguities as evidenced by the concepts of 'transmodernity' (Dussel, 2012), 'partial connections' (de la Cadena, 2015a) and 'ch'ixi' (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012).

This research fleshes out these concerns through an ethnographic engagement with the Guatemalan Tz'utujil community of San Pedro, and its opposition to a wastewater megaproject, the 'megacolector' being advanced by a local environmental NGO 'Friends of the Lake' as a solution to Lake Atitlán's contamination. I apply a lens of political ontology and MCD to examine Pedrano community leaders' objections to the megacolector, but also to cast an eye to the wider community, and the initiatives of artists, poets, rappers, educators, agronomists, and spiritual guides. In doing so I demonstrate that beyond being a resource conflict and an ontological conflict, Pedranos' opposition is most significantly tied to a wider project of revindication, that is, efforts to reclaim San Pedro's epistemic and political autonomy.

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A Note on Translation:

All English texts and interviews are my translations, all errors are my own.

A Note on Figures:

All photos without an accompanying source are my own.

A Note on Quotations:

All quotations within this thesis with only a name stated as a source are from my ethnographic fieldwork data.

List of Abbreviations

AALA	Asociación de Amigos del Lago de Atitlán (Association of Friends of Lake Atitlán)
ALMG	Academia de Lengua Mayas de Guatemala (Mayan Language Academy)
AMSCLAE	Autoridad y Manejo Sostenible de la Cuenca del Lago de Atitlán y su Entorno (Authority for Sustainable Management of the Lake Atitlán Basin and Surrounding Areas)
ANT	Actor Network Theory
BCIE	Banco Centroamericano de Integración Económica (Central American Bank for Economic Integration)
CACIF	Comité Coordinador de Asociaciones Agrícolas, Comerciales, Industriales y Financieras (Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial, and Financial Associations)
CCDA	Comité Campesino del Altiplano (Peasant Committee of the Highlands)
CEA	Centro de Estudios Atitlán (Centre of Atitlán Studies)
CICC	Centro de Investigación Científica y Cultural (Scientific and Cultural Research Centre)
CMP	Colonial Matrix of Power
CNB	Curriculo Nacional Base de Guatemala (National Curriculum Base of Guatemala)
COCODE	Comunitario de Desarrollo Consejo (Community Development Council)
COMUDE	Consejo Municipal de Desarrollo (Municipal Development Council)
CONAP	Consejo Nacional de Áreas Protegidas (National Council for Protected Areas)
CONRED	Coordinadora Nacional para la Reducción de Desastres (National Coordinator for Disaster Reduction)
DOT	Defensa del Territorio (Defence of Territory)
ERIS	Escuela Regional de Ingeniería Sanitaria y Recursos Hidráulicos (Regional School of Sanitary Engineering and Hydraulic Resources)
ILO	International Labor Organisation
INE	Instituto Nacional de Estadística Guatemala (National Statistics Institute of Guatemala)
INGUAT	Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo (Guatemalan Tourism Institute)
MAGA	Ministerio de Agricultura, Ganadería y Alimentación (Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food)
MARN	Ministerio de Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (Ministry for Environment and Natural Resources)
MCD	Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality
MLP	Movimiento para la Liberación de los Pueblos (Movement for the Liberation of the Peoples)
MP	Ministerio Público (Public Ministry)
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
OWW	One World World
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PE	Political Ecology
PO	Political Ontology
PAC	Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil (Civil Defence Patrols)
PPP	Public–Private Partnership
SEA	Strategic Environmental Assessment
SFEI	Servicio Fomento Economía Indígena (Indigenous Economy Promotion Service)
STS	Science and Technology Studies
USAC	Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala
UVG	Universidad del Valle de Guatemala
WWTP	Wastewater Treatment Plant

Glossary

(S) denotes word of Spanish origin, (T) - Tz'utujil, (M) – Mexican (mainly Nahuatl), and (K) - Kaqchikel

Acuerdo municipal (S) – Municipal law

Ajaw (T) – The supreme creator god

Ajq'ij (T) – Spiritual guide

Alcaldía (S) – Town councils/mayoral administrations

Aldea (S) – Small village/hamlet

Alfombra (S) - Traditional religious carpet made from coloured sawdust

Amparo (S) – Legal injunction

Atiteco (M/S/T) – Inhabitants of Santiago Atitlán

Atit Ya' (M/T) - Grandmother Water

Cabecera (S) – Head officer of Santiago Atitlán's ancestral authority

Campesino (S) – Someone who works the land, a farmer, or peasant.

Cancha (S) – Basketball court in the centre of town where important public events are held

Canton (S) – Administrative unit of San Pedro

Cargador (S) – Director within ancestral authorities.

Cayuco (S) - Traditional wooden canoe

Chaletero (S) – Elite vacation homeowner

Chuacanté (T) – One of San Pedro's four *cantones*

Cocode (S) – Community council representative

Cofradía (S) – Religious brotherhood or saint society

Consejos (S) – Advice imparted by elders

Consulta comunitaria (S) – Community referendum

Costumbre (S) – Traditional beliefs

Criollo (S) – Guatemalan descendants of European settlers

Curandero (S) – Traditional healer

Feria (S) - Fair

Finca (S) – Plantation

Finquero (S) – Elite plantation owner

Gringo (S) – American

Imox (T) – Nahual for water

Indio Permitido (S) – Authorised Indian

Iyom (T) - Midwife

Ixim (T) - Corn

Kuku' (T) – Traditional clay water vessel

Kumuk (T) – Manmade stone structure of politico-spiritual importance

Ladino (S) - Westernized person of predominantly mixed Spanish and Indigenous descent

Lámina (S) – Tin sheet used as a roofing material

La Violencia (S) – The most violent period of the armed conflict (1980-1983)

Maquila (S) – Textile factory

Maxán (T) – Plant with large banana-like leaves used as a wrapping material

Mecapal (M) – Tumpline attached to the head traditionally used to carry loads in Mesoamerica

Megacolector (S) – ‘Mega-collector’ wastewater megaproject

Milpa (M) – Patch of land planted with corn and beans

Nahual (M/T) - Mythical essential power, protective spirit and day in the sacred calendar.

Patria (S) – Homeland

Pedrano (S) – Inhabitant of San Pedro

Pom (T) – Incense from resin of copal tree

Qa Tee' Ya' (T) – Our Mother Water/Lake

Quetzal (M) – Guatemalan currency

Repartimiento (S) - Forced draft of Mayan labour

Revanchismo (S) – Revenge politics

Ruk'u'x (T) – Life-force

Sololá (T) – Capital and namesake of the department

Tinaja (S) – Water vessel

Tul (T) – Aquatic plant, the reeds of which are used for weaving

Tzanjay (T) – One of San Pedro's four *cantones*

Tz'unun Ya' (T) - Water of the Hummingbird (San Pedro's Tz'utujil name)

Tz'utujil (T) – Mayan ethnic group living around Lake Atitlán

Xajaan (T) – Sin/shame

Xocomil (K) – Powerful wind which suddenly appears over the lake in the afternoon

Declaration

The material contained in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree in this or any other institution. It is the sole work of the author who takes full responsibility for any errors contained.

Statement of Copyright

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.

Acknowledgements

I would like to make a special thanks to my supervisors Mike and Simone, and especially to Penelope for all of her invaluable critical feedback and advice, to Massi for putting up with me and taking the leap to Guatemala, and to Michelle and Marcin for their friendship. I also want to thank my sisters - Annabelle, Laura and Sophie, as well as my father for all their constant support and encouragement.

Most of all I want to thank my mother, who has always inspired my curiosity in the world around me.

Hay demasiados Pedranos que agradecer aquí, pero tengo que mencionar Conce, Vinicio, Clemente, Don Salvador, Paulina, Luis, Maida, y Teodora. Muchas gracias por todo.

Sobre todo, al pueblo de Tz'unun Ya',

Maltiox



For my mother

Preface

I have tried to get stories of the origin of the lake, or anything about the lake, with very trivial success [...] It is my strong impression that the life and thoughts of the lake townspeople is directed back to the hills rather than to the lake [...] the lake itself, in short, does not appear to affect their culture very strongly.

Sol Tax – American Anthropologist writing from Lake Atitlán in 1937

*As the sun rose, with a bow, women would descend
passing on sands cleaned by your movement.
Before taking your waters they raised their gaze
to ask permission from the mother of life without equal.*

-

*The grandmothers and grandfathers said that you are a gift
because a woman came from above with a fine jar
That suddenly fell, spilling the water that it carried
and you were born beautiful grandmother Lake Atitlán*

-

*Grandmother Lake was considered a sacred jewel,
by those who with faith believed that you came from on high;
so that the favoured creatures did not suffer thirst,
Without selfishness I mean the Mayan descendants.*

-

*Lake Atitlán is a reason for permanent struggle,
of those who love you and respect you with conscience,*

-

**Extracts of the poem 'Lago Atitlán' (Quiacaín Sac, n.d.)
written by Don Salvador Quiacaín Sac - Pedrano elder and community leader**



Chapter 1: Introduction

On the morning of January 17th 2019 rumours began to flood my Facebook newsfeed warning of the Vice President's imminent arrival to inaugurate the construction of the 'megacolector' – an environmental wastewater megaproject promoted as a solution to Lake Atitlán's contamination problems. As the day wore on, Pedranos continued to raise the alert, and hundreds of protestors from all around the lake gathered to oppose it. The situation quickly escalated into a security concern, preventing the Vice President's helicopter from landing (Figure 1). As it turned out, the rumours were false, and his visit was unrelated to the megacolector. It didn't matter, the protestors seized the opportunity to make their opposition known.

Figure 1: January 17th 2019 anti-megacolector protests (in Chuk Muk, a suburb of Santiago Atitlán)



Esswein and Zernack (2019a)

I watched all this unfold on my laptop screen in the UK with amazement. Many of the people sharing the alert on Facebook knew nothing about the megacolector when I had interviewed them the year before. Something extraordinary had occurred in the meantime. During my fieldwork, I witnessed community leaders sowing the seeds of an opposition movement. Since returning to the UK its roots had spread, slowly mobilising the community against the megacolector. With the January protests, their efforts finally bore fruit, and Pedranos' resolve has only continued to grow. In September 2019, they delivered an *amparo* (legal injunction) to Guatemala's Constitutional Court in

an attempt to suspend the megaproject, citing violations of their right to prior consultation as guaranteed by the ILO-169 convention (Figure 2). A year later in the midst of COVID-19, Pedranos were granted a public hearing.¹ The outcome is still forthcoming, but it looks to have far-reaching consequences. If successful, it would be the first time in Guatemala's history that a megaproject was suspended before construction has even begun.



FGER (2019)

There is nothing remarkable about the photos above, they relate a story sadly familiar to Guatemala, where Indigenous communities are facing intensifying extractivist threats from transnational corporations. Yet the circumstances of the megaproject conflict are notably different. The megaproject is not a commercial mine or a hydroelectric dam, but the initiative of a local environmental NGO, AALA - 'la Asociación Amigos del Lago' (Friends of the Lake) which aims to pump wastewater away from the basin to prevent the lake's contamination. Given the

¹ Corte de Constitucionalidad de Guatemala (2020).

megacolector's seemingly innocuous intentions, what accounts for the scale of Indigenous mobilisation and San Pedro's central role in this lake-wide opposition movement?



The anthropologist Benjamin Paul explains that each of Lake Atitlán's communities are 'as distinctive from the others as are the personalities of different individuals' (Paul, 1950). In this regard, San Pedro has a reputation for being an independent-minded trailblazer. It often sets the example for the other communities to follow, indeed it has been the centre of a movement before. In 2016 San Pedro became Guatemala's most famous *pueblo ecológico* – (environmental town) due to its implementation of a well-publicised plastic ban,² initiating a movement which subsequently spread throughout the country (Rodríguez, 2018). This is what drew my interest to the community in the first place, but then the megacolector conflict flared up, and I was even more intrigued. Why was Guatemala's famous *pueblo ecológico* resisting environmental efforts to save Lake Atitlán?

This is the question which started me on my research journey, and it didn't take much digging to find an answer. Pedranos see the megacolector as a threat because despite its innocent environmental appearances, it *is* an extractivist project advanced by private interests. Although AALA is an NGO, it is also an elite association with many ties to the country's oligarchy. It claims the sale of wastewater to agroindustry on the Pacific coast is only a minor detail of the megacolector, required to make the whole project economically sustainable. However, Pedranos credibly fear this as a covert resource grab intended to privatise the lake's water. Such circumstances go some way in

² Municipal decree 111-2016 which banned single-use plastic bags, straws, and polystyrene.

explaining Pedranos' motives for resisting the megacolector, but not entirely. Take for instance the statements below from AALA's website and Pedranos' *amparo*:

*LAKE ATITLÁN IS THE MOST IMPORTANT AND VALUABLE **WATER RESOURCE** IN GUATEMALA.*

*Lake Atitlán is a cultural and natural icon that inspires everyone who visits. It is one of the most symbolic destinations in the country and a source of water for over 300,000 people that live on its shores [...] It is undoubtedly the most important natural attraction in the country and is **one of the main economic sources, as it attracts national and worldwide tourists***

AALA (2019a)

*Our legal action seeks to depart from the vision of the world that considers certain human beings the centre of the universe, and place on the discussion table **that the Lake/water is alive, that it makes claims, that it has rights and requires valorisation, respect and protection**. Without this recognition, any project can threaten Lake Atitlán. **Our Lake is much more than water, it is a living being***

Colectivo San Pedro (2019a, p.2)

While AALA values the lake as an economic resource, Pedranos claim the lake as a living being. This disparity reveals that the megacolector conflict is about more than just the control of a resource. It is also a conflict over what the lake actually is, in other words an ontological conflict. As such, it exposes the limits of relying solely upon a political ecology-orientated analysis and instead steers interpretations towards the theoretical frameworks of political ontology and MCD, both of which have recently gained traction in academic circles. These frameworks posit 'resource conflicts' like the megacolector's as emerging from the 'ontological openings (Walsh, 2018) and 'decolonial cracks' (de la Cadena, 2015a) of modernity. They imagine Indigenous communities' resistance as aimed towards guaranteeing 'futurity' – that is a different future that imagines, and 'struggles for, the conditions that will allow them to preserve as a distinct world' (Escobar, 2018, p.71). Although these theoretical frameworks can usefully broaden a classic political ecology analysis, they have also faced significant criticism for being insufficiently grounded in ethnographic realities and for reifying ontological boundaries. My research attends to these concerns by using an in-depth ethnographic account of the megacolector conflict to flesh out and critically assess these frameworks.

As Coombes et al., (2012a) state, 'Indigenous motivations in environmental disputes are connected to broader projects of recognition, reclamation of sovereignty and resistance to northern capitalism; they are not mere resource conflicts' (p.818). Indeed, during my fieldwork I came to understand Pedranos' opposition to the megacolector as connected to something greater, a wider project of revindication, i.e. efforts to reclaim Pedrano political and epistemic autonomy, the latter

of which centres on recovering ancestrality (ancestral values and ethics). Such autonomy is perceived to have been eroded as a result of 500 years of modern/colonial suppression. There are numerous signs of revindication in San Pedro, some more obvious than others. In everyday acts, a range of individuals - artists, poets, rappers, photographers, educators, spiritual guides, agronomists and community leaders are returning San Pedro to its ancestral roots as Tz'unun Ya' – the water of the hummingbird (the community's precolonial name). This is what the Pedrano contemporary artist Benvenuto Chavajay optimistically refers to as the 'retornar y retoñar' (returning and sprouting) of Pedrano ways of being and thinking (Figure 4).



With the aim of achieving greater epistemic and political self-determination, the revindication movement is orientated towards acts of 'epistemic disobedience' (Tlostanova, 2017), and San Pedro is more clearly focused on this goal than perhaps any other Indigenous community in the department. In 2014, Pedrano academics formed the region's only Indigenous-led research centre, and in 2017 elders refounded the community's ancestral government. In marked contrast to neighbouring communities, during the 2019 Presidential elections, the Pedrano electorate overwhelmingly neglected mainstream parties in favour of Thelma Cabrera, a grassroots Indigenous activist. In light of such developments, San Pedro's central role in the megacollector conflict comes as less of a surprise. We can see that Pedranos' opposition to the megacollector is not *only* about the megacollector. It is more significantly about reclaiming Pedrano epistemic and political autonomy.

In politicising the lake as a sentient being, Pedranos commit an ‘ontological disobedience’ (Burman, 2016) to AALA’s modern outlook. Yet, despite such public articulations, Pedranos aren’t responding from a place of ontological purity. Their revindication movement is critical of modernity, but it is being enacted through more complex ontological configurations than generally assumed by MCD and PO. Rather than an outright rejection of modernity, revindication entails a more pragmatic repurposing of modernity, selectively blending it with ancestrality to mitigate its destructive effects. While not totally dismissive of MCD and PO, my research does support those who criticise these frameworks for overstating ontological difference at the expense of more complex realities. My research suggests a more productive way forward can be found in paying greater attention to the more nuanced ontological ambiguities conceptualised in the notions of ‘transmodernity’ (Dussel, 2012), ‘partial connections’ (de la Cadena, 2015a) and ‘ch’ixi” (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012). My findings also suggest that such analyses require greater consideration of how ontological difference is strategically mobilised in specific social, historical, and political contexts. I arrived at such a conclusion through attempting to answer the following central question:

1. How can we understand the megacollector conflict as more than a ‘mere resource conflict’? (Coombes et al., 2012a).

Along with three related sub-questions:

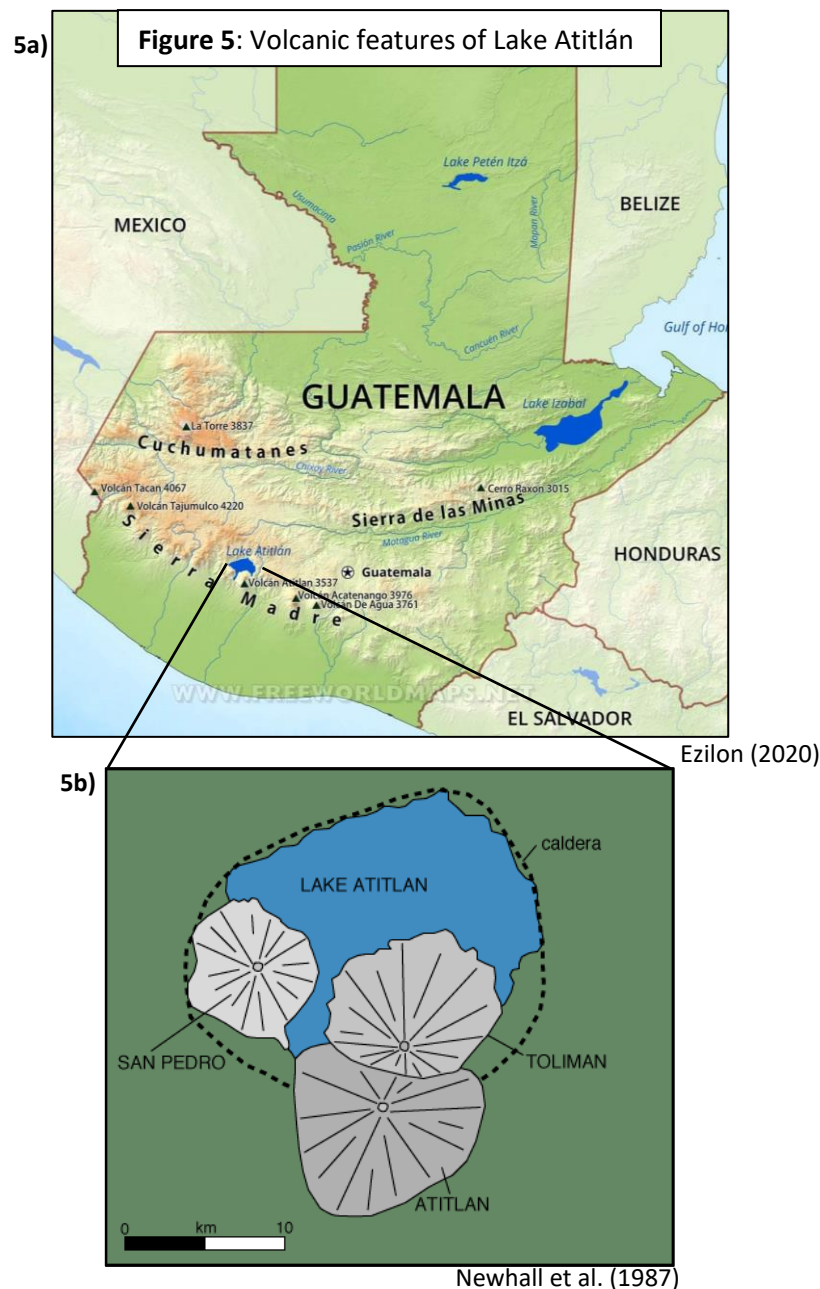
- I. How is the megacollector conflict linked to broader Indigenous struggles for revindication?
- II. Is the megacollector conflict an ontological conflict? What different forms of worlding can be identified?
- III. How are discourses of indigeneity and ontological difference mobilised by different actors in the megacollector conflict?

I provide further context for these questions in the literature review (Chapter 2). First, though, it is necessary to contextualise my case study.

Case Study Background

Lake Atitlán

Lake Atitlán is a high-altitude, freshwater lake in Guatemala's Western Highlands (14.68° N, 91.16° W) (Figure 5a). Approximately 12km by 5km, it is the third largest lake in the country, and with a maximum depth of 330 metres, it is the deepest lake in all of Central America (Ferráns et al., 2017). The lake sits in a volcanic caldera, formed 84,000 years ago from the 'Los Chocoyos' eruption (Newhall et al., 1987). This cataclysmic event created three large volcanoes which still surround the lake today, Atitlán, Tolimán, and San Pedro (Figure 5b).



Like many lakes in the world, Lake Atitlán is suffering from accelerating rates of contamination. In October 2009, a massive foul-smelling cyanobacterial (blue-green) algal bloom spread rapidly over its surface. It wasn't the first time something like this had happened,³ but it was the largest and most serious algal bloom to date. It lasted for two months, which devastated the local tourist and fishing economies, and prevented people from swimming and washing laundry in the lake (Bájan Balán, 2016; Valladares, 2010). Most concerning however was its threat to public health, as several communities (San Pedro included) depend upon the lake as their main source of drinking water. Although the cyanobacteria in the lake has not yet proved to be toxic, this likelihood is increasing as blooms occur with greater frequency. Another large blooming event occurred in August 2015, covering 40% of the lake's surface (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Lake Atitlán's Algal Bloom in 2015



photo courtesy of Josué Samol



Servir Global (2015)

In 2009 Atitlán was declared threatened lake of the year by the Global Nature Fund (GNF, 2009). Many people were shocked by Atitlán's seemingly precipitous environmental state, but its

³ Blooms have been documented as early as 1968 (AMSCLAE, 2020a), and even further back in oral history.

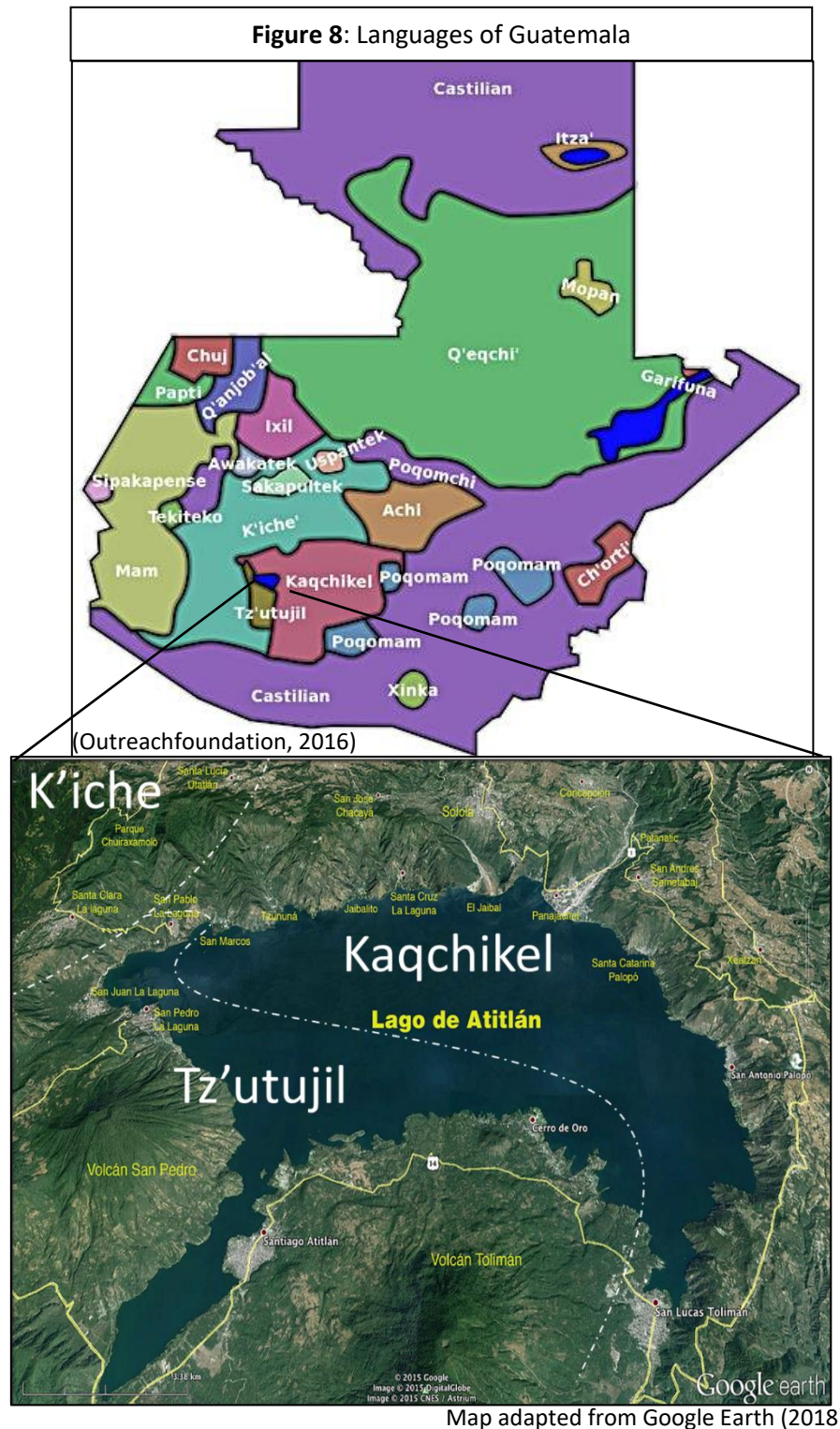
condition had in fact been deteriorating for many years. The lake has no natural outlets, and this closed system facilitates the overloading of nutrients (especially nitrates, phosphates, and carbon), of which there are four main sources - chemical fertilizers, soil erosion, wastewater, and atmospheric deposition (see Appendix 1 for further details). Nutrient overloading instigates processes of eutrophication, which in turn generate algal blooms (Rejmánková et al., 2011). The worst-case scenario of sustained eutrophication is a relatively lifeless hypoxic lake environment. Unfortunately, there is already evidence of decreased oxygen availability in Lake Atitlán's lower depths (Margaret Dix, personal communication May 2019).

Socio-Political Context

The lake is entirely contained within Sololá, one of Guatemala's 22 administrative departments (Figure 7a). Around half of the country's 17 million inhabitants are Indigenous (INE, 2018), as are 96.5% of Sololá's population (ibid). Sololá is further divided into 19 different municipalities, 12 of which border directly onto Lake Atitlán (Figure 7b). It is estimated that 300,000 people live within Atitlán's basin (ibid).



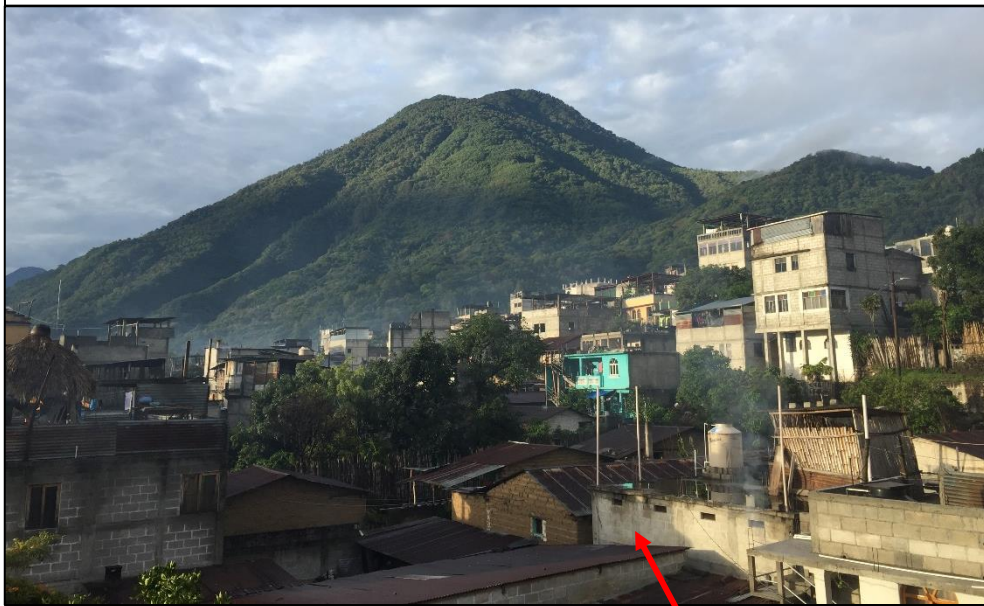
Guatemala is a highly diverse country. Of the 24 official languages spoken in the country, 21 belong to Mayan ethnic groups (Figure 8). Lake Atitlán lies at the crossroads of three of these - Tz'utujil, Kaqchikel, and K'iche. Tz'utujiles occupy the southwestern shore, Kaqchikeles the north-east, and the K'iche inland to the north-west.



San Pedro

San Pedro la Laguna (more commonly referred to as San Pedro) is a Tz'utujil town of around 14,000 people (INE, 2018). It is located on the lower slopes of San Pedro volcano (Figure 9), with its closest neighbour, the Tz'utujil community of San Juan la Laguna, situated just a few kilometres away. The largest town in the basin (also Tz'utujil) is Santiago Atitlán, and it has a population of over 40,000 (ibid). Some of the lakeside communities are connected to each other by road, but the most common form of transport is the regular passenger boat service which runs between them.

Figure 9: San Pedro la Laguna



AAALA (2017a)

Thesis Summary

This thesis is organised into ten chapters. Following the literature review (Chapter 2) and methodology (Chapter 3), the thesis is divided into two main parts - **Part 1: The Revindication of Tz'unun Ya'** (Chapters 4-7) and **Part 2: The Megacollector Conflict** (Chapters 8-10). The former will establish the context of San Pedro's revindication movement, and the latter will develop this into an analysis of the megacollector conflict through the concepts of the MCD triad. I have intentionally placed the megacollector conflict *after* my discussion of revindication so as to better foreground what it means to understand resource conflicts differently (Coombes et al., 2012a). A summary of each chapter is provided below:

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter follows my rationale for choosing to adopt MCD and PO as the main theoretical frameworks of my research. After outlining each framework, I discuss their shared aim for realising the pluriverse. I then turn to the main critiques which have been directed against them, focusing on the issues of essentialism and the need to decolonise their practices. I conclude by explaining how I build on these critiques in my own research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter builds on Chapter 2 by first addressing the question of decolonising my research from a methodological perspective. I start off by outlining a picture of the colonial researcher in a Guatemalan context, exploring the issues of extractivism, consent, and power relations. I then reflect on the measures that I adopted to avoid being a colonial researcher myself. Afterwards, I identify PAR as the best possible methodology to decolonise research with Indigenous communities. I then discuss the institutional constraints which prevented me from conducting PAR, concluding with a discussion of my compromise as an activist researcher. In the remainder of the chapter, I outline the logistics of my research and the four phases of my investigation, including a discussion of my rationale for choosing San Pedro and for focusing on art and artists, as well as various translation issues.

Chapter 4: Guatemala, 'La Patria del Criollo'

This chapter establishes the context for San Pedro's revindication movement by examining just how modernity/coloniality has constrained Indigenous self-determination over the course of Guatemala's history. I trace the Criollo's hegemony through three historical periods - colonial, post-colonial, and post-conflict Guatemala. Afterwards, I explore the three main colonial paradigms used to maintain

this dominance and which are critical to colonial relations today - extractivism, paternalism and racism. In doing so, I provide the context for Part 2, since these same colonial paradigms also frame the megacollector conflict.

Chapter 5: Modern 'Contamination'

This chapter uses the metaphor of 'contamination' to explore how San Pedro has been affected by modernity. This is an important context for the megacollector conflict, given the revindication movement's aims to mitigate the destructive effects of modernity (of which the megacollector is deemed to be part). First, I reconstruct an impression of San Pedro in the 1960s/1970s, the reference point by which many Pedranos measure modernity/coloniality's accelerating effects. I compare this past to San Pedro's 'contaminated' present, after which I weigh up various interpretations for the perceived loss in sense of the community, focusing on ontological explanations (the erosion of ancestral values) as well as political economy (the coffee and tourism industries). I close the chapter with a discussion of the colonial logic of modern 'contamination'.

Chapter 6: Revindication

This chapter establishes revindication in San Pedro as a decolonial movement, thereby contextualising Pedranos' response to the modern/colonial imposition of the megacollector. I begin by exploring the origins of revindication in San Pedro's past. I then explore the three principal modes by which it unfolds – self-valorisation, epistemic disobedience, and epistemic restitution. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the extant tensions within the revindication movement, using this as a lens to critiquing the disjuncture between MCD and the subaltern praxis of decoloniality.

Chapter 7: Ontological Ambiguities

This chapter focuses on the pluriversal aspirations of revindication and its inherent ontological ambiguities. I begin by exploring hybrid/transmodern/ch'ixi worlding practices in community life, and I then discuss several formal and informal expressions of transmodern revindication in education, youth culture, contemporary art and permaculture. The remainder of the chapter extends this exploration of ontological ambiguities to Pedranos' relationality with the lake (and young people in particular). I also explore what Pedranos' relationality with the lake entails, discussing the lake's personhood and its affective energy, context which is critical to understanding how the megacollector conflict is more than just a resource conflict, thus providing a bridge to Part 2.

Part 2: Introducing the Megacolector Conflict

In this section I contextualise the megacolector conflict, outlining the logistics of the megacolector, the key actors involved, and an overview of the conflict's history (including a timeline).

Chapter 8: The Megacolector is the Only Solution

This chapter gets to the heart of why Pedranos are opposing the megacolector. First I outline the political economy of the conflict, summarising the evidence which implicates the megacolector as a resource grab, as well as the tactic of gaslighting which AALA uses to dismiss such evidence. I then explain how the megacolector is worlded as the *only* solution to the lake's contamination through exploring the disjunctures between the megacolector's rhetoric and reality. I discuss in turn each of the three main discourses that AALA utilises to build its emancipatory modern rhetoric, arguing that the megacolector is the 'expert', 'modern', and 'objective' solution. Within this discussion I also explain how Pedranos counter such discourses, and how this implicates the megacolector as more than a mere resource conflict. At the same time, I also complicate the notion of the conflict as a binary clash of ontologies by paying attention to actors which blur such a divide.

Chapter 9: Coloniality and the Megacolector

This chapter moves past the modern rhetoric of the megacolector to the next stage of the MCD triad - its colonial logic. I start off by identifying how the megacolector's imposition echoes historical colonial violence, as well as Chapter 4's colonial paradigms. I then look to AALA's mobilisation of indigeneity and ontology, particularly through the tool of cosmetic multiculturalism. I discuss how this tool is used to mask more nefarious colonial manipulations and disciplinary actions aimed at neutralising the Indigenous opposition, as well as AALA's utilisation of the 'Authorized' and 'Insurrectionary Indian' subject positions. As in Chapter 8, I also take note of ontological ambiguities. I then conclude the chapter by discussing Pedranos' attempt to counteract coloniality through the organisation of a *consulta*.

Chapter 10: The Opposition *for*...

This chapter examines the megacolector conflict through the final concept of the MCD triad – decoloniality. I begin by explaining what Pedranos opposition is *for*, distinguishing it from their opposition *against* the megacolector. After discussing AALA's neglect of Pedranos' proposals for the lake, I examine Pedranos opposition *for* more closely, explaining that it is about protecting lake/life/community. I use this insight to elucidate how community leaders were able to successfully mobilise the wider community against the megacolector, whilst also recognising the tensions inherent to this movement. Finally, I discuss attempts to create a law for the lake, using this as an

opportunity to examine the issue of strategic essentialism, and to judge the extent to which the megacollector conflict can be deemed an ontological conflict.

Chapter 11: Final Thoughts

This concluding chapter of the thesis begins by summarising my principal research findings, in particular highlighting the risks of overstating the megacollector conflict's ontological dimensions. I will then discuss the wider conceptual and empirical implications of my research, as well as my thoughts on future avenues for investigation. The chapter closes with a reflection about Lake Atitlán's future in light of recent developments.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Although this thesis concerns Pedranos' opposition to the megacollector, as I explained in the previous chapter, it is about much more than a mere resource conflict. It concerns the community's efforts to guarantee their futurity through revindicating San Pedro's epistemic and political self-determination. The megacollector conflict is just one of many different stages in community life where these processes of revindication are playing out. Accordingly, the scope of this thesis lies beyond the narrow question of Lake Atitlán's management, which explains my decision not to ground my analysis within the water governance literature.⁴ Instead, I have turned to two other principal literatures - political ontology and MCD analytics which are better equipped to explain the wider processes of revindication in which the megacollector conflict is embedded. In this chapter I will discuss each of these literatures in turn, after which I will weigh up the main critiques which have been directed towards them. In the process I will explain how I will build on these critiques in my own research approach.

Political Ontology

Political ontology (PO) emerged from political ecology (PE), which since its inception in the 1970s has developed into a hugely diverse field with contributions from many different disciplines (e.g. geography, anthropology, ecological economics, sociology and environmental history). Although it is defined by a certain 'theoretical eclecticism' (Escobar, 2018),⁵ PE is broadly speaking unified by its concern with environmental conflicts, and the struggles engendered by the forms of access to, and control over, resources (Peluso and Watts, 2001).

Some strands of PE scholarship have recently begun to move in an ontological direction,⁶ and it was one of these – the perspective of 'hydrosocial territories' (Boelens et al., 2016) which initially drew my attention to the megacollector conflict.⁷ However I soon realised that its perspective of resource conflicts as contested 'representations' (Romano, 2016) and 'socionatural constructions' (Seemann, 2016) only partially addresses questions of ontology (Yates et al., 2017). As Bonelli et al., (2016) criticise, from this PE logic:

⁴ See for example Bakker (2010); Boelens et al. (2016); Budds (2009); Linton and Budds (2014); Swyngedouw (2009).

⁵ Yeh and Bryan (2015) identify three major theoretical strands of PE - cultural ecology, ecological anthropology, and Marxist-inspired agrarian studies.

⁶ Particularly the relational thinking of feminist political ecologists (Elmhirst, 2011).

⁷ Specifically, Travieso's (2016) discussion of the megacollector conflict from a 'hydrosocial territories' perspective.

the differences at stake in environmental conflicts correspond to 'cultural differences', or 'cultural beliefs', or even to differences in the 'languages of valuation' of one world 'out-there'. In short, 'Nature' remains singular, culture remains plural' (p.85).

Some scholars have argued that this multiculturalist approach reduces nature to a matter of 'resources' (Karlsson, 2018) and misses the deeper significance of 'resource conflicts' (Blaser, 2009a; Coombes et al., 2012a). Indeed, early on in my fieldwork it was clear to me that the megacollector conflict was as much a struggle over the lake's *meaning*, as it was a struggle over the lake's correct management. As Blaser and de la Cadena (2018) argue, in neglecting ontological dimensions of environmental conflicts, PE 'can only upend the analysis a bit' (p.5). It is for this reason that together with Arturo Escobar, they developed the new and influential paradigm of PO - political ontology.⁸ They sought to push PE's intent further, by taking different ontologies seriously (Blaser, 2014).⁹ Blaser and Escobar (2016) refer to PO as 'third generation' PE,¹⁰ suggesting that political ontologists:

rather than seeking to rethink the relation between nature and culture that so concerned previous generations of PE, [...] challenge the taken-for-granted ontological character of the divide; that is, they challenge the assumption that the divide is universally applicable as if it represented the ultimate reality (p.167).

PO is part of the 21st century's broader 'ontological turn' in which social theorists have increasingly focused on the issue of ontology. A wide-ranging body of work has emerged with the aim of 'break[ing] away from the normative divides, central to the modern regime of truth, between subject and object, mind and body, reason and emotion, living and inanimate, human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic' (Escobar, 2018, p.63).¹¹ The ontological turn is itself premised on the earlier postdualist scholarship of Tim Ingold, Bruno Latour, Philippe Descola, Donna Haraway and Marilyn Strathern - academics who have prominently continued to deconstruct the nature-culture divide through their work on networks, assemblages, socionatures and naturecultures. While postdualism is not new, what is distinctive about the ontological turn is the sheer volume of theoretical and ethnographic studies dedicated to reconnecting a range of dualities, especially within anthropology and Science of Technology Studies (STS).

⁸ See Blaser (2009a; 2009b; 2013), de la Cadena (2015a; 2015b) and Escobar (2016; 2018). These are the most prominent proponents of PO, but Blaser (2009b) also recognises the contributions of Harvey Feit, Justin Kenrick, Brian Noble and the Crabtree Collective.

⁹ That is, the assumptions about 'what kinds of things do or can exist' (Scott and Marshall, 2005 in Blaser, 2009b, p.877).

¹⁰ The two other (overlapping) generations being materialist PE (with its focus on the social production of nature) and poststructuralist PE (with its focus on the cultural construction of nature) (Tetreault, 2017).

¹¹ These new focuses are individual 'turns' in their own right (e.g. the posthuman, material and affective 'turns').

A major influence on PO was the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's (1998; 2004) concept of 'perspectivism', in which he broke free of modernist multiculturalism (i.e. multiple perspective on the same reality) by elucidating how Amerindian ontologies instead suppose multinaturalism (i.e. a single perspective and multiple realities). Similarly influential was Bruno Latour's (1993; 2005) development of the Actor Network Theory (ANT), which decentres human agency through reconceptualising humans and non-humans as 'actants' within a 'parliament of things' (1993).¹² It was through ANT that Annemarie Mol - one of Latour's STS colleagues, introduced the notion of 'ontological politics' to describe the 'contestation and struggle over the institution and disclosure of reality' (Oksala, 2010, p.447).¹³

Key to Mol's (1999) discussion is the notion that ontologies are 'done and enacted rather than observed' (p.77). This is also the central premise of PO, in which the process of enacting a world/ontology is referred to as 'worlding' (Blaser, 2014; de la Cadena, 2015b). PO is primarily focused on the power-laden practices involved in worlding (Escobar, 2018), and the 'conflicts that ensue as different worlds or ontologies strive to sustain their own existence as they interact and mingle with each other' (Blaser, 2009b, p.877). In particular, PO is concerned with the domination of the modern dualistic world over non-dualistic/relational worlds. De la Cadena (2015a), Blaser (2009a; 2010) and Escobar (2014) developed PO through ethnographic engagement with the relational worlds/ontologies of Indigenous or Afro-descendent communities in Latin America. In these communities, humans are understood to be mutually constituted through their relations with other beings - 'things and beings are in their relations, they do not exist prior to them' (Escobar, 2017, p.256).

Relational worlds are threatened by the universalising nature of modern knowledge. It is for this reason that political ontologists refer to the modern world as the 'One-World World' (OWW) (Law, 2011), that is a world 'that has arrogated for itself the right to be 'the' world, subjecting all other worlds to its own terms' (Escobar, 2016, p.15). As Neusiedl (2019) states, the 'OWW is the world of modernity, consisting of the conventional, hegemonic ontology of our modern era which informs how we live and make sense of the world' (p.656). The OWW is manifested in various hegemonic beliefs, such as rationality, modern science, economic growth, and most importantly in

¹² Vital materialists like Bennett (2010), Barad (2007) and Coole and Frost (2010) similarly draw upon Latour (1993) in their concept of 'distributed agency', that is, a dense network of agencies in constant 'relation' with each other. Their work displaces the focus of agency away from human subjectivity to the agency of matter and the 'force of things' (Bennett, 2004).

¹³ Although the term itself was coined by John Law, as Mol (1999) acknowledges.

the context of this thesis, extractivist development – the unbridled capitalistic exploitation of natural resources for profit (Raftopoulos, 2017).

Like PE, PO is concerned with inequalities and social justice, and it aligns itself in defence of relational worlds against the OWW's extractivist destruction. Extractivism is particularly threatening to Indigenous communities due to their bonds of mutuality and reciprocity with the natural world. Accordingly, while PE typically understands struggles against extractivism as conflicts over access to land and resources, PO suggests they may involve entire worlds struggling to defend their existence (Ehrnstrom-Fuentes, 2019).¹⁴ Indeed, I found such circumstances to characterise the megacollector conflict, as Pedranos framed their struggle as a question of their community's survival, rather than just a narrow question of water governance.

De la Cadena (2015a) offers one of the most arresting accounts of ontological struggle in her discussion of 'earth-beings' (tirakuna) in the Peruvian Andes. From a modern perspective, earth-beings are mountains, but from the relational perspective of those Indigenous communities (runakuna) who live adjacent to them, they are 'other-than-humans'.¹⁵ Both earth-beings (tirakuna) and the Indigenous communities (runakuna) exceed the modern partitions of nature and humans due to their mutual constitution, since '[b]eing composed as humans with nature [...] makes each more' (de la Cadena, 2015b, p.4). This relationality is known locally as being in-ayllu,¹⁶ which Mariano (de la Cadena's main Indigenous informant) explains further below:

Ayllu is like weaving, and all the beings in the world – people, animals, mountains, plants, etc. – are like the threads, we are part of the design. The beings in the world are not alone, just as a thread by itself is not weaving, and weavings are with threads, a runa is always in-ayllu with other beings – that is ayllu (de la Cadena, 2015a, p.44).

De la Cadena (2015a) discusses how one earth-being known as Sinakara was recently threatened by the prospect of transnational gold mining. While extractivist attempts like this can destroy relational worlds, in this case de la Cadena explains how the Indigenous communities managed to unsettle the OWW's hegemonic ontological assumptions. Their successful protests against the mine visibilised the earth-being's 'ontological excesses' as *more than* just a mountain. In doing so, they publicly refuted the OWW's dualistic distinctions between humans and nature. Yet

¹⁴ This is what de la Cadena (2015b) refers to as the 'anthropo-not-seen' -the war being 'waged against world-making practices that ignore the separation of entities nature and culture – and the resistance to that war' (p.3).

¹⁵ Here, de la Cadena (2014a) takes issue with Latour's notion of 'non-human actants', contending that earth-beings are not simply things endowed with human-like characteristics, but rather selves in their own right (see also Kohn, 2013).

¹⁶ An ayllu is also a territorial-political system, a political, geographical, and ethnic unit (Murra, 1975).

they did not do this alone. De la Cadena emphasises that the Indigenous communities' successful defence of the earth-being was also dependent on alliances with modern environmental NGOs. For this reason, she proposes alliances between worlds and a practice of politics across divergence (de la Cadena, 2015b). Although both the Indigenous communities and environmentalists shared the same interest in common (i.e. the prevention of mining), their alliance was also underpinned by uncommonalities, which she terms as 'ontological disagreements'.¹⁷ De la Cadena's proposal draws upon the work of Isabelle Stengers and Marilyn Strathern, and their concepts of 'divergence' (Stengers, 2005) and 'partial connections' (Stathern, 2004).¹⁸

As in the case of the successful defence of the earth-beings in Peru, political ontologists suggest that as increasing numbers of communities appeal to their non-dualistic understandings to resist extractivism, ontological openings are provided 'to the consideration of other ontologies as plausible and viable alternatives to the modern one' (Blaser, 2013a, p.556). As Blaser (2013a) states:

forty years ago, opposing [extractivism] [...] because indigenous ways of life would be profoundly disrupted would have been seen as sheer irrationality by most citizens in a Latin American country; not so now. The promise of modernization no longer appears as persuasive (p.557).

The ecological and social planetary crises of the 'Anthropocene' are similarly acting to erode the hegemony of modernity, if not its dominance (Escobar, 2016). As a result, of this loss in hegemony, the OWW is increasingly reliant on coercion rather than persuasion – hence the recent upsurge in violence to enforce extractivist policies. As Blaser (2013a) explains, it is these crises which provide both the context and the rationale for political ontology.

Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality

Decolonial studies overlaps with PO in many regards, and it notably shares PO's concern about the destructive impacts of the OWW. However, it refers to the OWW by a different name – modernity/coloniality or the 'colonial matrix of power' (CMP) (Quijano, 2000), that is the 'cultural, political, sexual, spiritual, epistemic and economic oppression/exploitation of subordinate racialized/ethnic groups by dominant racialized/ethnic groups' (Grosfoguel, 2007, p.220). Through this close attention to the operation of power through which modernity operates, decolonial studies

¹⁷ The incommensurabilities which emerge in these dialogues are expressed through equivocations, which I will unpack later in the thesis.

¹⁸ Similar also to Barad's (2007) notion of 'intra-acting', partial connections are what de la Cadena (2010) describes as 'a complex formation, a historic-political articulation of more than one, but less than two, socationatural worlds' (p.347).

complements PO well, since this is something that PO (like the ontological turn more generally) has been criticised for neglecting (more on this later).

Decolonial studies is wide ranging, and the notion of modernity/coloniality arises from one particular strand, the so-called Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality (MCD) group (Escobar, 2007). The MCD group is a loose collective of multi-disciplinary scholars who can be said to write from a Latin American 'perspective' (Escobar, 2007), with key members including Catherine Walsh, Anibal Quijano, Walter Dignolo, Enrique Dussel, Nelson Maldonado Torres, and Ramon Grosfoguel.¹⁹ Their collaborative efforts began in the 1990s, galvanised by the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano's (1992) conceptualisation of the 'coloniality of power'. In the 2000s, they further developed their ideas, which have begun to make significant headways in academic circles in the Global North following their recent translation into English (Quijano, 2000; 2007). Although prominent, the MCD group has come under heavy criticism by other scholars writing from both within and outside of decolonial scholarship.

MCD cites a wide range of influences, from Franz Fanon and Mahatma Gandhi, to dependency and world systems theory, the Bandung Conference (1955) and subaltern studies (Dignolo and Walsh, 2018). However, MCD most obviously builds upon postcolonial theory, through their shared critique of the legacies of Western colonialism in contemporary social orders and forms of knowledge (Bhabha, 2014). There are also some key conceptual and historical distinctions between them. Like PO, the MCD group pays close attention to the specificities of Latin America, and they are critical of postcolonial theory's neglect of this context.²⁰

Despite these criticisms, the MCD group do not suggest that postcolonialism can somehow be 'fixed' by extending its analytical gaze to Latin America and Latin American thinkers (Dignolo and Tlostanova, 2007). From their perspective, it is not just 'who' is speaking that is important, but from 'where', 'why' and 'how' they are speaking.²¹ They contend for instance that while many key post-colonial thinkers are socially located in the Global South, their theorising remains bound to a modern Eurocentric epistemic framework (i.e. they are epistemically located in the Global North).²² As Grosfoguel (2011) contends, 'the success of the modern/colonial world-system consists in making

¹⁹ Although bracketed together, the MCD group is by no means cohesive. Grosfoguel (2013) for instance states that the MCD group is a 'fiction', claiming it as just a very weak network, including people with very strong differences who don't communicate with others.

²⁰ Postcolonial theory focuses predominantly on the cultural legacy of British and French colonialism in Asia (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994).

²¹ This standpoint of knowledge is what Dignolo (1995) refers to as the 'locus of enunciation'.

²² Dignolo (2007) for instance highlights how postcolonial theory is rooted in the post-structuralism of Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida.

subjects that are socially located on the oppressed side of the colonial difference, think epistemically like the ones in the dominant positions' (p.14).

MCD's principal theory is its namesake, the conceptual triad of modernity/coloniality/decoloniality.²³ While postcolonial theorists locate the birth of modernity in the 18th century European Enlightenment, from the MCD's perspective, it was rather the 'Conquest' of the Americas which initiated the modern/colonial world system. MCD confirms that whilst modernity is a European phenomenon, it was one 'constituted in a dialectical relation with a non-European alterity' (Dussel, 1993, p.65). Modernity thus appeared in the 15th/16th century when Europe affirmed itself as the centre of World History and the newly colonised populations as the periphery (Escobar, 2007). As Aman (2016) explains, 'the indigenous populations provided the mirror in which Europe, as an identity and culture, could recognise itself as modern' (p.101),²⁴ and thus a Eurocentric discourse of modernity was built upon a range of binary opposites, most notably core/periphery, modern/traditional, and civilised/primitive. Drawing attention to the fact that these binaries are themselves a creation of the discourse of modernity proves that 'Modernity is a fiction that carries in it the seed of Western pretence to universality' (Mignolo, n.d. p.2).

Through universalising itself as natural and desirable, modernity's discourse has been updated over the course of history through self-serving narratives of salvation, progress, civilization, modernisation, development and market democracy (Mignolo, 2017a). What's hidden from view however is the destructive colonial logic that such discourses are premised upon, the othering and devaluation of all that belongs to the outside of modernity (Vázquez, 2012). MCD contends that modernity was the result of Europe's colonial ambitions, which implies coloniality as 'constitutive, not derivative, of modernity' (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p.4). Modernity/coloniality are thus understood as 'two sides of the same coin' (Mignolo, 2017a). Through European colonialism this logic of coloniality manifested itself in the creation of racial/colonial hierarchies, i.e. 'colonial difference' (Mignolo, 2002). Yet key to MCD is understanding that these hierarchies outlived colonialism in the form of coloniality, that is:

the 'long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations (Maldonado Torres, 2007, p.243).

As Mignolo (2005) states, 'coloniality demarcates the hierarchies at modernity's heart' (p.xiii), for which reason he contends that coloniality 'cannot be ended if global imperial designs in the name of modernity continue' (Mignolo, 2017a). The main task of decoloniality then is to unveil

²³ Although 'theory' is a term which Mignolo and Walsh (2018) reject.

²⁴ A process which Coronil (1996) terms as 'Occidentalism'.

this logic, and to delink from the CMP (Mignolo, 2018a). Being born in response to the promises of modernity and the realities of coloniality, decoloniality thus completes the modernity/coloniality/decoloniality triad (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). The ultimate decolonial horizon is the end of modernity, which would imply the end of coloniality, and so 'Without modernity/coloniality there would be no need for decoloniality, because there would be nothing to decolonize' (Mignolo, 2018a, p.109). Although each concept within the modernity/coloniality/decoloniality triad is separate, they are each simultaneously connected to the previous one. However, decoloniality is not a 'lineal point of arrival or enlightenment' (Walsh, 2018, p.17), it has been present from the inception of modernity/coloniality.

While postcolonial theory critiques modernity and aims to transform the academy from within, MCD's vision is more radical. They don't want to update or improve upon postcolonial theory, but rather use academic disciplines to advance political goals (Mignolo, 2017a). MCD's main objective is to delink from the CMP, which is deemed necessary because 'there is no outside of [coloniality], and there is no privileged location from which to confront it' (Mignolo, 2018a, p.108). Consequently, MCD advocates 'epistemic disobedience' through delinking from the privileged institutions of higher learning (Tlostanova, 2017). Mignolo (2009) posits an embedded praxis of 'doing-thinking', that is 'decoloniality with the people, collectives, and communities' (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p.9) outside the purview of the academy.²⁵ This necessitates a shift away from 'studying about' to 'thinking with' (Walsh, 2018, p.28).

Delinking however isn't an end in itself. As Mignolo (2018a) states, 'delinking presupposes relinking to something else' (p.120), and this relinking is the 'epistemic reconstitution' of subaltern epistemologies that have been colonised and delegitimised.²⁶ As Walsh (2018) explains, 'decoloniality seeks to make visible, open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought' (p.17). This epistemic reconstitution of the deconstituted enables what she terms as the possibility of an *otherwise*, that is 'modes that confront, transgress, and undo modernity/coloniality's hold' (ibid, p.18). For the MCD group decoloniality is not about *resistance* so much as *re-existence* (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018).

²⁵ This is what Santos (2014) proposes as a 'rearguard theory', as opposed to the 'academicist, overintellectualized, and stagnated character of vanguard theories' (p.13).

²⁶ Here MCD finds close agreement with the Epistemologies of the South (ES) framework of Bonaventura de Sousa Santos. Santos (2014; 2020) criticises the North's 'epistemicide' for suppressing alternative ways of knowing (or producing them as non-existent), calling for 'cognitive justice' in the world, to learn from and make visible alternative forms of knowledge, proposing an epistemological shift to know 'the world from the point of view of its diversity' (Santos and Meneses, 2019, p.xvii).

In the case of this thesis, my decision to utilise MCD analytics was due to Pedranos themselves. It was San Pedro's contemporary artists who introduced me to MCD scholars and concepts, and a language of decolonisation was often employed in wider community discussions about processes of revindication.²⁷ I chose to apply MCD to the megacollector conflict because I could see the same dynamic at work - the megacollector's discourse of modernity, a hidden logic of coloniality, and Pedranos' subsequent efforts towards re-existence. Part 2 (Chapters 8-10) of this thesis will follow the modernity/coloniality/decoloniality triad through the megacollector conflict, with each chapter exploring a concept of the triad in turn.

Another reason why I chose to utilise MCD was because of how it conceptualises power and agency. On the one hand, MCD has been criticised for overstating the strength of the CMP (Yates, 2020) and for conceptualising power as top-down and emanating from a totalizing source (Cheah, 2006). As Cheah (2006) argues, 'the current state of power relations is an effect of multiple processes that are dynamic, heterogeneous, and unstable, processes that cannot be reduced to a single logic of coloniality' (....). Crucially however, the MCD triad emphasises that colonial power has *never* gone unchecked because modernity/coloniality has *always* been resisted by decolonial resurgence, insurrection, rebellion and agency (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). As Walsh (2018) states:

Decoloniality has a history...and praxis of more than 500 years...Decoloniality has been a component part of...actions to resist and refuse the legacies and ongoing relations and patterns of power established by external and internal colonialism...and the global designs of the modern/colonial world (p.16).

While MCD seeks to highlight the oppressive parameters of the CMP's dominance, it also draws attention to its underside and otherwise. In this way, it contributes to the burgeoning field of literature focusing on the agency of Indigenous peoples to control and subvert the way they are represented.²⁸ This mode of analysis is especially important in light of the historical dismissal of Lake Atitlán's Indigenous communities' capacity to adapt, resist, and subvert (Carlsen, 1997). Like Carlsen (1997), in this thesis I aim to show how throughout their history, Pedranos 'have been neither passive witness to their own existence nor powerless in determining the nature of their relations with external sociopolitical interests' (p.2).

The Pluriverse

Although PO and the MCD group use different vocabularies, they share the same commitment to bringing forth the possibility of multiple worlds, i.e. the 'pluriverse' – 'a world in

²⁷ Although this is not to say that a language of decolonisation was accepted by all (Chapter 6).

²⁸ See Dangl (2019) Montejo (2003); Ramos (2003); Graham (2003); Turner (2003); Liu and Zhang (2011).

which many worlds fit' as the well-known Zapatistas dictum goes. Blaser (2013a) suggests PO 'is concerned with telling stories that open up a space for, and enact the pluriverse' (p.533) in place of the OWW's singular reality. MCD likewise pushes for a 'decolonial pluriversality', with Mignolo (2007) claiming 'De-colonial thinking [as] the road to pluri-versality as a universal project' (p.20).²⁹ Whether out of 'ontological openings' (de la Cadena, 2014b) or 'decolonial cracks' (Walsh, 2018), both PO and MCD envisage the pluriverse as emerging from modernity's borders.

As Querejazu (2016) notes, despite its critical stance towards modernity, the idea of the pluriverse is not exactly to work against modernity, 'but to show that the pluriverse has always coexisted with it, even if this has not been recognized or accepted' (p.12). A pluriversal approach is therefore not about accentuating the divides between modern and non-modern worlds, because doing so would only perpetuate the binary thinking that the pluriverse stands against (de la Cadena, 2010). The aim is rather to eliminate any ontological hierarchy, through horizontalizing relations between all ontologies (Escobar, 2016). It is for this reason that PO emphasises alliances and 'partial connections' between different worlds and in spite of ontological disagreements (de la Cadena, 2015b). The pluriverse is thus deemed as a space where ontological differences can thrive, Escobar makes a helpful comparison in imagining a matriarchal pluriverse in contrast to a patriarchal OWW. As he states:

Matriarchy is not defined by the predominance of women over men, but by an entirely different conception of life, not based on domination and hierarchies, and respectful of the relational fabric of all life (Escobar, 2018, p.10).

Like PO, MCD's vision of decoloniality is also outwardly opposed to fundamentalist absolutism. Mignolo (2018b) for instance claims that 'Western universalism has the right to coexist in the pluriverse of meaning' in which it would 'be one of many cosmologies, no longer the one that subsumes and regulates all the others' (p.x). As he continues, 'pluriversality as a universal project is aimed not at changing the world (ontology) but at changing the beliefs and the understanding of the world (gnoseology)' (ibid). Drawing upon the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), he posits 'border thinking' (Mignolo, 2000) as redefinition of the emancipatory rhetoric of modernity from the subaltern's own cosmologies and epistemologies (Grosfoguel, 2011). Mignolo thus claims border thinking as the route to enacting pluriversality, but this claim is contested. Michaelson and Shershow (2007) for instance highlight incongruities in Mignolo's work, arguing that:

border thinking seems [...] to be little more than a displacing or replacing of European thought by its Amerindian counterpart [...] — a "battle" in which subaltern knowledge wins everything, but at the cost of any possibility of double critique and absorption (p.54).

²⁹ He suggests that this condition of pluriversality is contingent on the shift from 'truth without parenthesis' to 'truth in parenthesis' (Mignolo, 2020).

Similarly, while Mignolo vehemently eschews abstract universals, Alcoff (2007) suggests that, 'it is difficult to interpret Mignolo's own project in any way other than as a project concerned with truth and with the way in which the colonial systems of knowing inhibited and precluded both the understanding and the identification of truth' (p.97). Alcoff's criticism is evidenced by Mignolo's notion of delinking, which as Vieira (2019) points out, is premised on 'unproblematised ontological coherence and wholesale rejection of Western modernity/coloniality, where only domination is worth examining and no ambiguity is allowed into it' (p.155). There is a great danger to this puritanical outlook, since any sort of engagement with hegemonic structures may automatically be dismissed as co-optation (Lyons, 2010). This is what Yates (2020) terms as the 'decolonial problem'. As he argues, 'Decoloniality, as presented by Mignolo and Walsh, seems to suggest an in/out logic that struggles to account for [...] messy interactions', such as decolonial praxis which accommodates modernity/coloniality or 'is supported by the kinds of politics and practice that otherwise uphold the colonial matrix of power' (p.3). Suffice to say, this 'decolonial problem' informed my decision to turn to some alternative conceptualisations more conciliatory towards modernity.

I found a more nuanced approach in the form of 'transmodernity' as advanced by the MCD scholar Enrique Dussel (2002; 2012). Dussel's concept resonates more strongly with my ethnographic data and the ambiguities that I encountered on the ground during my fieldwork. Transmodernity is similar to border thinking, but its objective is about *transcending* rather than *delinking* from modernity/coloniality (Dussel, 2002). Like Mignolo, Dussel is critical of modernity's expropriative practices, but with one notable difference - he concedes room to modern contributions in the transmodern project of reconstruction, allowing modernity 'a seat at the table' (Alcoff, 2012).

Transmodernity is a 'future-orientated project' (Dussel, 1996) which aims to reconstruct modernity from 'below', from the perspective of those who 'have been affected and produced by European modernity, but never fully subsumed nor instrumentalized [by it]' (Grosfoguel, 2011, p.27).³⁰ In this way, Dussel draws attention to the radical potential of these exterior spaces, the 'decolonial cracks' (Walsh, 2018) where the project of decoloniality can take root as sites of articulation of alternative projects (Escobar, 2018). Accordingly, transmodernity is not hostile to modernity, but rather seeks to assume its 'positive moments' (Dussel, 2012, p.43) along with 'critical elements' adopted from the non-modern cultures themselves in order to create a 'rich pluriversity'

³⁰ As Dussel (2012) explains, although such cultures have coexisted with modernity, they are something very different as a result of their distinct roots, 'They respond from the perspective of their own cultural experiences' (p.42).

and an 'authentic intercultural dialogue'. Dussel suggests that this dialogue has the capacity to propose novel and necessary answers for 21st century challenges.³¹

While more hospitable to modernity, Dussel (2012) is not a romantic, he also cautions that such a project 'would need to bear clearly in mind existing asymmetries' (p.43). This point brings us to the main conundrum faced by political ontologists and MCD scholars, that is, how to realise the pluriverse given the OWW's universalist claims.³² Its harmonious coexistence is jeopardised by the inherent power differentials between worlds, and especially those 'dominant worlds that do not want to relate' (Escobar, 2018, p.217). This power differential, i.e. coloniality (Mignolo, 2018b) opens up the potential for conflict as different worlds 'step on each other's toes' (Oslender, 2019, p.4).³³ For Oslender (2019) the problem here is too much conceptual posturing about the pluriverse in 'unnecessarily convoluted language' (p.4), and a lack of concrete ethnographic evidence to support these claims. Mignolo (2011) for instance argues pluriversality as 'learning to live with people one does not agree with, or maybe not even like' further adding that 'Conviviality is [...] a hard and relentless effort towards cosmopolitan localism and pluriversal futures' (p.176). Yet he remains vague in the details of how such conviviality is to be achieved.

For Oslender (2019), the solution to this problem is obvious - meaningful ethnographic engagements to 'put flesh on the pluriversality discourse and to enable a deeper, rooted decolonial engagement with the on-the-ground, lived experience of what it means to live in a pluriverse' (p.4). This is something my research will contribute to, through actively engaging with and exploring Pedranos' lived experience so as to illustrate how their 'pluriverse-edification' struggle is unfolding (Neusiedl, 2019). More difficult to resolve is the main theoretical challenge which has been levelled at the pluriverse (and the ontological turn in which it is embedded). That is the accusation that in claiming ontological multiplicity, the pluriversal approach is reproducing the very logic it is meant to sidestep – i.e. making a claim about what reality is like (Mercier, 2019). This contention was rigorously debated in the 2010 issue of *Critique of Anthropology*, 'Ontology is Just Another Word for Culture' (Carrithers et al., 2010). The discussion which followed is complex and has become embroiled in what Holbraad (2013) describes as 'a slinging match of competitive exasperation' (p.563).

Without becoming too weighed down in these complexities myself, in short, the ontological turn's supporters have defended themselves by emphasising that ontologies do not relate to an

³¹ In this regard, transmodernity shares common ground with Spivak's (2008) notion of the 'enabling violation' – that is, a double-edged attitude which recognises the enabling potential of modernity, despite its violations (Kerner, 2018).

³² That the world is only one, i.e. a universe (Law, 2011).

³³ This potential for conflict between different worlds is of course exactly what PO is all about.

external and independent reality (Blaser, 2013a), or the nature of existence of separate world 'out there' (Holbraad in Carrithers et al., 2010). Instead, they are conceived as heuristic devices, 'a set of assumptions postulated by the anthropologist for analytical purposes' (ibid, p.185) and 'a manner of foregrounding the array of ways of conceiving what exists so as to make palpable the claim of multiple ontologies' (Escobar, 2018, p.218). Blaser (2014) for instance stresses that the pluriverse is a heuristic proposition, 'an experiment in bringing itself into being' (p.55). Key here is an understanding of ontology as a way of worlding, a 'storied performativity' that is 'always in the making' (Blaser, 2013a, p.551). From this perspective, the pluriverse is a 'foundationless foundational claim' (ibid) - 'an open ended ethical and theoretico-political proposition, rather than a hard-nosed claim on the real' (Escobar, 2018, p.218).³⁴

This defence has yet to win over the ontological turn's many critics. Kisner (2020) for instance suggests that despite his best efforts, 'Blaser leaves us in the quandary of perpetually running into ontological assumptions in the very attempts to avoid them' (p.361). However, in terms of my research, I suggest this theoretical dilemma does not compromise utilising the concept of the pluriverse so long as attention is paid to worlding practices, and this is why I decided to make worlding the focus of one of my research questions. Even so, there is another problematic aspect of the pluriverse, which is how its conceptualisation often essentialises ontologies. It is to this issue that I now turn.

Essentialism

Both MCD and PO have come under fire for essentialising ontologies, and one influential critique in this regard is that of Bessire and Bond (2014), who contend that in their 'rush to reclaim truly different difference' (p.443/444), ontologists often end up reifying the boundaries between modern and nonmodern worlds. The pluriversal approach flattens ontologies, since 'they must be understood as relating to the "same" reality in each and every "world"' (Mercier, 2019, p.8). As Bessire and Bond (2014) criticise, this generation of a homogeneous and uncontested ontology is achieved through 'a targeted erasure of ethnographic evidence and an artificial standardization of alterity itself' (p.443). In this way, 'the intrinsic incoherence of indigeneity is reduced to a telos of order imposed [...] by authorized nonindigenous experts' (ibid).

The Brazilian anthropologist Alcida Rita Ramos (2012) presents another equally derisive critique of the ontological turn. She also disproves of how ontologists select fragments of ethnographic material from highly complex contexts for use as 'building blocks for grand theories'

³⁴ As Blaser (2014) argues, PO is concerned more with *reality-making* than the notion of an external and independent reality.

(p.488). This ‘cutting and pasting’ ‘in the direction of the analyst’s choice’ produces ‘a much-coveted elegance of analysis’ (ibid, p.487), but as she argues, these fragments lose much of their weight when they are put back into context. This context, as Cepek (2016) notes, includes ‘the complex richness of [Indigenous people’s] discourse and practice—the great pragmatic multiplicity of what and how they say and do’ (p.625). Pragmatic functions and performative context are neglected when anthropologists distil alterity-affirming content from their collaborators’ statements (ibid).

Accusations of essentialism have been made against MCD,³⁵ but they are targeted especially towards the recent PO literature. Bessire and Bond (2014) for instance criticise Blaser’s (2009a) ethnography of the Yshiro people of the Paraguayan Gran Chaco, pointing out how he uses traditionalists as a basis for his discussion of the ‘non-modern Yshiro ontology’. De la Cadena’s (2015a) account has been similarly criticised, with Canessa (2017) for instance taking issue with her reliance on just two male ritual specialists to construct her entire hypothesis. In a similar vein, Hornborg (2017) questions whether perceptions of earth-beings were also shared by young people, and he also queries the effects of the recent development of shamanistic tourism on the Indigenous ontology that de la Cadena describes.

Countering such accusations, Blaser (2009a) argues that:

speaking of different worlds or ontologies is not another way of reinstating largely overcome anthropological ideas of self-contained and clearly bounded cultures. The worlds and the borders that delineate them have to be traced constantly for they are in a constant state of becoming (p.16).

Even so, PO continues to be accused of fixing Indigeneity, ignoring dynamic processes of cultural change, and portraying ontologies as constant through time (Hunt, 2014; Revilla-Minaya, 2019). This critique is especially pertinent in the context of shifting local identities and rapid cultural change among Indigenous people (Rodriguez and Inturias, 2018). The main contention here is that Indigenous ontologies are being represented in an exoticised and romanticised way which effaces the reality of being Indigenous.³⁶ As Chandler and Reid (2020) state, through such representations ‘Indigeneity is transformed into a fictive way of being and knowing that has nothing to do with the rich plurality of the lived life of Indigenous groups, and everything to do with the imagination of its white Western author’ (p. 12). It is argued that missing from such accounts is a deeper reflection about the representational strategies used to engage with Indigenous ontologies (Hunt, 2014).

³⁵ Burman (in Blaser, 2013a) for instance argues that Mignolo often makes ‘sweeping generalization[s] about ‘indigenous knowledge,’ and disembedded references to a selection of indigenous concepts’ (p.461).

³⁶ Decolonial literature is similarly criticised for paying insufficient attention to how culture is contested at a local level (Rodriguez and Inturias, 2018).

On these grounds, both Blaser and de la Cadena have attempted to defend their position by stressing that their ontological accounts are drawn from particular experts and are not representative of social groups as a whole. Blaser (2013a) for instance emphasises the performative aspect of ontology, reinforcing the point that Indigenous identity doesn't 'automatically [translate] into an other-than-modern ontology' (p.553). Even so, I agree with Revilla-Minaya's (2019) assertion that their ontological claims sometimes appear to extend beyond their informants, and that both authors would benefit from incorporating dissonant voices into their discussions. For example, Blaser (2009a) explains that Christianised Yshiro are disdainful of the 'traditionalist ontology', but he excludes this segment of the population from his analysis (Revilla-Minaya, 2019). As Revilla-Minaya (2019) notes, it is also unclear how worldings are reproduced and adapted by younger generations. Arguably, inclusion of these dissonant voices would better illustrate how ontological concepts (like earth-beings) are negotiated within social groups.

On this note, it is important to stress that while this thesis takes the community of San Pedro as the centre of analysis, I do not mean to essentialise it. I do not take San Pedro as a fixed and pre-existing *thing*, but rather see it as those collective *actions* mobilised by community leaders' deployment of a rhetoric of community to oppose the threat of the megacollector (see also Dueholm Rasch, 2012). In this sense, the community of San Pedro can be thought of as a 'spatio-temporal event' (Massey, 2005, p.131) which has been constituted through a networked process of 'relational place-making' (Pierce et al., 2011). It is a 'happenstance juxtaposition' (Massey, 2005, p.94) of different trajectories that may disperse if the threat of the megacollector subsides. Furthermore, as Massey (2005) argues, a constructed place/community is not intrinsically coherent, and the temporary constellation of trajectories constituting the community of San Pedro are also contested. Threats like the megacollector have the potential to deepen fractures within a community as well as to unite them (Mackenzie and Dalby, 2003; Bastos Amigo, 2020). The 'power geometries' (Massey, 1999) created by the megacollector conflict also reproduce pre-existing power differentials in Pedrano society, such as those along lines of age and gender, both of which I will touch upon in this thesis.

Taking on board the criticisms of essentialism that have been levelled against ontological analyses, in this thesis I aim to draw particular attention to two issues. Firstly, I will focus on how ontology is performatively worlded, looking past what is professed, to a closer analysis of what is *enacted*, paying attention to the pragmatic functions of such worldings (i.e. possibilities of strategic essentialism). Secondly, I will explore how ontologies are contested at a local level. As Teixeira Delgado (2018) notes, focusing on ontological conflicts between worlds can obscure the power disputes already present in the local sphere. However, this issue has not passed Blaser's notice. He

emphasises that PO is not just about conflict between different worlds, but also ‘the politics involved in the practices that shape a particular world or ontology’ (Blaser, 2009b, p.877).³⁷ My thesis will pay attention to these politics, in particular I will examine the role of younger Pedranos in regard to Pedranos’ relational ontology. As Cepek (2016) argues, there is no sense in making an anthropological construction about worlds which no one actually inhabits. To truly understand Pedranos’ relationship with Lake Atitlán I must attend to the kinds of complex ambivalences and uncertainties which upset neat analyses. Such efforts should help to avoid essentialist tendencies.

Still, it is important to recognise that essentialist tendencies *did* greatly inform my initial research approach, and this is a problem which I only fully recognised during the writing process. This was due to my eager adoption of a PO framework early on. I went into the field enthused with de la Cadena’s (2015a) notion of earth-beings, so much so that in my research I set out to prove Lake Atitlán’s existence as a similarly other-than-human entity. Although this earth-beings hypothesis grazed against the ethnographic realities that I encountered, I mentally played down such contradictions and pursued lines of enquiry which would further strengthen this approach. When writing this thesis, just as Ramos (2012) criticises, I ‘cut and pasted’ quotes to present a cleaner account of the situation, without its messy contradictions. Most notably, I downplayed and even erased Christian aspects which unsettled the presentation of a ‘pure’ Indigenous relationality with the lake. It was only on reflection that I realised the extent to which my commitment to PO had constrained my initial interpretation of San Pedro’s situation. Kindon and Cupples’ (2014) assertion that, ‘You will learn as much from writing the field as being in the field’ (p.236) rang especially true in my case.

As Ramos (2012) states, ‘the more extensive and deeper ethnographic knowledge is, the less arrogant we become and the more clearly we perceive the folly of projecting our theoretical ambitions on indigenous peoples’ (p.489). In my early research approach, I was guilty of projecting my theoretical ambitions on Pedranos, of ‘vulgar replication’ and ‘interpretative excesses’ (ibid) so as to better align with de la Cadena’s framework. Ramos (2012) highlights how similar such circumstances in the case of Viveiros de Castro’s notion of perspectivism. She notes how numerous anthropologists adopted his concept as a sort of pan-Amerindian ontology (e.g. Brightman et al., 2012), criticising the feedback effect of perspectivism which propelled future research projects in the same essentialist direction. In her eyes, this is especially problematic given that his model neglects specific historical trajectories and local contexts in Latin America.

³⁷ Even if this is somewhat neglected in his own writings.

My own utilisation of the earth-beings concept is an outcome of this same feedback effect. Although I doubt de la Cadena ever intended for her ideas to be adhered to in this way, this is nonetheless a temptation for inexperienced doctoral students when confronted with the daunting prospect of ethnographic research. This is not to negate the usefulness of de la Cadena's concepts as heuristic devices for thinking through complex realities. Yet, their utilisation should not come at the price of ethnographic integrity. As Vigh and Sausdal (2014) suggest, 'the merit of anthropology lies in [...] crafting accounts that are able to describe, make sense of, and educe themes from a world that is multiple, entangled, yet shared' not in 'translating ethnography into arcane philosophy' (p.68). In this sense, I initially overstepped the mark in shaping my ethnography to fit the theory, even if I later realised the error of my ways. When I rewrote my thesis, I tried to undo my 'cutting and pasting' and reinsert the ethnographic complexities which unsettle neat ontological narratives. But rather than obscuring my earlier essentialist impulses, I have instead attempted to highlight the moments in which these occurred. In doing so I hope to visibilise a tension which is rarely brought to light in the literature.

Essentialism emerges not only through the reification of ontologies, but as in Viveiros de Castro's case, a concurrent neglect of wider sociocultural contexts (Ramos, 2012). This neglect is highlighted as being especially problematic by critics of the ontological turn.³⁸ As Yeh and Bryan (2015) argue, 'some ethnographies of indigenous ontologies seem to ignore or downplay situated histories and geographies of war, capitalist penetration, colonialism, state policies, development, and trade to define an abstracted indigenous ontology' (p.539). The underlying point here as outlined by Hornborg (2015) is that apolitical musings of multiple ontologies obstruct the urgent theorizing of capitalism and global power inequalities.³⁹ In Theriault's (2017) ethnographic analysis of the Palawan in the Philippines, he avoids an ontological framework for this very reason, arguing that we must 'avoid treating the world-making practices of state interventions as separate from or impervious to those of Indigenous peoples' (p.125). Instead, he posits 'a 'unified but polarized reality' (Atleo, 2011) in which practices deriving from varying ontological assumptions interact with (and potentially transform) one another' (Theriault, 2017, p.117).

I sympathise with Hornborg and Theriault's concerns, but in my own research I am more inclined to agree with Yeh and Bryan's (2015) contention that 'attention to different worlds need not elide an analysis of state power or capitalist extraction' (p.539). Furthermore, as Bovensiepen (2020)

³⁸ Revilla-Minaya (2019) for instance contends that Blaser and de la Cadena ignore the possibility that the Indigenous ontologies they describe are a form of strategic representation, assumed as a homogenous image in order to pursue political goals.

³⁹ Hornborg (2015) instead suggests that efforts should be made to investigate the political economic conditions that produce particular ontologies.

points out, 'political ontologists are arguably better attuned to the importance of politics, history and emergence than their more metaphysical ontological cousins' (p.29). A role model in this case is Burman's (2016; 2017; 2019) proposal to investigate the 'coloniality of reality' through ontologizing political economy and politicising the ontological turn, thereby providing the critical tools necessary to challenge ontological *and* political/economic power asymmetries simultaneously. In his own words:

critical attention to power asymmetries as expressed for instance in unequal ecological exchange within the capitalist world-system may be fruitfully combined with a critical attention to the ontological power asymmetries, that is, the coloniality of reality, underpinning such unequal material flows, since the former are a condition for and a justification and naturalization of the latter, and the latter are a material expression of the former (Burman, 2016, p. 92)

In effect, Burman (2016) advocates a closer attention to the coloniality (i.e. colonial difference) underpinning ontological conflicts because this beneficially 'reveal[s] dynamics of colonial domination that go deep into the very nature(s) of reality and being(s)' (p.77). I share this commitment in own research, as demonstrated through my decision to merge the PO and MCD frameworks. Consequently, while I explore the ontological dimension of the megacollector conflict, I will also situate this within Pedranos' political and economic realities, and most importantly, their experience of coloniality.

As well as neglecting local political/economic/historical contexts, ontologists are accused of accentuating a notion of ontological incommensurability at the expense of more complex on the ground entanglements (Erazo and Jarrett, 2017; Hornborg, 2017), as well as ignoring ontology's fluid and contingent nature (Cepek, 2016; Bovensiepen, 2020; Mézáros, 2020). Killick (2017) for instance argues that approaches focused on 'ontological difference are undermined by their inability to move beyond the distinction that they draw' (p.5). As a case in point, he deconstructs an imagined divide between Amerindian and modern lifestyles in Amazonia, drawing attention to hybrid social and cultural forms of everyday living. Killick's (2019) point isn't just to emphasise that such binaries are inaccurate, but rather to highlight the potential danger that the politicisation of reified ontologies engenders. He frames his argument around the concept of Buen Vivir (Good Living), noting how its politicised form diverges from the everyday experiences and desires of Indigenous peoples in their attempts to live well (see also Teixeira Delgado, 2018). While there are many flexible ways in which a good life can be achieved, Killick warns that this variation can be restricted by idealised narrow ideas of Buen Vivir. As he states, there is a 'danger that those dominant ideas turn from being descriptive to becoming normative' (Killick, 2019, p.8).

Killick's (2019) specific concern relates to how such circumstances can play into the hands of the state through the straitjacket of 'authenticity', and in particular through Hale's (2004) notion of neoliberal multiculturalism and its associated subject positions of the 'Authorised' and 'Insurrectionary Indian', terms which he borrowed from Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (see also Postero, 2007).⁴⁰ As Killick (2019) states:

In valorising indigeneity but explicitly or implicitly equating it with a particular understanding of community and sociality the notion can come to impose a new form of governmentality on indigenous peoples themselves. Those who do not conform to the template are dismissed as 'inauthentic' [...] [whilst] only certain types are understood as 'authentic' and thus therefore worthy of support and continuation (p.8)

A similar point is also made by Ramos (2012), who attributes the Yanomami's poor treatment by the Brazilian state in part due to ethnographic research which emphasised Yanomami alterity (i.e. Chagon, 1968; 1988).⁴¹ In this way, as Erazo and Jarret (2017) caution, depictions of ontological difference can easily fall into age-old stereotypes of savagery, creating obstacles to the collaboration that Indigenous people often desire. Even so, one problem with this narrative is that it downplays the political agency of Indigenous peoples (Copeland, 2011), and this is something I aim to remedy in this thesis. I will pay close attention to how neoliberal multicultural governance operates on the ground through exploring Indigenous actors' responses to the colonial subject positions which are mobilised in the megacollector conflict.

There are means to still highlight ontological difference whilst still acknowledging the plethora of 'rich inter-cultural, inter-ontological and inter-epistemological' (Borpoudakis, 2019, p.559) exchanges between worlds. De la Cadena's (2015a; 2015b) notion of the 'partial connections' between worlds is helpful in this respect. While de la Cadena's account does centre on ontological incommensurabilities, she doesn't see these incommensurabilities as a barrier to dialogue between different worlds. Indeed, her overriding argument is that alternative alliances can be formed across divergence, a perspective which is often neglected by her critics (Erazo and Jarrett 2017; Hornborg, 2017).⁴² Dussel's (2012) notion of transmodernity functions in a similar way, but within an MCD context. It is a conceptual tool orientated towards transcending essentialism - as Alcoff (2012) states, 'The concept of the transmodern is meant, in part, to allow for a broad, even global relationality among elements, so none are irreducibly local' (p.65).

⁴⁰ Hale (2004) defines neoliberal multiculturalism as the severe limitations on Indigenous people's transformative aspirations as a result of the conditional granting of Indigenous cultural rights.

⁴¹ During this time, their land was divided up into small parcels on the basis that they were too violent to live in continuous territory.

⁴² Although I have to agree with Bovensiepen's (2020) assertion that despite acknowledging partial connections, PO's emphasis on multiple worlds 'nevertheless leads to an analytical over-prioritization of difference' (p.30).

Neusiedl (2019) stresses that the OWW is not sealed off from relational worlds, and that its ideology and beliefs may be desirable outside the OWW and vice versa. Building on this important point, in this thesis I will pay particular attention to partial connections and transmodern formations between different worlds. Such an approach should help to avoid oversimplifying the ontological dimensions of the megacollector conflict as a clash between static and bounded ontologies (Burman, 2017). Another useful lens in this regard is the Aymara notion of ‘ch’ixi’ as discussed by the Bolivian sociologist/activist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2012). As she explains, Ch’ixi is the word for:

a color that is the product of juxtaposition, in small points or spots, of opposed or contrasting colors [...] [it] reflects the Aymara idea of something that is and is not at the same time. It is the logic of the included third. A ch’ixi color gray is white but is not white at the same time; it is both white and its opposite, black (p.105).

As Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) states, ‘ch’ixi combines the Indian world and its opposite without ever mixing them’ (p.105), and this notion is helpful because it allows us to think beyond binaries to the coexistence of heterogeneous elements (i.e. modern and non-modern worlds – see Figure 10 below). Rivera Cusicanqui herself draws upon what René Zavaleta (1986) terms *sociedad abigarrada* – (motley society), which expresses ‘the parallel coexistence of multiple cultural differences that do not extinguish but instead antagonize and complement one another’ (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012, p.105). The point here then is to be open to contentious oppositions and to embrace contradictions and inconsistencies, without seeking to reconcile differences or prioritise a given ontology (Rivera Cusicanqui in Furlong et al., 2019, p.11). This message has recently been taken onboard by several scholars aiming to provide a more nuanced take on the intersection between Indigenous worlds and modernity.⁴³ In this thesis, I similarly aim to explore radical alterity without losing sight of the existence of dynamic hybrid and heterogeneous realities, as can be understood through drawing attention to partial connections, transmodernity and ch’ixi.



arttextum (2020)

Figure 10: ‘Corn and Piercing’ (2014). This artwork by the Pedrano contemporary artist Benvenuto Chavajay represents the intermingling of ancestral and modern worlds

While my discussion has thus far centred on the essentialisation of Indigenous ontologies, it is important to note that PO and MCD approaches also homogenise modernity as singular and monolithic. This is something that these disciplines purposefully do so as to better critique modernity/coloniality / the OWW.⁴⁴ Blaser (2013a) for instance admits that PO ‘shrinks modernity’, because such ‘variations are not analytically relevant’ (p.553), and because doing so also beneficially regains space for the positivity of other (non-modern) worldings. However, he also suggests that modernity’s variations could be considered, depending on the specificity of the ethnographic case and the intended intervention.

In his ethnographic study of local mobilisations against neoliberal conservation Greece and England, Bormpoudakis (2019) critiques ontological analyses for conflating ‘particular ways of (Philosophical) thinking associated with modernity with ‘modern’, western societies’ (p.554).⁴⁵ He sets out to unsettle this notion in his own study by demonstrating how the homogenisation of modernity ‘runs the risk of papering over differences that are central in local struggles’ (p.552). He concludes that in Greek and English contexts ‘Moderns-as-people do not hold a single view of nature: nature-as-commodity or nature-as-separate from culture’ (p.554).

In their ethnography of salmon farming in Norway, Law and Lien (2018) likewise claim that ‘the internal colonization of what we call modernity by modernity was never complete’ and that there are ‘subordinate sensibilities [...] embedded in and enacted by those caught up in the practices of modernity’ (p.158). Even so, they fall short of pushing for the recognition of multiple modernities,⁴⁶ arguing that this would too simplistically ‘[bracket] the ways in which despite their particularities, a broad range of heterogenous practices work together’ (ibid, p.156). Instead, they conclude that modernity is ‘both coherent and not coherent at all’ (ibid, p.131). Although I understand Blaser’s (2013) pragmatic reason for ‘shrinking’ modernity, I believe ontological analyses can also benefit from a more nuanced approach. For this reason, this thesis will explore ‘a more complex modernity’ (Killick, 2017) than is often discussed in the MCD and PO literature.

Decolonising PO and MCD

Besides essentialism, the other major critique that I will discuss speaks to the need to effectively decolonise PO and MCD. These two issues are in fact interconnected, with the former a

⁴⁴ As Blaser (2009b) states, a focus on multiple modernities ‘makes it even more difficult to account for ontological conflicts as part of the present conjuncture’ (p.880).

⁴⁵ Blaser (2013a) defends PO on this front, explaining that ‘the attribution of modernness would go hand in hand with specific practices and not with a specific group’ (p.553), suggesting for instance that he wouldn’t consider a white woman practicing neopaganism as modern.

⁴⁶ See Grossberg, (n.d). and Eisenstadt, (2002).

symptom of the latter. For example, as mentioned in the previous section, academics' propensity to 'cut and paste' ethnographic material often results in essentialist presentations of Indigeneity (Ramos, 2012). Yet this is arguably caused by a deeper underlying problem, that is the academic's monopoly over representation, or as Ramos (2012) puts it, the continued 'ethnographic division of labor between those who know (the ethnographers) and those who let themselves be known (the natives)' (p.490). She accuses ontologists of 'ventriloquising' Indigenous peoples, since in their accounts 'the voice we hear is not indigenous, but an alien verbalization, an ersatz native, a sort of hyperreal Indian (Ramos, 1994)' (Ramos, 2012, p.490). Chandler and Reid (2020) are even more damning, arguing that ontologists are 'parasitical' in the manner in which they 'objectify' Indigenous peoples to 'enable their own creative critical capacities' (p.15).

A similar case is made against MCD by Rivera Cusicanqui (2012), but she takes her critique further in pointing out how this 'ventriloquism' is damaging to Indigenous peoples:

Neologisms such as decolonial [and] transmodernity [...] proliferate, and such language entangles and paralyzes their objects of study: the indigenous and African-descended people with whom these academics believe they are in dialogue. (p.102)

I believe that [...] Mignolo and company neutraliz[e] the practices of decolonization by enthroning within the academy a limited and illusory discussion regarding modernity and decolonization. Without paying attention to the internal dynamics of the subalterns, cooptations of this type neutralize. They capture the energy and availability of indigenous intellectuals—brothers and sisters who may be tempted to play the ventriloquist of a convoluted conceptualization that deprives them of their roots and their dialogues with the mobilized masses (p.104).

In place of furthering the goal of decolonisation, Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) argues therefore that the MCD group actually 'recolonize the imaginaries and minds of intellectuals of the South' (p.102).

Worst of all, Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) suggests that this damage is caused solely for the purpose of personal gain. She contends that the MCD group have created 'a new academic canon, using a world of references and counterreferences that establish hierarchies and adopt new gurus' (p.102). Although she doesn't name it as such, Grosfoguel (2016) suggests that Rivera Cusicanqui's critique draws similarities to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's (in Klein, 2013) notion of 'cognitive extractivism', which in Rivera Cusicanqui's case he rephrases as, 'epistemic extractivism'. In this process, decolonial concepts are constructed out of knowledge obtained from Indigenous people, but without an explicit recognition of their origin - 'Ideas run, like rivers, from the south to the north and are transformed into tributaries in major waves of thought' (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012, p.104). These concepts are then recirculated back to the South as something original, 'we end up having to consume, in a regurgitated form, the very ideas regarding decolonization that we indigenous people

[...] have produced independently' (ibid, p.103), and 'we produce the raw material and they give it back to use as a finished product' (Rivera Cusicanqui in Grosfoguel, 2016).

For Rivera Cusicanqui this process is exploitative because the benefits are unidirectional. She argues that MCD scholars are able to build a career on the back of Indigenous peoples, benefitting from their knowledge without actively contributing to their struggles or social movements.⁴⁷ Ontologists have also been accused of political complacency (Ramos, 2012; Todd, 2016), but in the MCD group's case this is even more problematic, due to their militant stance and claim to speak explicitly in the name of epistemological decolonisation.

The MCD group have addressed Rivera Cusicanqui's (2012) accusations directly. The first half of Mignolo and Walsh's (2018) recent book, 'On Decoloniality' for instance, is dedicated to the praxis of decoloniality, with Walsh introducing numerous political movements, struggles and insurgent actions in the South, emphasising the importance of thinking *with* Indigenous peoples. Throughout the text, Mignolo and Walsh further stress that, contrary to Rivera Cusicanqui's (2012) claims, they are not attempting to impose a new academic canon or a master plan of decoloniality. Instead, they emphasise that there are many ways of engaging with decoloniality, and that decolonial thinking itself should be understood as one *option* among many (Mignolo, 2018a). However, in spite of these counter claims, during my fieldwork, I found evidence which affirmed, at least partly, Rivera Cusicanqui's (2012) concerns.

This evidence came in the form of the contemporary Pedrano artist, Benvenuto Chavajay, whose work 'Corn and Piercing' (2014) accompanied my discussion of ch'ixi earlier on. Of the many artists from San Pedro, Benvenuto has reached the greatest international acclaim, so much so that he caught the attention of Walter Mignolo, who often discusses his art in his writing,⁴⁸ and he also invited Benvenuto to participate in one of his lectures at Duke University in 2014. When I spoke to Benvenuto about his relationship with Mignolo, he described it as follows:

They started to call me [decolonial] in Duke [University] where I gave the first talks with Walter Mignolo [...] it's that they want it like this [...] but I am not a decolonial artist. Walter Mignolo has said that I am a decolonial artist because this is the title he manages

He likes to say that the theory confirms my art, and my art reaffirms the theory. But I never thought when I started with this that I would be a decolonial artist, that my art would be part of decolonisation. No!

There is decolonial theory that connects with my work, but I am not decolonial, I understand it [but] [...] I am an artist of syncretism of the 21st century, I am more that, but why? It's because I unite modernity and the ancestral in my work [...] One could say that it comes from decolonial thinking, it's said that it comes from a theory of transmodernity, that's fine, that's

⁴⁷ Which is of course the very accusation that decolonialists make about postcolonial theory.

⁴⁸ Mignolo (2016; 2017b; 2019); Gaztambide-Fernández (2014); Nanibush and Mignolo (2018).

okay, I studied that, there is a connection. But I am not about that really, I am syncretism of the 21st century.

Mignolo and Walsh (2018) claim that their interest lies in ‘pluriversal decoloniality’, and bringing together local histories, subjectivities, knowledges, and narratives. Yet my conversation with Benvenuto suggests otherwise. His narrative of ‘21st century syncretism’ appears to have been subsumed by Mignolo’s authoritative form of decoloniality. If I hadn’t spoken to Benvenuto myself, I would have assumed him as a self-ascribing decolonial artist, since this is implied in Mignolo’s work. I carried such expectations with me when I met with the young poet Pedro Chavajay, another one of San Pedro’s well-known creatives. Before our interview, I had read a thesis which described him as a decolonial poet. However, this is something Pedro denied in person, stating:

Look, it’s the problem of all the intellectuals and theorists, they feel very happy taking concepts and treating them like they are facts.

Although Walsh and Mignolo (2018) deny they are constructing a decolonial canon, this is how it may function in practice. Decoloniality is about visibilising suppressed subjectivities, but Benvenuto’s inclusion seems to be orientated primarily towards affirming Mignolo’s own narrative. This beggars the question, at what point does decolonial theory cease being useful, and start being oppressive through preventing local, nuanced expressions of decoloniality from emerging on their own terms? As Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) fears, Mignolo’s particular language of decoloniality seems to somewhat ‘entangle and paralyze’ Benvenuto. For Blaser (2010) this problem is rooted in the power asymmetries of translation. As he explains, MCD scholars engage only with intellectual others that are literate in academic languages, and capable of merging different categories of knowledge (i.e. modern/academic with their own). While these intellectual others have to convey their work in the dominant language, MCD scholars do not need to learn the language of others. In other words, ‘the border thinking of intellectual others is not matched by a similar gesture by MCD’ and this ‘tends to force some peoples to fit into the story of others’ (Blaser, 2010, p.17).

Like Blaser, I agree that this form of intellectual engagement is lacking, but at least in Benvenuto and Mignolo’s case, this dynamic can be seen to be mutually beneficial. Benvenuto’s fame has increased considerably as a result of his association with such a ‘rock star’ (Todd, 2016) intellectual,⁴⁹ and their relationship doesn’t quite fit the exploitative pattern argued by Rivera Cusicanqui (2012). For one, Benvenuto has been invited to speak for himself in Northern universities, and as he states in another publication, ‘if they want to call me decolonial, I wouldn’t get mad about

⁴⁹ He has for instance been invited to many different cities to speak and show his work, including Paris and New York.

it, either' (in Ciudad Imaginacion, 2015, p.10). It is doubtful whether Mignolo could be said to be 'recolonising' Benvenuto's mind. Benvenuto chooses to utilise MCD concepts like the CMP, as this allows him to better articulate his own thoughts.⁵⁰

As to Rivera Cusicanqui's other main allegation - that MCD scholars 'neutralise' Indigenous political mobilisation, there are certainly some Pedranos who agree with this notion. As I will explore further in Chapter 6, there is a slight rift within San Pedro's artistic community between more politically engaged members,⁵¹ and other more well-known members like Benvenuto who are less involved in the community. As one artist explained to me:

I have friends here that are very famous, but sometimes it's very sad to speak to them, because they know a lot, [...] they can explain to you a lot, more than me, but it's people that only have theory that they don't practice. It's no good if you have knowledge and you don't use it. [...] They are a little egotistical because they will never share the reality of things. And in my case, with another [artist] friend we like to help people, give them advice, and when it's necessary to help somebody that needs it, we do everything possible to facilitate a situation.

Given the decolonial slant of Benvenuto's work, I was surprised by his admission that he isn't very political. During our interviews, he and a few other contemporary artists also appeared indifferent to some of the urgent threats facing San Pedro, most notably the megacollector.⁵² However, whether this indifference is personal, or a result of MCD 'neutralization' and co-optation of their energy at the expense of the community remains to be seen.

In terms of building on the critiques of this section in my own research approach, Benvenuto's situation suggests treading carefully in the utilisation of MCD concepts. As Ramos (2012) argues, the aim should be to 'extinguish the ventriloquist and make room for the voices of the Indians themselves' (p.490). To make analytical space for Indigenous ontological propositions, I should therefore let my ethnographic insights shine and resist the temptation to centre my analysis too deeply in Euro-American philosophy (Theriault, 2016). As Oslender (2019) states, 'Without these ethnographic stories, some of the debates in decolonial thinking run the risk of [...] getting lost in convoluted, abstract language games' (p.13). Unfortunately, by the very nature of the thesis, it is not possible to avoid ventriloquism altogether, and I will discuss these limits in the following methodology chapter. However, I do make an effort to 'walk with' (Sundberg, 2014) Pedranos by

⁵⁰ As I mentioned earlier, it was through his and other 'decolonial' artists' recommendations that I was first introduced to MCD myself.

⁵¹ Several of whom formed a political party during the 2015 elections.

⁵² Although their stance has, like the entire community's, shifted over time (see Chapter 10).

treating contemporary artists as theorists in their own right.⁵³ I include their work and opinions throughout this thesis *alongside* the concepts of MCD and PO scholars. In doing so I hope to avoid what Smith (2014) criticises as the phenomenon of ‘ethnographic entrapment’, whereby non-Indigenous scholars frame Indigenous peoples as mascots incapable of their own thought and analysis.

Exclusion

While the critiques of Ramos and Rivera Cusicanqui centre on the question of the representation of Indigenous voices, there is an equally pressing concern as to the exclusion of these voices from the ontological literature and MCD altogether. In the case of the former, Sundberg (2014) criticises its ‘overwhelming silence about Indigenous scholarship which articulates non-dualistic frameworks’ (p.36). However, it is important to draw a distinction here. Political ontologists are not culpable of excluding Indigenous philosophies, on the contrary, as I explained earlier, they are accused of treating these philosophies in essentialist ways. It is work on non-dualist ontologies beyond the PO literature, including ANT, post-humanism, and assemblage theory which face this critique. Sundberg (2014) takes particular aim at the vital materialism of Jane Bennet (2010) and her exclusive focus on Anglo-European thinkers, which she suggests implies Indigenous people as incapable of producing knowledge relevant to theorising materialism.

Todd (2016) makes a similar case against Bruno Latour in her influential piece ‘Ontology is just another world for colonialism’.⁵⁴ She discusses her attendance at one of his public lectures where he failed to reference a single Indigenous thinker. Such scholarship, Todd (2016) argues, ‘spin[s] itself on the backs of non-European thinkers’ (p.7), but ‘celebrat[es] and worship[s] a European thinker for ‘discovering’, or new articulating by drawing on a European intellectual heritage, what many an Indigenous thinker around the world could have told you for millennia’ (p.8). For Todd, the problem lies not with Latour exactly, but ‘how a Euro-Western audience consumes Latour’s argument [...] without being aware of competing or similar discourses happening outside of the rock-star arenas of Euro-Western thought’ (ibid, p.8). Accordingly, she deems the problem to be systemic, highlighting the structures which ‘make it easy for those within the Euro-Western academy to advance and consume arguments that parallel discourses in Indigenous contexts without explicitly nodding to them’ (ibid).

⁵³ Sundberg (2014) borrows this term from the Zapatistas and their call for an ‘engagement with Indigenous communities and individuals as intellectual and political subjects, colleagues in the practices of producing worlds’ (p.41).

⁵⁴ See also Schulz (2017).

MCD has also faced heavy criticism for excluding Indigenous voices. The Guatemalan novelist and literary critic Arturo Arias (2018) for instance argues that despite a significant Indigenous literary output, US-centred decolonial academics like Mignolo still gravitate towards Eurocentric positionalities, invisibilising Indigenous published output and contributions to decolonial perspectives. A notable example in this instance comes from Grosfoguel's (2016) criticism of Quijano's (2012) article about the Indigenous concept of Buen Vivir. Grosfoguel argues that Quijano 'appropriates critical Indigenous thought' without citing a single Indigenous person, with 16 of the 20 citations he made being references to his own work (see also Xón Riquiac, 2014). As Arias (2018) suggests, such neglect 'may be more a statement about academic power relations than about scholars' respect for Indigenous agency' (p.617), but it is problematic all the same.

The MCD group has also been accused of neglecting the debt that they owe to the contributions of postcolonial and decolonial feminists.⁵⁵ Kiran Asher (2013) for instance, condemns the MCD group's disavowal of postcolonial literature and the work of Gayatri Spivak in particular, which she argues is highly pertinent to the discussion. Mariana Ortega (2017) is even blunter in her article, 'Decolonial Woes and Practices of Un-knowing' where she argues that 'certain local histories and certain bodies are being erased' in the conversation on decoloniality, thereby replicating colonial impulses. In particular, she highlights how the work of US women of colour like Emma Pérez, Chela Sandoval, and Gloria Anzaldúa has been erased, omitted, or minimized.⁵⁶ Yet while Ortega (2017) is critical of the MCD group, she is most concerned with decolonial researchers, as she states:

My concern is not so much about Mignolo. It is about us. It is about those who have taken up the decolonial project [...] and whether we ourselves will replicate the very same silences (p.509).

Taking these critiques on board, in this thesis, I aim to include the work of excluded voices as much as possible. Yet as Ortega (2017) draws attention to, the practice and ethics of the researcher and their utilisation of theory is as important as the theories themselves. Decolonising my theoretical framework is therefore as much a methodological question as a theoretical one. However, as much as I aim to mitigate my own colonial tendencies, there are limits to this strategy, given that I am embedded within the colonial 'westernized university' (Cupples and Grosfoguel, 2018). It is to this urgent question of decolonising methodologies that I turn to in the next chapter.

⁵⁵ See Asher (2013; 2017); Asher and Wainwright (2018); Ortega (2017).

⁵⁶ See also Flórez (2003) for a discussion of MCD's exclusion of a feminist perspective more generally.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how PO and MCD can be suitably utilised to help understand processes of revindication in Indigenous communities. Yet both frameworks are encumbered by abstract conceptualisation and a lack of ethnographic engagements. As Burman (in Blaser, 2013a) states, ‘for a project of political ontology to take flight, there is a need for anchoring this thinking more explicitly and deeply in specific contexts and practices’ (p.561). My thesis will do just this, fleshing out PO and MCD concepts in the context of everyday life in San Pedro (Part 1) and as they play out in the megacollector conflict (Part 2).

I have also brought to attention the main theoretical critiques that have been levelled against PO and MCD. In this thesis, I aim to build on these lessons to push PO and MCD debates forward in a productive direction. In particular I aim to sharpen and nuance PO and MCD analyses through paying closer attention to the ambiguities and contestations that complicate essentialist and binary renderings of Indigenous opposition to modernity, as well as providing a more nuanced examination of modernity itself. In sum, this thesis will provide an ontological analysis of the megacollector conflict which doesn’t lose sight of either the operation of power, nor San Pedro’s situatedness within the social, historical and economic contexts of Guatemala.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter will confront the why, where, when, and how of my political agenda, research engagements and practices (Sundberg, 2015), putting them into conversation with decolonial methodologies (Smith, 1999). To achieve this, the chapter will be divided into two main parts. The first is a discussion of decolonising methodologies, where I will expand upon Chapter 2, and its conclusion that decolonising research is as much a methodological question as a theoretical one. To examine the extent to which it is possible to decolonise my research, I will first outline the harm of the colonial researcher in a Guatemalan context. I will explore the issues of extractivism, consent, and power relations, using this as a springboard to scrutinising my own research practices. I will then turn to the positive potential of research, reviewing PAR and the constraints which prevented me from adopting it as a methodology. This part will end with a discussion of the decolonial compromise I reached in assuming the position of an activist researcher. In the second part of this chapter, I will address the logistical aspects of my fieldwork and my methodological choices. This will be structured around a discussion of the four phases of my investigation, within which I will also outline my rationale for choosing San Pedro as a field site and for focusing on art and artists, as well some of the translation issues I encountered.

Decolonising My Research

Timothy, I have a proposal for you. I know that your studies are useful for you. I like to support students, but what benefit do they get from their study, apart from obtaining a certificate and a career? That's already your success. But I say, how can we also help ourselves in this sense, that is, what can we do? Because here we fill up with ideas, we write everything down, this also helps you, but really how can we help each other? For example, my idea is, as long as these institutions at an international level come to screw us, they continue to crush us, no!

It's that, what you [researchers] are doing, it's not very useful. Always it's 'their' criteria that have to be used, it doesn't matter that we can also think, that we can give opinions [...] In what way can we organize ourselves so that no type of insect comes to screw us? Excuse me, but the Mayan people, this is their opinion, international programs are like that. So then how can we tell them this? [...] I say that through your thesis you may be able to share these ideas at the international level. It would be interesting that through you [something is done]. How interesting this investigation is, [let's ensure that] it doesn't only impact international staff, but also us. You, as a [foreign] student have more access, it's as if we had a little window there, where you keep an eye out for us.

Andrea Rocche Chavajay – community leader,⁵⁷ spiritual guide, and researcher

⁵⁷ Leader of San Pedro's 'Association of the Municipal Organisation of Women'.

The English think that they're the centre of the world, we need to begin to decolonise that bullshit, and actually I want that in your thesis [...] that [should be] the very key point in the beginning of your thesis. Because that's not true. Either your university will allow that shit or not. If they don't, I think you need to defend your thesis, because I think you have an opportunity, you have access to these fucking universities, and you have access even to an audience, because decolonisation, it cannot just be from us.

David Sacach – community leader and artist

These anecdotes highlight the main conundrum at the heart of the question of decolonising my research. On the one hand, as a researcher from the 'westernized university' (Cupples and Grosfoguel, 2018), I am part of the machinery of modernity/coloniality, a site of epistemic violence where:

learning and the production, acquisition and dissemination of knowledge are embedded in Eurocentric epistemologies that are posited as objective, disembodied and universal and in which non-Eurocentric knowledges such as black and indigenous knowledges are largely ignored, marginalized or dismissed (Cupples, 2018, p.2)

On the other hand, this closeness grants me privileged access and perhaps an opportunity to decolonise the institution from within and contribute to structural and institutional transformations (Burman, 2019). In this section, I will unpack this 'place of entanglement' (Sundberg, 2015) that I find myself caught in. It has been a source of great source of personal conflict and reflection over the four years of my PhD, but in the end, it has also allowed me to better understand the limits of decolonisation. Before getting to this discussion however, it is necessary to discuss the context of the colonial researcher.

The Colonial Researcher

As the Māori anthropologist Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) notes, 'The term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism', a relationship which has been perpetuated 'through the ways in which knowledge about indigenous peoples was collected, classified and then represented' (p.1). My research did not take place in a vacuum, both my own experience of researching, and the experience of Pedranos being researched was conditioned by this colonial history. Accordingly, in the following discussion I will introduce the role of the academic researcher and the wide-ranging damage that they have wrought in Guatemala. I will provide a few select examples from Guatemala's chequered past which highlight the most critical ethical issues pertinent to Indigenous research, namely those of extractivism, consent, and power relations. I will discuss these issues in light of my own research practices in San Pedro, explaining how I have attempted to avoid replicating them myself.

1. Extractivism

In Chapter 2 I introduced the notion of ‘epistemic extractivism’ (Grosfoguel, 2016) to describe how Indigenous knowledge is extracted for outsiders’ benefit. Worse still, this knowledge is often mobilised for colonial purposes. This is especially true of anthropology, which has been a force for harm from its earliest days in Guatemala. Around the turn of the 20th century, large numbers of Germans migrated to the country to develop coffee plantations in the highlands. As the Kaqchikel scholar Aura Cumes (in Cumes and Iñigo Clavo, 2017) notes, academic investigations were pivotal to the maintenance of the exploitative plantation industry that they established:

there was a German colony in the Maya territories of Q’eqchi’ [...] and many of its members investigated what they termed ‘Indian culture’ in depth; there were Germans who had learned the Q’eqchi’ language perfectly and they used this knowledge to construct mechanisms to oppress people [...] taking everything away from them and turning them into their slaves.

Years later, the Indigenous knowledge extracted by outsiders was also sadistically used by the military during Guatemala’s bloody armed conflict (1960-1996):

Maya culture was also appropriated by the army, which perverted sacred symbols and names of deities to designate their destructive forces during the genocide. The T’zultaq’a spirit of the valleys and mountains – a Q’eqchi’ deity profoundly revered by this community – and the army used this name for the military forces that persecuted these same peoples during the genocide (ibid).

The genocidal policies of the Guatemalan military were a direct consequence of the 1954 coup which was orchestrated by the CIA (see Chapter 4). It has been proven that Guatemala-based American anthropologists contributed to this turn of events, through sharing their ethnographic data with the US military (Price, 2011; Gonzalez, 2002). Unfortunately, such nefarious practices have continued in the wider region to this day.⁵⁸

- My Research

Early on in my fieldwork, Pedranos impressed upon me the harm caused by researchers’ ‘open-cast mining approach to research’ (Smith, 1999). Nicolas Tumax, the President of the Association of Fishermen for instance described his negative past experiences:

There are a lot of people who come to take advantage, opportunists. For example, I took [researchers from] the Universidad del Valle one time with me, but they didn’t even thank me. Others came to make a video, I gave them a lot of time, like three days, I went to Panajachel, I went to give my talk, but they didn’t even pay for my boat journey. They are blood sucking. This is an unfair situation, but I like to collaborate. For example, with you I am collaborating, this time has cost me quite a lot. For example today I had other necessities to attend to but I suspended them to attend to you.

⁵⁸ Mychalejko and Ryan (2009); Voosen (2016), Wainwright, (2012; 2019); Kelly et al., (2017).

Wary of being just another a 'blood-sucking' researcher, I attempted to mitigate the extractivist tendencies of my research through various means. Where I deemed it appropriate, I compensated interviewees for their time, either through a small monetary fee or more usually through inviting them for a coffee and cake or a meal. In the case of Nicolas Tumax, during my fieldwork, I donated a sum of money to be used to buy the fishermen a snack periodically after their monthly beach clean.

Of course, this strategy is not without its own problems. To begin with, providing material compensation is likely to reinforce the financial benefits of collaboration. This was a problem I encountered on several occasions, with some Pedranos assuming that I had much greater resources and influence at my disposal than in reality. For example, one Pedrano awkwardly requested that I financially contribute to the building of a new office headquarters for his association. Another presumed I might be able to get Manchester United to help finance his project. In cases such as these, the power imbalance between myself and the interviewee is deepened further, if they are in difficult financial circumstances, they may feel that they have no other choice but to agree to an interview.

Although my behaviour was in a sense manipulative, at the same time, I felt it would be more unethical to expect Pedranos to give up their time for nothing. It is important to note that the compensation I provided was *only* tokenistic, and the majority of my interviewees didn't appear to expect it. This issue aside, the small compensations that I provided did not absolve me of extractivist behaviour. As Andrea Rocche Chavajay's earlier anecdote stressed, the greater issue is that I am able to establish my career on the back of Pedranos through the process of epistemic extractivism. Being less extractivist in this sense would require me to give back to the community in a more significant way.

At the beginning of my interviews, I would explain to interviewees that I aimed to return physical copies of my thesis to San Pedro, and I also recorded their email addresses so that I could personally send them a copy too. Although this seems like the minimum requirement, a shocking number of researchers fail at this task. A Pedrano friend told me how he had once acted as a translator for an American researcher but had never heard anything back from her after she left Guatemala. On hearing his description of the research, I realised that I had a printed copy of her thesis and I showed it to him. He was happy to finally see the fruits of his labour, yet I noticed that the researcher hadn't acknowledged him within her thesis.

Whilst I could make this guarantee of returning a copy of my thesis with relative confidence, I felt uncomfortable promising interviewees anything more since I didn't know what I could realistically achieve. The bar is set high, as some researchers are very well respected in San Pedro,

having maintained reciprocal relations for decades. Chief in this regard is the American child psychologist Barbara Rogoff, who established the town's first library in 1976, and she is still fondly remembered today. Some interviewees presumed that I would be able to do something similarly concrete for the town, but I attempted to avoid any implications to this effect. The problem is, as I will discuss later in the chapter, that my thesis is and always has been orientated towards my own academic goals rather than the community. As such, my research is unavoidably extractivist, even as I attempt to mitigate for this through an activist stance.

After submitting my thesis, I plan to return to San Pedro to disseminate my findings in a more useful way, and Domingo Yocom, the director of the CICC (San Pedro's Scientific and Cultural Research Centre) said he would support me in finding a way to do so. Provisionally, I hope to translate specific sections of my thesis into Spanish, producing a shorter document critical of AALA which could be more useful to community leaders in their opposition to the megacollector.

2. Consent

There is a long legacy of violations of consent in Guatemala. Between 1946-48 a program of American medical research was conducted on 1,300 Guatemalans (sex workers, soldiers, prisoners, and psychiatric patients), who were deliberately exposed to sexually transmitted diseases, including syphilis (O'Shaughnessy, 2011; Spector-Bagdady and Lombardo, 2019). Disturbingly, no consent had been granted from the patients in question, and in many cases, they had been actively deceived. When this scandal came to public attention in 2010, President Obama made a public apology. Yet far from being an isolated incident, ethical malpractice is a systemic problem. It only becomes 'scandalous' when it is publicly exposed.

- My Research

I obtained verbal consent from participants to record interviews, explaining how the interview data would be used beforehand, and I made it clear that I was a foreign university student. However, interviewees sometime presumed that I must be affiliated with the Guatemalan government or AALA. This was the case for Andrea Rocche Chavajay whose anecdote opened the chapter. She was wary of my motives, and I found it difficult to secure an interview with her. When we finally met, she was reluctant to discuss the megacollector. That was until she realised that I was definitely not employed by AALA. Her caution was well justified, she explained to me how she had previously been approached by two foreign young women, who had deceptively explained that they

were also doing an investigation about the lake's contamination. However, it was only when Andrea questioned them directly that they admitted they were employed by AALA.

I obtained permission from community leaders to attend their meetings. However, the politically sensitive nature of some interviews presented additional ethical challenges. In some cases, recordings were paused, with their comments being 'off the record'. I also told interviewees that they could be offered confidentiality if they wanted. Due to their political positions, some interviewees had been threatened with violence, but they still expressed a desire for their names to be included in my thesis. In these instances, wary of my responsibility not to cause harm, I had to decide on a case-by-case basis whether the interviewee's wishes should be overridden for their own safety. Where appropriate, I have anonymised the interviewee in question only as a 'community leader'.

3. Power Relations

In Guatemala, anthropologists have long exercised power over Indigenous communities (although this was *always* contested). As the K'iche anthropologist María Jacinta Xón Riquiac (2018) notes, their representations of Indigenous communities greatly affected the state's 20th century policies for 'Indian modernization'. This power differential was also recently exposed in a conflict between Xinca communities and the Canadian mining company - 'Tahoe Resources' (NISGUA, 2018). For years, the Xinca have protested the operation of the San Rafael silver mine within their territories, claiming that their right to prior consultation was violated in the granting of the mining license in 2013 (Dary, 2018). The Xinca have historically suffered significant cultural assimilation, having lost their native language. Tahoe Resources have used this against them, attempting to justify their lack of consultation on the basis that they are not Indigenous communities.

In 2018, the Constitutional Court ordered several Guatemalan academic institutions to carry out anthropological studies to determine whether the communities living around the mine were Indigenous (Flores, 2018). This order was protested by the communities themselves, who argued that anthropologists had no right to deny their self-determination (Brown, 2019). While the state upheld the anthropologists' prerogative to determine the Xinca's very existence as a people, colonial power never goes unchecked, and these circumstances sparked a massive revivalist movement. The Xinca have reclaimed their identity, and this is reflected in the latest census where their self-identifying population increased from 16,000 in 2002 to over 260,000 in 2018 (Brown, 2019).

- My Research

In light of my positionality as a Northern, white, male researcher conducting research in an Indigenous community, a discussion of power is essential. Power asymmetries operate on multiple levels within my research. Firstly, there are the those between myself and my Indigenous research participants during the fieldwork. Then there are those during the writing of the thesis itself, that is, my power over my research participants' representation.⁵⁹ However, as Alcoff (1991) argues, researchers' reflections on power differential shouldn't be used as a sort of disclaimer. Confessions and self-reflexivity alone don't help to dismantle the structure of domination that enable privilege. Smith (2014) argues that the undoing of privilege rather occurs 'through the creation of collective structures that dismantle the systems that enable these privileges' (p.217). While this may be true, it is still important to critically interrogate the bearing of my positionality on Pedranos.

Given my authoritative status, those Pedranos I approached in the streets of the town might have felt obliged to speak to me. However, in most of these cases, my translator was the intermediary with whom they interacted, mitigating this issue to some extent. Truly resolving this power imbalance however would require my absence entirely, for Pedranos to carry out such research themselves (i.e. indigenist research). This has a number of benefits, as Smith (1999) states:

When Indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed. Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, and people participate on different terms (p.193).

Pedranos *are* increasingly representing themselves. During my fieldwork I encountered several individuals who were conducting academic research about their community on questions of culture, spirituality, and language loss. These circumstances beggar the question – wouldn't it be better to step back for Pedranos to carry out such research themselves? I would answer "yes", but not necessarily in all cases. There are also other factors to consider. Firstly, it is worth noting that my investigation is not wholly centred on Pedranos, but also non-Indigenous outsiders (scientists, NGO and governmental personnel). As Alcoff (1991) notes, retreating may undercut the possibility of political effectivity. My privileged positionality has for instance also opened doors which might be closed to Pedrano researchers. As a white foreigner, I was able to obtain appointments with these outside institutions easily, and they further took my interviews seriously. In contrast, an Indigenous friend complained how he had been waiting for months for an email reply from AALA. Likewise, I had

⁵⁹ Although it is important not to overstate this power differential. Some of my participants may have been exercising agency in their interactions with me to meet their own needs in ways that may have been deliberately hidden from me.

no difficulty attending scientific conferences in Guatemala, spaces which aren't particularly open to Indigenous participation. Through blending into such environments, I was able to gain access to certain outsider spaces without any questions being asked.

Pedrano community leaders were also eager that I take advantage of this opportunity that my positionality afforded me to question AALA, and at least voice some of their own concerns about the megacollector directly. As one community leader put it:

Well you as a foreigner have more possibilities to talk with them, whereas we don't.

As David and Andrea's anecdotes at the beginning of the chapter stressed, by way of my privilege, I also have a unique window to speak back to the 'westernized university' (Cupples and Grosfoguel, 2018). Not doing this investigation on account of my positionality would be abandoning a political responsibility to speak out against oppression. By privilege of my position, I have the time and money at my disposal that few Pedranos have, and so I would rather utilise this opportunity to advance the needs of those being represented.

This being said, it is important to recognise that I am doing more than simply speaking about Pedranos and their situation in this thesis. I may also be speaking *for* them, that is, representing 'the other's needs, goals, situation, and in fact, *who they are*' (Alcoff, 1991, p.9). My representation is based upon my own situated interpretation, and this situatedness and its effects must be critically interrogated. In Chapter 2 I already discussed the danger of the researcher's monopoly over representation, and the essentialised representations which ensure from ethnographic 'cutting and pasting' (Ramos, 2012). This tendency towards essentialism is itself a product of colonial stereotypes about Indigenous peoples. As the American anthropologist Diane Nelson (1999) states:

It is [...] unpleasant to acknowledge that all of us [foreigners] are drawn to Guatemala through the attractions of similar imaginings – of traditional Indian culture (p.54).

My own situatedness is also shaped by this notion of the exotic 'noble savage', and this undoubtedly influenced my initial essentialist treatment of Pedranos' relational ontology. As I explained in Chapter 2, I have attempted to account for these essentialist tendencies by drawing attention to them throughout my thesis.

One of the greatest dangers of speaking for Indigenous people is misrepresentation, and there are many ways for this to occur besides through my own biases. The issue of translation for instance is especially important in my case, given that interview data underwent multiple levels of translation.⁶⁰ The voices chosen to represent the community is another important factor. I interviewed many Pedranos (almost 1% of the population), and I attempted to include a wide cross-section of the community, including those whose voices are often excluded, such as trash collectors,

⁶⁰ I will address this issue later in the chapter.

campesinos (farmers/peasants), and old women. Manuel, who is employed at the town's trash processing plant for instance stated:

For me it's an honour that you have taken me into account, although I would have liked to have spoken in other spaces, but this opportunity has never been offered, not with the municipality, never.

However, the bulk of quotes littered throughout this thesis are taken primarily from the town's political and intellectual elites. As Saffari (2016) argues, 'The voice of the intellectual classes [...] cannot be taken as the voice [...] of all the subaltern groups' (p.42), and thus, a potential outcome of these circumstances is that 'Certain voices [...] find no place – and are lost [...] in the hegemonic modes of knowledge production' (ibid).⁶¹ That is not say that even those voices I included are represented well, as Smith (1999) states:

It galls us that Western researchers [...] can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us. (p.1)

The best way to lessen the dangers of misrepresentation is to adopt the practice of speaking *to* and *with* rather than *for* others (Alcoff, 1991; Mato, 2000). This would transform research 'participants' into research 'partners' (Lindblom, 2019), treating Indigenous people as political subjects rather than mere objects of research. Such a transformation is advocated by decolonial scholars. Walsh (2018) for instance stresses the importance of moving from a posture of 'studying about' to 'thinking with' Indigenous people, while Sundberg (2014) draws upon the Zapatista concept of 'walking with', to advocate research as 'a form of solidarity built on reciprocity and mutuality, walking and listening, talking and doing' (p.41). Speaking with Pedranos would involve providing them with an opportunity for critical feedback to contest my representation of their struggle against the megacollector (Lindblom, 2019). Yet this is not something I did, and unfortunately Pedranos were not my research partners due to the PhD's logistical constraints. As Mato (2000) notes, while studying with the subaltern is preferable to studying the subaltern, it is only rarely feasible. This is an issue I will address in the following section.

Although my research falls short in lessening the power disparities between myself and Pedranos, there are other measures that I have adopted in an attempt to minimise the danger of misrepresentation. I have for instance attempted to utilise the writings of Indigenous authors who represent themselves (including the work of Pedranos). I have also included numerous artworks of Pedrano contemporary artist thinkers. In doing so, I hope to widen modernity's narrow definition of what constitutes expert knowledge by letting the artwork stand in for theory in its own right (Iñigo

⁶¹ Furthermore, as Emma Chirix (in Marcos, 2010) criticises, such encounters tend to favour Indigenous men's abstract conceptualisations over the lived experiences of women.

Clavo, 2020). Even so, I recognise that the subaltern is not always able to speak in my thesis (Spivak, 1988), and this is due to my failure to decolonise my research.

The Limits to Decolonising Research

While the previous section concentrated on the ways to minimise harm to my research participants, in this section I will explore the possibilities of doing good. First it is important to draw a distinction between social justice-oriented research and decolonial research. As Tuck and Yang (2012) powerfully argue, social justice is not a metonym for decolonisation, and anti-colonial projects do not necessarily align with Indigenous interests. Without a firm commitment to decolonisation and the reclamation of Indigenous lands, sovereignty and ways of thinking, even well-intentioned research projects can perpetuate settler colonialism. Decolonial research must have what Spivak (in Spivak et al., 1996) terms a ‘responsibility structure’. As she states, ‘Finding the subaltern is not so hard, but actually entering into a responsibility structure with the subaltern, with responses flowing both ways [...] that’s the hard part’ (p.293).

Caxaj et al’s., (2012) analysis of research on Guatemalan mining conflicts is a useful means to making sense of this distinction. They conclude that while this research is typically oriented towards social justice for the affected Indigenous communities, it often problematically obscures Indigenous agency. In particular, they highlight how Indigenous women are reified as helpless victims so as to better highlight the oppressive realities of mining companies. They argue that such accounts invisibilise the women’s long-term visions and fail ‘to convey a true sense of the formal organization and planning in which the women were continuously engaged’ (Caxaj et al., 2012, p.84).⁶²

My research is similarly well-intentioned. I aim to highlight modern/colonial structures of oppression in San Pedro, and in AALA’s advancement of the megacollector in particular. Even so, though I employ a decolonial theoretical framework, my research cannot exactly be considered decolonial research. As I mentioned in the previous section, I am speaking *for* rather than *with* Pedranos. They are my research participants, and my research is driven by my priorities, not theirs. As Kendall et al., (2011) criticise, most research labelled as collaboration ‘is really little more than consultation’ (p.1724), and in my case, naming Pedranos as my research ‘partners’ would be disingenuous, implying a level of control and reciprocity that they simply lack. In the following section, I will push beyond this rhetoric of collaboration to explore how meaningful decolonised research could be achieved, and afterwards I will explain why in my case this was not possible.

⁶² In an Andean context, Fabiana Li (2015) and Katy Jenkins (2017) have similarly fleshed out women’s agency in anti-mining activism.

Participatory Action Research

As Coombes et al., (2014) emphasise, there is no pre-determined, singular, or authorised suite of methods for pursuing the goal of decolonised research. However, PAR (Participatory Action Research) has been widely recognised as the methodology best suited to achieving decolonised research with Indigenous communities (Zavala, 2013). As a collaborative and action-orientated framework, it fulfils decolonial objectives (Smith, 1999), despite considerably predating the decolonial turn.⁶³ PAR is distinguished from other approaches by its centring of local knowledge and involvement of Indigenous partners as full collaborators in the research process. From design to dissemination of results, the research develops through ongoing dialogue with communities about their priorities and their identified needs and objectives (Caxaj et al., 2012). PAR aims to better horizontalize the hierarchical relations between researcher and researched (Zavala, 2013), and it also is driven by a political imperative to transform findings into actionable knowledge of direct benefit to community members (Baum et al., 2006). However, it is important to note that while PAR can be put to good use, it is not inherently decolonising (Wainwright, 2012). It can be just as disempowering as conventional research practice, and this is more often the case when it is driven by the 'impact agenda' rather than Indigenous needs (Coombes et al., 2014).

PAR has been effectively deployed in Guatemala to examine the impacts of mining and the armed conflict (Caxaj, 2015, Caxaj et al., 2012). Lykes et al. (1999) for instance carried out a PAR Photovoice project with the Association of Maya Ixil Women (New Dawn) from the community of Chajul, which had suffered greatly during the armed conflict. They pushed research objectives beyond narratives of female victimhood to ways that better benefit the community. Most importantly, their project was orientated towards concrete goals articulated by the Ixil participants themselves. These women decided to use photography to document images of the community and reconfigure the history of the war through their own memories. As Lykes et al., (2010) explain, this process of self-reflection and collective knowledge generation not only helped to disseminate the women's understanding of their experiences and heal wounds from the war, but it also created an organization base from which to establish new projects that would improve the women's lives and the lives of their children.

Adopting PAR, or more specifically, community-based participatory research (CBPR) would have been the best way for me to decolonise my research with Pedranos, but there are several reasons why I did not choose this approach. To begin with, as I mentioned earlier, feasibility is a significant constraint to speaking *with* the subaltern (Mato, 2000). What is or is not feasible is

⁶³ Orlando Fals-Borda (1985) carried out the first earliest PAR project, although its origins stem to the work of Paulo Freire (1970).

dictated mostly by the ‘westernized university’, which often restrains the possibility of aligning community and academic intent (Coombes et al., 2014; Cupples and Grosfoguel, 2018). Take for instance the issue of prioritising the Indigenous community’s objectives. For Hodge and Lester (2006), the researcher must wait to be invited to carry out research:

non-Indigenous researchers must be prepared to wait to be invited into the domain. No longer can researchers sit in ivory towers of supposed knowledge and dream up research topics, pedagogical and epistemological evolutions of Indigenous processes and outcomes (p.45).

In my case, to initiate the PAR process I would have had to have spent several months relationship building in San Pedro before starting my fieldwork, waiting to be invited by Pedranos, and with no guarantee of this eventuality (Newton et al., 2012). This ‘waiting’ would have been difficult to achieve within the timeframe and funding of a three-year PhD program.⁶⁴ As Hodge and Lester (2006) state, ‘time constraints of academia are limiting in that institutionalised education invariably requires time-bound ‘outcomes’, whereas issues or concerns pertinent to [Indigenous] communities [...] rarely conform to such time specificities’ (p.49). I also doubt whether the ESRC would have been willing to fund a project of such high risk of being rejected by the community.

Institutional Constrains

There are a number of inbuilt institutional constraints encouraging the researcher to prioritise their own needs over their research participants, and chief among these is the issue of funding. When I returned from my fieldwork, I expressed concern to my supervisors about the possibility of obtaining funding to return to San Pedro to disseminate my research findings and give back to the community. I was surprised to hear that there was no specific funding for this purpose, but plenty for researchers to attend the international conferences which are primarily orientated towards networking and developing researchers’ careers. These circumstances reflect the priorities of the ‘westernized university’ itself - its own social reproduction.⁶⁵ I was easily able to obtain funding for my language training needs and the attendance of international conferences, but I will have to draw on my own limited savings to return to Guatemala to disseminate my findings. In this sense, the system is extractive, discouraging reciprocity, and prioritising the extraction of information for the researcher’s benefit.

⁶⁴ In the case of Lykes et al, (1999), the PAR Photovoice project was initiated after seven years of close contact and trust building with the community.

⁶⁵ And its emphasis on producing journal articles rather than more directly contributing to social justice (Pain et al., 2011).

As a 100,000-word document, the PhD thesis also doesn't exactly lend itself to easy dissemination or political usefulness for Indigenous outcomes. The knowledge it contains is often inaccessible except to those specialised in the discipline who are able to decipher it, and so it is no wonder that to many outsiders, 'Universities often seem more like asylums for the protection of deluded academics than workshops producing real knowledge' (Ree, 1997, p.1). As the K'iche anthropologist Maria Jacinta Xón Riquiac (2018) argues, in the social sciences the institutionalisation of knowledge can often become an end in itself. This is not to say that the researcher can't produce shorter dissemination-focused documents, but critically this is not a required aspect of the PhD, and it would still have to take a backseat to the thesis itself (as it has done in my case).

The underlying issue here is that the 'westernized university' approves research which doesn't benefit Indigenous communities, and this is a problem of ethical procedure. The ethics form which I completed for my fieldwork approval made no special consideration of research with Indigenous communities. Although the form aimed to ensure that no harm was caused to research participants (through for instance making informed consent a requirement), there was little emphasis on giving back to the community. The only section which touched upon this was a yes/no question – "Will your informants be provided with a summary of your research findings?". Arguably, what's needed is a more rigorous ethics procedure, one which would *only* approve collaborative research directly beneficial to Indigenous communities (Allahwala et al., 2013). This adjustment would require more work on the part of students and the ethics committee, but as Smith (1999) states, 'Negotiating and transforming institutional practices and research frameworks is as significant as the carrying out of actual research programmes' (p.140). This transformation would likely prevent much research from being approved, yet as Sundberg (2015) suggests, 'ethical considerations do imply ending certain kinds of research [...] when the research's objectives do not align with the interests, capacity, or political goals of marginalized communities with whom they wish to work' (p.120).

A more rigorous ethical procedure would likely have rejected my own research proposal, but this would have forced me to consider how to better attend to the ethical implications of my research. These considerations can be understood as what Sundberg (2015) (drawing on Spivak (1990)), refers to as the task of 'homework'. Homework is the work that one undertakes long before fieldwork, it requires researchers think more carefully about their research in light of certain questions. What is the research's purpose? Whose interests are served by it? 'To what extent are we involved in processes of extraction that mirror the imperial extraction of raw material?' (Wainwright, 2012, p.89 in Sundberg, 2015). Unfortunately, as much as decolonisation is now being discussed in the 'westernized university' (Radcliffe, 2017), it is an institution slow to renovate its ethos. As

Marker (2019) states, universities 'are in increasingly paradoxical positions as they ostensibly invite Indigenous expression, but resist the undoing of hierarchies that maintain hegemonic equilibrium' (p.502).

Although I accept my personal responsibility for failing to decolonise my research and build a more socially responsible methodology, as this section has shown, my capacity to do so was also constrained by institutional limitations. The requirements of an ESRC-funded Geography PhD are not entirely compatible with meeting the community's needs. My research is fundamentally researcher-centric, prioritising gaps in the literature and producing as strong a thesis as possible, and it will likely benefit myself much more than Pedranos. Although my research is not decolonial, I have found other ways to contribute to the community of San Pedro. In the next section, I will outline how I progressed to the position of the activist researcher.

The Activist Researcher

Graduate students often express interest in research that might enact grassroots social change or influence public policy, but subsequently bend to more conventional expectations of advisors, departments, universities, and the disciplinary mainstream. (Brewer, 2013, p.330)

In the duration of my PhD, I have found my own priorities altered in much the same way as Brewer (2013) describes above. During my fieldwork, I enthusiastically hoped to write something of use to Pedrano community leaders, above all I wanted to 'walk with' (Sundberg, 2014) Pedranos by exposing the modern/colonial dynamic of the megacollector. However, over time, my priorities shifted to instead mining my research for theoretical insights. Even so, I have attempted to ensure that my research doesn't totally lose sight of my earlier goal, and one guiding influence in this respect was Domingo Yocom, the president of the CICC. During our interview, he explained his experience with a research project that he conducted with local *campesinos*:

Five years ago, I worked with campesinos, I interviewed many of them in the countryside and two years later I bumped into one of them. He asked me the following, "What quantity of area of corn did you plant this year?". But what did he mean by asking this? Let's try to understand. I interviewed him, accompanied him and took photos and videos. What he was thinking was that I had learned something from him, and that I had planted corn, because if not, what was the point in studying in the first place? This is his mentality.

As Domingo describes, from the Pedrano perspective knowledge must be *lived*, it is meaningless without a direct practical application. He explained that *experience* is the core foundation of Mayan epistemology, as is eloquently expressed in the Tz'utujil phrase, 'Ja nub'iini rotaq, ja rotaq nub'an', translating as 'He that speaks it, knows it. He that knows it, does it'. I have carried this piece of wisdom with me ever since and have pondered how to do justice to Pedrano epistemology.

As the previous section showed, the dilemmas of research do not justify the decision to remain silent on the struggles facing marginalized people. Scholars 'should accept the challenge of figuring out how to productively engage with and participate in mutually beneficial knowledge production about those struggles' (Nagar, 2002, p.181). In this vein, even though my thesis is not orientated towards beneficial Indigenous outcomes, it can still usefully visibilise the struggle that Pedranos are facing against the megacollector. I can use my privileged window of opportunity to speak back to those powerful institutions who may take my opinion more seriously than Pedranos'.⁶⁶ Moreover, beyond the remit of the thesis, this is a goal that I can contribute to through my own actions. Sundberg (2014) argues that *walking with* may also entail taking direct action.

During my fieldwork, one such opportunity arose when I was contacted by a foreign investigative journalist who had caught wind of the megacollector conflict. They required information and contacts, and they also wanted to know more about the conflict from my perspective as a researcher. Their request forced me to seriously contemplate my position, and in particular the objectivity which I had up until this point, been struggling to maintain, as can be seen in my field diary entry below:

After conducting almost 100 interviews exclusively with local people I feel that my whole idea about the megacollector has been tainted by their views, and I am less able to look at the project objectively. I feel this is my main problem as a researcher and something I haven't been able to balance. I'm unable to act as a neutral objective force in my interviews. Being a neutral observer necessitates one to be an actor. Sometimes it feels very disingenuous. I feel like I'm faking it. This quest for objective perfection makes me extremely uneasy.

After critically assessing the journalist's motives and obtaining permission from community leaders to do so, I agreed to share my opinions. The role that I had become accustomed to was reversed, I was now the one being interviewed. Through contributing to the media output in this way, I became complicit in the political unfolding of the megacollector conflict.

Before the journalist contacted me, I was already struggling with the idea of the neutral academic that I had assumed I was meant to embody. That is, the idea that the research 'is not influenced by [the researcher's] values, experiences or material conditions' (Staeheli and Lawson, 1995, p.328 in Sundberg, 2015). From this perspective, the observer is situated above the observed and this distance is assumed to guarantee neutrality and an unbiased view (Sundberg, 2015, p.118). This positioning has however long been critiqued within the social sciences, especially by feminist and post-colonial scholars, who in particular highlighted how 'objective' knowledge is inherently exclusionary, partial, and highly racialised (Suchet-Pearson et al., 2013). Even so, as Asher (2019) notes, 'empiricism continues to haunt geography, and positivist methods (strongly influenced by

⁶⁶ As Andrea Rocche Chavajay expressed a desire for at the beginning of the chapter.

“evidence-based science”) have re-emerged in the 21st century’ (p.124). Indeed, my years of study at university left me with the impression that neutrality is what is expected of the researcher.

As McClean et al., (1997) argue, the notion of ‘objective’ geographic research relies ‘on outdated (and totalising) concepts of an apolitical and universal ‘truth’’ (p.12), but even more problematic is its inherent coloniality. As Smith (2014) states, ‘the quest for the knowable racialized subject is part of colonial and racial discourse itself’ (p.214). Reflecting on her own fieldwork in Guatemala, Sundberg (2015) describes how she was uncomfortable with the observer status because it assumes a position of mastery in relation to the observed. She argues that this authoritative and hierarchical position is a construction of self which ‘recalls imperial tales of exploration and glorifies European men’ whilst ‘obscuring the contribution and participation of the many individuals involved, especially Indigenous peoples’ (p.119). The same concerns characterised my own research, as I expressed in my field diary:

Am I reproducing the very thing my research is meant to be countering? We’re sent out here to exploit, me exploring and ‘revealing’ to outsiders reproduces the same old tired paradigm

McClean et al., (1997) suggest that ‘commitment to [...] research partners as knowing subjects rather than mere objects to be known, necessitates taking their concerns seriously and being willing to act on them’ (p.12). This is what I have attempted to do in various ways outside the remit of the thesis. I started taking Pedranos’ concerns seriously in community meetings, where I found it impossible to maintain a neutral stance on the megacollector conflict. In this regard, my experience mirrors Datta’s (2018) discussion of research with Indigenous communities in Bangladesh:

My confusion was on how to be neutral when I was sharing stories as a process of relationship-building. When I was in conversation with participants, they wanted me to listen to their story with empathy and act on their issues [...] Many times, I thought, ‘Am I going to lose my neutrality as a researcher if I respond to my participants’ feelings?’ (p.6).

Datta (2018) explains that he overcame his confusion through decolonising from the Western form of researcher, to a participant-orientated researcher. In a similar way, during my fieldwork I consciously adopted the position of an activist researcher, aligning my research objectives in solidarity with Pedranos and their struggle against the megacollector’s imposition. When asked, I contributed to the community leaders’ efforts against the megacollector in the small ways that I could. For instance, I printed invitations to community meetings and helped to deliver them around town. I also financially and technically contributed to the organisation of an activist event. Since returning from the field, I have also continued to support the movement from a distance, through for instance helping with pieces of translation, and contributing (financially and creatively, albeit minimally) to Pedranos’ poster publicity campaign. My most significant contribution

however was the logistical facilitation of a community leader's participation at the Tepoztlán Institute conference in Mexico in July 2019. This week-long conference that we participated in together was focused on the subject of water conflicts. It provided a setting for the community leader to expand their network with international academics and activists, and also to collaboratively discuss the megacolector conflict and decide upon the best way forward to framing the opposition movement.

As Hale (2006b) suggests, the activist researcher position generates insight that would otherwise be impossible to achieve, and it also provides a basis for analytical understanding and theoretical innovation. However, through assuming such a position 'we are also inevitably drawn into the compromised conditions of the political process' and 'The resulting contradictions make the research more difficult to carry out' (ibid, p.98). Another issue that Smith (1999) highlights is that:

Many researchers [...] may see the benefits of their particular research projects as [...] serving a specific emancipatory goals for an oppressed community. But belief in [this] ideal [...] becomes so taken for granted that many researchers simply assume that they as individuals embody this ideal and are natural representatives of it (p.2).

In this case, I recognise and aim to account for how my political alignment may, as Nelson (1999) cautions, problematically reproduce 'white saviour' narratives:

As [foreign researchers], we rely on heroes and villains. We feel more content with ourselves when we are positioned as moral subjects against the voracious and unjust power structure and as the vehicles of justice for the victims whose side we take [...] We need to rigorously explore the ways our interventions as 'white people saving brown people from slightly less-brown people' may maintain colonialist-style relations (p.62).

During community meetings I was conscious of imposing myself in this Indigenous space. Although I realised that at this point, I was more than just an observer, I still thought it best in practice to limit my interaction to observing and listening unless otherwise asked. Understandably, this ambiguous position wasn't always understood, as demonstrated on one occasion when a community leader assumed that I would be one of the nine individuals chosen to partake in an excursion for community leaders. The investigative part of me desperately wanted to attend. However, I realised that attending would cross a critical boundary between foreign ally and Pedrano activist. It was not my place to take up one of the spaces reserved for Pedranos. I support their resistance to the megacolector, but ultimately it is not my fight, especially given that it might well last for decades.

Fieldwork Logistics

Rationale for choosing San Pedro

I first set my eyes on Lake Atitlán in 2011 when I passed through Guatemala as an 18-year-old backpacker. I spent just a few nights in San Pedro, but its colourful murals and joyous atmosphere left a deep impression on me. I was drawn there for the same reason that many tourists are. San Pedro is an alternative destination to the more developed and accessible lakeside town of Panajachel. It may not be the largest or most traditional of the lakeside communities (a title held instead by Santiago Atitlán), but it is the most open and welcoming, and this is perhaps why it has held such a special allure to writers and anthropologists over the years (Paul and Paul, 1941; Monteforte Toledo, 1948). Indeed, locally San Pedro also has a reputation for attracting people, commerce, and ideas – one Pedrano described it as the ‘New York’ of the lake.

In 2016, when I was planning to improve my Spanish in preparation for my PhD research, I remembered that intriguing town on the shores of Lake Atitlán, and I booked myself several weeks of study in one of San Pedro’s many Spanish schools. The homestay experience afforded me the opportunity to peel back some of its mystery, and the family I lived with generously included me in cultural festivities and Mayan ceremonies, as did my Spanish teacher. We chatted about many things, but our conversations often led back to the lake. It was this experience which caused me to switch my approved PhD proposal from Mexico to Guatemala at the last minute.

At this point, I knew there was plenty of scope for fruitful investigation at Lake Atitlán, but I wasn’t sure of my particular focus. In my previous research I had investigated the dynamics of tourism on local communities in Mexico and Peru, and this was initially something I had in mind for my PhD too, especially in light of the notably sharp separation between San Pedro’s tourist zone and the community. However, in the year preceding my fieldwork, two interesting situations led to me to shift my angle. The first was San Pedro’s implementation of a plastic ban (October 2016), and the second was growing opposition to the megacollector’s advancement (Abbott, 2016). In both cases, I pondered why San Pedro was the lakeside community at the forefront of these seemingly ‘environmental’ issues. When I returned to San Pedro the summer of 2017, I again lived in a homestay and studied at a Spanish school. However, this time when I attended cultural festivities and deepened my relationships with Pedranos, I did so with a much more investigative mindset. During this time, I also carried out a few preliminary investigations and practice interviews. For example, I attended some events with UC Davis Summer school,⁶⁷ based in the office of AALA in

⁶⁷ And their program ‘Ecological and Social Issues at Lake Atitlán’.

Santa Catarina Palopó, and this afforded me an introduction to some key actors of the megacollector conflict.

Ultimately, I chose San Pedro as my case study because of its regional prominence in environmental/political affairs, and this only became clearer as the community became the main centre of opposition to the megacollector during my fieldwork. However, this choice was also pragmatic. Having spent the summers living in homestays in San Pedro, I had been introduced to different facets of community life, and I had also established a number of relationships with Pedranos. I saw the potential to use this experience and my Pedrano contacts to begin researching. I also felt comfortable and familiar enough with the town to live there for nine months. San Pedro's medium size meant it was realistic to achieve a very thorough investigation, but at the same time, its tourist facilities would allow me to escape momentarily from community life and eat a pie with gravy in an English pub.

Research Methods

Given some of the ethnographic deficiencies of PO and MCD (Chapter 2), ethnography was the natural choice for an in-depth understanding of the megacollector conflict. The combination of interviewing and participant observation was also ideally suited to examining the disjuncture between rhetoric and performance (i.e. worlding), a main focus of my research. Over the nine months of my fieldwork (24th November 2017 - 18th August 2018), I carried out intensive ethnographic research, conducting around 145 interviews,⁶⁸ and I participated in a vast range of events. My research can be roughly divided into four major (but heavily overlapping) phases, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Research Methods		
PHASE	FOCUS	METHODS
1	Wider Community	- Predominately shorter semi-structured interviews with randomly selected Pedranos. - Participant observation of cultural and environmental community events.
2	Narrow Community (elites)	- In-depth interviews with selected Pedranos. - Participant observation of community meetings.
3	Narrow Outsiders (elites)	- In-depth interviews with selected outsiders. ⁶⁹ - Participant observation of scientific conferences and other external events.
4	Distant situational	- Continued online contact. - Observation on Facebook. - Transcribing and coding of interviews. - Discourse analysis.

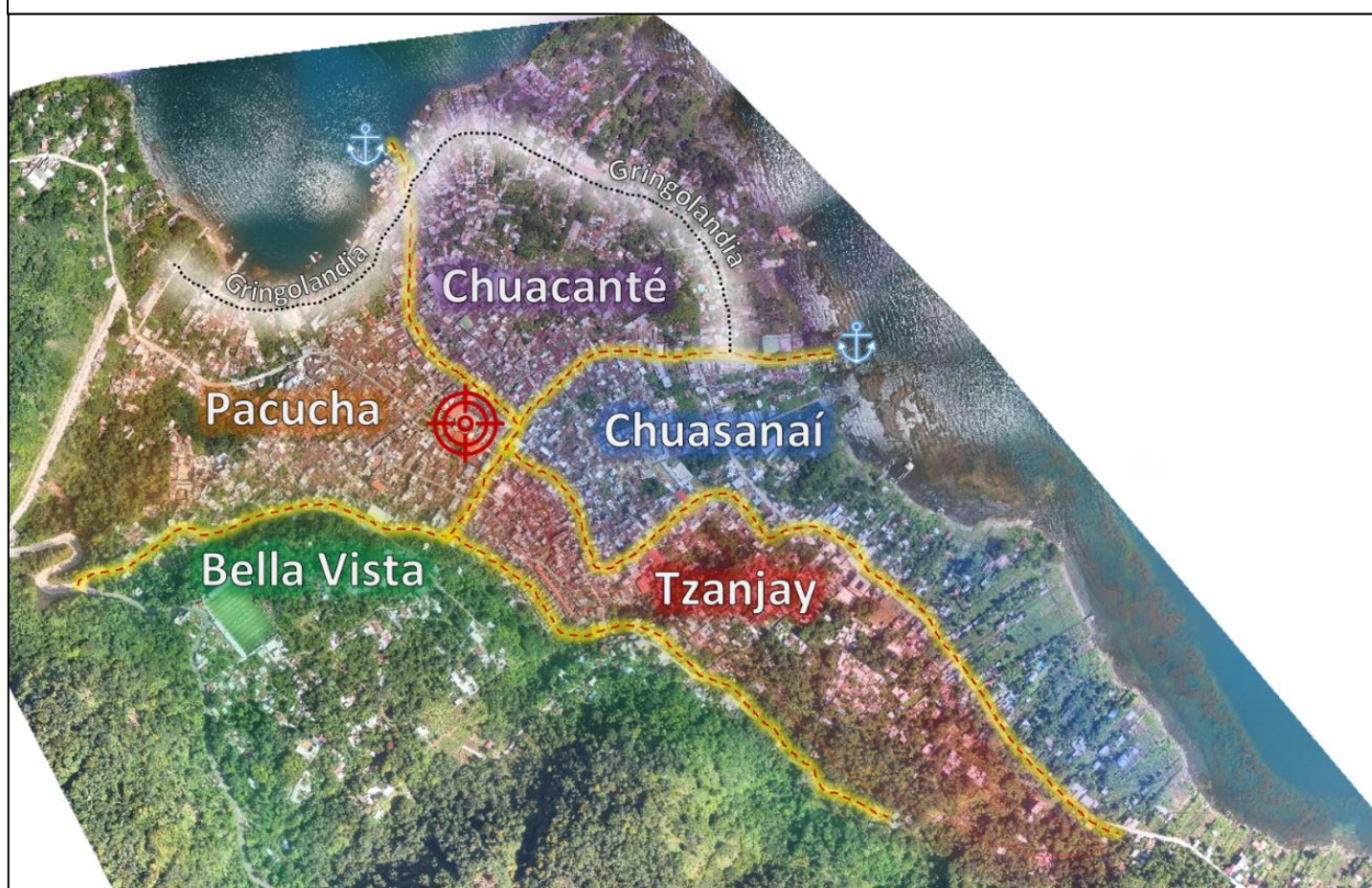
⁶⁸ Excluding repeat interviews, of which there were several.

⁶⁹ Although some of these were Pedranos who worked for outside institutions.

Phase 1

San Pedro is divided into four separate administrative units (*cantones*), Tzanjay, Chuacanté, Chuasanaí, and Pacuchá, and the small suburb of Bella Vista (Figure 11). The administrative and political centre of the town lies at the intersection of the four *cantones*. This is also the site of the *cancha* (basketball court) – where most community events take place. Following a lake-wide pattern, San Pedro's tourist development is largely confined to the lake shore. This tourist strip - *Gringolandia*, stretches between the town's two main docks (marked in white).

Figure 11: San Pedro's *Cantones* (adapted from satellite imagery, courtesy of AALA)



After arriving for my fieldwork, I made a conscious decision to avoid *Gringolandia*, as I wanted to root myself deeper in the community. Instead, I found a shared house to rent in the *canton* of Tzanjay with an employee of MARN.⁷⁰ In the first few months, my research developed slowly. I attempted to holistically connect to multiple aspects of community life. Some of the events I participated in included Mayan ceremonies, tree planting, beach cleaning, football matches, an

⁷⁰ A contact who afforded me access to the region's environmental politics.

archaeology talk, a film screening, a book presentation. I also accompanied the garbage truck's route to the processing plant up above town, participated in the filming of a documentary film about plastic waste, enrolled in a short permaculture course, and attended numerous cultural and religious festivities. Not all of these activities were necessarily instrumental for my research, nor did they need to be. I was also *living* in San Pedro as well as researching it, and so my involvement in these activities also reflected my own personal interests. Sometimes I found this life/work balance difficult to negotiate, but my friendships with Pedranos kept me grounded. My closeness to two former language school homestay families was especially important, and it was often in these informal 'research free' contexts, gossiping over coffee, playing card games, celebrating birthdays, watching World Cup matches, that I truly got under the skin of the community. My connection to these Pedranos wasn't just a means to better understanding the community, I formed real and long-lasting friendships.

I first began interviewing with Clemente Quiacaín, my former language teacher and friend who assisted me as a paid translator. He also helped me develop and trial suitable questions so that they were appropriately suited to the Pedrano context. We would spend a few hours every afternoon wandering around the centre of town, looking non-selectively for a range of Pedranos to interview. The duration of these interviews varied widely, from ten minutes to an hour, and since they were largely conducted as chance encounters in the interviewee's place of work, they were necessarily brief to avoid being too obtrusive. Following Clemente's advice and to avoid being a 'blood-sucking' researcher (as discussed earlier), I also provided a minority of interviewees with small monetary compensation for their time, around 10-20 quetzales (equivalent to £1-2). These interviews were semi-structured, with the questions largely centred on the subject of the lake and the town's plastic ban. However, when possible, I also investigated a greater range of topics, and with elders especially, I explored the subject of San Pedro's culture and history. I also asked Pedranos about their views on the megacolector, but at this time, very few knew about it.

Not all of these Phase 1 interviewees were randomly chosen, I had in mind a range of Pedranos with specific professions who I wanted to speak to. Given San Pedro's relatively small size,⁷¹ Clemente usually knew of any prominent individual who fit this description. Tracking these more specialised individuals down involved a lot of telephone calling, and searching for addresses on

⁷¹ As the predominance of the same few surnames (Quiacaín, Navichoc, Puac, Pop, Chavajay and Peneleu) testifies, San Pedro's rapid population growth in the 20th century means that many Pedranos are related to one another.

foot, sometimes in vain.⁷² More often than not however, our persistence paid off. It was through some of these more selective interviews that I became acquainted with niche aspects of San Pedro's community life. For example, through my first interview with a fisherman, I was able to attend the Association of Fishermen's monthly beach cleans. Likewise, the first artist I interviewed invited me to events within the artistic community which I would continue to attend regularly for the duration of my fieldwork. This initial encounter took my research in an unexpected direction that I had not envisaged from the outset, but critically, it ensured that I didn't become too narrowly focused on the megacollector to the detriment of losing sight of wider processes occurring in the community (i.e. revindication).

A Note on Translation

Before moving on to a discussion of Phase 2 of my research, it is necessary to interrogate the role played by my translator Clemente Quiacaín in terms of how he accessed my informants and mediated their voices. As I mentioned in the previous section, most Phase 1 interviewees were chosen randomly, and Clemente thus had little influence on those informants chosen. I simply approached whoever appeared unpreoccupied in their homes, shops and vendor stands whilst walking around the centre of town. However, Clemente did exercise a great influence over those informants with specialised professions that I interviewed. Because of the close-knit nature of San Pedro, the identity and position of certain individuals is common knowledge to Pedranos, even if they are not known on a personal level. It is important to emphasise here that Clemente does not play an active role in community politics. In fact, he is quite apolitical, and to this day he has expressed little interest in the megacollector conflict.

Above all, I valued Clemente because we had built up a close relationship over many months of one-to-one Spanish classes, and I enjoyed his fun and amiable character. I knew this would be helpful to put interviewees at ease, especially given my positionality as an outsider, unfamiliar with many Pedrano social norms. Clemente's presence was very important in my earliest interviews, as he showed me how to interact with Pedranos sensitively, acting as a sort of cultural facilitator. With him it was much easier to approach Pedranos, especially elders, many of whom could be found sitting in their porches in the town's narrow alleyways. It is important to note that it was only with elders (around 20 interviewees) that Clemente acted as a translator in a conventional sense. Clemente's translation here was absolutely essential because many elders didn't speak Spanish fluently. For other interviewees during Phase 1 however, Clemente took a back seat, only

⁷² There are no street names in San Pedro.

occasionally intervening to rephrase a question. His presence was more for my own comfort and support.

For those 20 interviews conducted in Tz'utujil by Clemente, mistranslation was a major concern since my initial questions went through no less than four translations. First with my translation from English to Spanish, then Clemente's translation from Tz'utujil to Spanish, and once again my translation from Spanish into English. With every translation, the chance of mistranslation increased. I often saw Clemente struggling to translate a particular Spanish concept succinctly into Tz'utujil, particularly as elders would sometimes use antiquated words that even he couldn't understand.

The first time I realised the magnitude of this problem was when he returned a Spanish transcript of a recorded Tz'utujil interview with a 99-year-old elder. What caught my attention was the interviewee's supposed use of the word 'globalisation' in a discussion about the cultural changes that had occurred in San Pedro. When I expressed my surprise to Clemente, he explained that the elder hadn't actually used the word 'globalisation', but this is what he had taken him to mean. Clemente had replaced the elder's convoluted sentence with the word 'globalisation', and he likely mediated the informants' voices regarding other concepts too. Whilst this undoubtedly problematic, these circumstances only apply to a minimal number of my total interviews, and principally on the subject of the culture and history of the town (Chapter 5).

It is important to recognise that the issue of mistranslation also existed in those interviews conducted entirely in Spanish. There can be miscommunications between different worlds even when both speakers are using the same Spanish word to describe something. These mistranslations occur especially when Indigenous people are obliged to put their more complex concepts in modern terms (Cruikshank, 1990), what de la Cadena (2015a) refers to as 'equivocations'. In this thesis I draw attention to how some Pedrano concepts that are forced into equivocation by outsiders in this way, but it is also possible that I committed them myself.

I realised the harm caused by mistranslations when I spoke to a Pedrano who had recently helped a Canadian expat edit and publish a book about the town's elders (Moyer et al., 2018). The multilingual book has parallel texts in Tz'utujil, Spanish and English, and it was written through interviewing 52 elders about their lives. Having heard about it on Facebook, I went to purchase the book from its translator. However, he only reluctantly sold me a copy, explaining that the Canadian had committed many errors and mistranslations in the editing process, neglecting the revisions that

he had made.⁷³ On the book's title page, a statement reads 'Made with love and respect for the people of San Pedro la Laguna', and although the book was undoubtedly well-intentioned in its conception,⁷⁴ the translator saw its mistranslated publication as a disrespect to Pedranos. When I asked Viento Tuy Navichoc, a charismatic Pedrano community leader and researcher if he would read it, he retorted:

But it has a gringo thinking, I'm not interested! I won't read it. If somebody from here does [the same thing], yes I will.

As Viento highlights, mistranslations are unavoidable by way of my non-local identity. In his opinion, any such work is invalid since outsider's interpretations are always likely to misunderstand local contexts. Ultimately, the only effective way to mitigate for this problem is, as I discussed earlier in the chapter, to decolonise research and open it up to greater critique and scrutiny by Indigenous participants themselves.

Phase 2

By the end of March 2018, I had conducted around 50 interviews with Pedranos and gained a much deeper impression of the range of community opinions on my research topic. My confidence and interviewing technique had also improved considerably, and I had already begun conducting interviews without Clemente's assistance. My first few selective interviews proved pivotal for my subsequent research trajectory. Some of these were with well-connected community leaders, and through snowball sampling, I was able to obtain the contact details of other community leaders. From this point onwards, I followed this network of contacts, concentrating almost exclusively on what could be considered as the major players in San Pedro's politics. These interviews were much more in-depth, and they lasted sometimes two or three hours. For this reason, I often invited the interviewee for coffee and cake in a local café, or dinner in a restaurant, both as an incentive, as well as compensation for their assistance.

The community leaders who I engaged with at this time were predominately cocodes, that is elected representatives of San Pedro's COCODES - *Consejos Comunitarios de Desarrollo* (Community Development Councils). These councils were established by a 2002 law which aimed to establish an official mechanism for community participation in local and municipal level decision-making.⁷⁵ COCODES function as mediators between the community and the municipality, effectively subjecting

⁷³ Before allowing copies to be sold, the translator stuck a disclaimer in each copy explaining that the mistranslations were not his fault.

⁷⁴ 90% of the proceeds of the sale of the book are donated to a scholarship for Pedrano children.

⁷⁵ Law of Urban and Rural Development Councils (Decree 11-2002).

the municipality's actions to community consultation. They also propose policies, programs, and resolutions to a community's problems (CGC, 2002). Within a given community, each administrative unit (*canton*) elects several COCODE representatives. In San Pedro's case, there are four *cantones* and thus four COCODES. In this thesis I refer to the councils as COCODES, and their elected representatives as cocodes.⁷⁶

My most important contact during this phase of my research was Concepción Batzin, the President of the COCODE of Chuacanté.⁷⁷ She took me under her wing and invited me to my first COCODE community meeting in April. She also introduced me to other community leaders and provided access to the political organisation of the community. We would remain in close contact throughout the remainder of my fieldwork, and through her support and encouragement, I was able to attend many other activities. In early April, I also attended my first COMUDE, the monthly town council meeting. These are much more formal and bureaucratic, and are attended by the municipal administration, Cocodes and representatives of civil society organisations. Regular attendance of COCODE and COMUDE meetings provided me with great deal of insight into the functioning of Pedrano society.⁷⁸

Shortly after I became acquainted with the Cocodes of Chuacanté, they became the main drivers of the opposition to the megacollector. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time as a witness to the development of a movement which would eventually spread to the entire community. In May, the agenda of the COCODE meetings I was attending suddenly shifted to the urgent threat of the megacollector. By June, community meetings were being organised with greater frequency, alongside additional events with other COCODES and the Elder Council. In the closing months of my fieldwork, opposition events to raise community awareness of the megacollector were being organised. In addition, Paulina del Carmen González Navichoc (another cocode) invited me to attend the monthly assemblies of a regional alliance of ancestral authorities - Ajpop Tinamit, with which I was able to attend two.⁷⁹ This provided me with a glimpse into the functioning of the megacollector's opposition movement at a wider scale of organisation.

⁷⁶ More information about COCODES and where they sit within national political structures is available in Appendix 2.

⁷⁷ She also leads a women's environmental group 'Mujereres Tz'utujiles Semilla l'xija'tz' and is involved with several national activist networks.

⁷⁸ In total, I attended nine COCODE meetings, three COMUDES (with a fourth COMUDE recorded for me by a community leader). In addition, I attended several other *mesas técnicas* and community assemblies which typically involved San Pedro's Elder Council.

⁷⁹ One in Panimatlam, an *aldea* (hamlet) of San Andrés Semetabaj and another in Santa María Visitación. I was extremely fortunate, since these assemblies are not typically open to outsiders.

Phase 3

Whilst I was becoming increasingly drawn into the growing movement against the megacolector in San Pedro, I started concentrating more on the ‘outside elites’ implicated in the conflict, namely AALA, governmental personnel, scientists and NGOs. I felt it was important for me to hear Pedranos’ perspectives first, to get a clearer sense of their grievances so that I could develop more critical questions for these outsiders. Once I felt sufficiently prepared, I began interviewing, and this required frequent travel to Panajachel and other lakeside communities where many of these organisations were based. To prepare for this eventuality, months earlier I had begun to participate in events which would put me in closer contact with these organisations.⁸⁰ For example, I participated in two scientific conferences,⁸¹ and I also volunteered in several of AALA’s tul planting activities (Figure 12). Through such interactions, I was invited to attend a private PR event for the megacolector in which Indigenous promoters and select members of the press were invited.

As with my interviews with Pedrano elites, my contact with outsider elites was also obtained through snowball sampling. These interviews were in-depth, lasting over an hour. Several were conducted over lunch in Panajachel, whereas others were conducted officially within the offices of the institutions in question.

Figure 12: Tul planting with AALA



AALA (2021)

⁸⁰ As early as August 2017, I attended events with the University of Davis Summer school, which is based in AALA’s headquarters in Santa Catarina. Such events provided an ideal opportunity for participant observation of AALA.

⁸¹ The Rotary Club Symposium in May and the ‘Second International Symposium - Continental Water of the Americas: Integrated Management of Water Basins, Good Practices and Governance’ in July.

Phase 4

The final phase of my research was carried out discretely online, mainly through Facebook. Although I carried out a close online analysis throughout my fieldwork, on returning to the UK, this became my only way of keeping up with the continued development of the megacollector conflict.⁸² Parties on both sides of the conflict use Facebook as a platform to publish official statements and communiques, as well as photos, memes, and videos of events. The Facebook activities of both institutions and individuals have proved extremely insightful in demonstrating the conflict's underlying tensions. These have played out very publicly through heated comments and arguments, several of which are included in this thesis. Facebook has also proven indispensable to maintaining communication and sharing information with my Pedrano contacts. In this way, social media enabled me to extend my analysis of the megacollector conflict a further two years after returning from Guatemala. This aspect did however present a major challenge, since my thesis has required constant revisions as events have continued to unfold in new ways (Kindon and Cupples, 2014). As late as October 2020, I participated in a Pedrano community meeting via Zoom which required revisions to my thesis.

In the UK, I spent several months transcribing my interviews using a transcription software. Afterwards, I used the software NVivo 12 to code this interview data. I created 360 nodes to organise this data into different, often nested themes. Analysing the frequency of references under each node enabled me to get a better sense of repetitions and patterns within the data. As a result, I was able to decide which leads were worth following or discarding. Close analysis and comparisons of the stronger nodes helped me to think through the organisation of my thesis and my overall argument. I also frequently constructed mind maps to assist in this process. Finally, I conducted a discourse analysis of the megacollector through examining my interview data with AALA personnel, in conjunction with field diary notes during my participant observation of interviews and other events.⁸³

A Note on the Inclusion of Art and Artists

As I touched upon briefly earlier in the chapter, I have included numerous artworks of Pedrano contemporary artist thinkers within this thesis,⁸⁴ and I did so for several reasons. To begin with it seemed like a natural step, given how important art is to San Pedro's identity. The town is

⁸² Barring the conference at Tepoztlán (Mexico) that I attended with a community leader in 2019.

⁸³ Including for instance my observations about the behaviour, language, and tone used.

⁸⁴ Permissions were sought from all artists for the inclusion of their artwork.

renowned as one of Guatemala's principal artistic centres,⁸⁵ as evidenced by its numerous galleries and the many murals adorning its streets. Pedranos are known to have an incredible artistic disposition, and a huge number of them are engaged in producing the acrylic naïve paintings. One of the homestays I lived with were one such family, and spending time with them gave me some insight into this world. However, the naïve paintings produced for San Pedro's tourist market are principally romanticised and traditional scenes of the lake, and some Pedranos argue naïve painters are more artisans than artists, since they mainly copy previous works rather than create original pieces.

Before starting my fieldwork, I had already caught a glimpse of something more to San Pedro's art scene. I visited an exhibition in the centre of town displaying more complex political works which broke free of the confines of the romanticised naïve tourist market. They instead dealt with topics like racism, corruption, and the contamination of the lake. However, it wasn't until Phase 1 of my research when I interviewed the contemporary artist Marlon Puac that I became aware of San Pedro's status as a centre of conceptual art. Marlon also manages 'Samajib'al Achib'al' (Imagination Workshop), an art space in the centre of town which functions as a gallery for local artists to exhibit their work, as well as a site for debates and talks.⁸⁶ Throughout my fieldwork Marlon generously included me in these artistic events, which is how I came to encounter more contemporary artists and their work. Some of the pieces that I have included in this thesis I saw at first hand, whilst others were shown to me by the artists on their phones during interviews.



Samajib'al Achib'al' (2018)

⁸⁵ A title which it shares with San Juan Comalapa in the department of Chimaltenango (Paul and Johnston, 1998; Staikidis, 2007).

⁸⁶ The other main artistic space in town is the CICC.

As I will discuss later in this thesis, reflecting the holism of Mayan thought, Pedrano notions of art are much more expansive than narrower Western definitions (Movimiento de Artistas Mayas Ruk'u'x, 2018). Indeed, some of San Pedro's conceptual artists are also *ajq'ij*s, poets, epigraphers and musicians. Consequently, art is not a niche focus, but a means to engaging with a wider array of subjects. In fact, artists often dealt with certain delicate subjects (e.g. the armed conflict, racism and spirituality) which Pedranos more generally were reticent to discuss in interviews. They appeared at the forefront of the community's creative and intellectual life and were engaged in urgent and pertinent political conversations. Engaging with art and artists thus provided access to this deeper critical context in which the megacollector conflict is embedded.

A final reason why I chose to focus on artists was because I simply thought it would make for a more vivid and stimulating thesis. Art enriched my analysis, and I found conceptual pieces especially adept at communicating complex theoretical concepts through metaphor in a straightforward manner. It greatly aided my own understandings and thought process during the fieldwork, and the holistic outlook of Pedrano artists led me to understand the key role of revindication in the megacollector conflict.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I aimed for more than just a shallow engagement with methodology and the standard discussion of logistics and ethics. I have used it instead to extend Chapter 2's theoretical concern with the question of decolonising research. In doing so I have shed light on why, as Brewer (2013) argues, there are 'unfulfilled opportunities for more publicly engaged geographic research' (p.330). Having outlined the institutional constraints to decolonising research, as well those exhibited by my own research practices, I can now shift my focus onto Pedranos themselves, and the processes of revindication that they are enacting within the community.

PART 1:

The Revindication of Tz'unun Ya'



The Kumuk (CICC, 2018)

Chapter 4: Guatemala, ‘La Patria del Criollo’

This chapter sets the scene for San Pedro’s revindication movement by outlining its cause – the modern/colonial suppression of Indigenous self-determination. First, I will trace the modern/colonial dynamic by which the Criollo (European descended) elite have dominated the Indigenous population throughout the colonial, post-colonial, and post-conflict periods of Guatemala’s history. I will then explore three colonial paradigms which define their continued hegemony today - paternalism, extractivism and racism. This context is crucial to Part 2 because Pedranos widely understand the megacollector to be driven by elite interests and further recognise these accompanying colonial paradigms as being reproduced in the megacollector conflict. Most importantly, the modern/colonial dynamic that I outline in this chapter can also be discerned in AALA’s advancement of the megacollector (i.e. modern discourses obscuring a colonial logic).

A Colonial Snapshot of Guatemala

The Ladino ruling class monopolize the state and [...] uses those powers to oppress and dismantle the Mayan nations - Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil (1996, p.21)

To be Indigenous means that the project of the nation-state did not triumph
- Gladys Tzul Tzul in Capiberibe and Bonilla (2015, p.1)

Guatemala doesn’t make global headlines very often, but on June 3rd, 2018 shocking images of Fuego’s volcanic eruption were broadcast worldwide (Figure 13). The disaster remained in the international spotlight for a week or so, until fickle media outlets turned their attention back to the FIFA World Cup. In Guatemala however, the disaster provoked deeper questioning over the government’s accountability, and the public’s initial shock quickly shifted to outrage as further details emerged in the aftermath.

Figure 13: Fuego’s Victims Fleeing on Foot



Diario de Los Altos (2018)

The eruption claimed hundreds, possibly thousands of (predominately Indigenous) victims, but many of these deaths could have been prevented (Lobo, 2018; McVicar, 2018). Although seismologists knew about the impending danger eight hours in advance of the eruption, a mandatory evacuation order was only made by CONRED, the country's disaster relief agency at 3pm, by which time some communities had already been devastated by pyroclastic flows (Menchu, 2018). While the communities weren't alerted in time, the 5-star 'La Reunion Golf Resort' (Figure 14) had been evacuated several hours earlier. As Eduardo Cortez, a young Pedrano teacher and member of the permaculture collective 'Collectivo Tz'unun Ya' criticised:

In the resort they were alerted at 6am because there were the children and the nieces and nephews of the oligarchies. But they didn't alert the [local] people, because [they] can die and it doesn't matter

Figure 14: La Reunion Golf Resort



Hotelopia (2020)

Fuego's eruption laid bare Guatemala's colonial 'necropolitics' (Mbembe, 2003), and though an eruption of this magnitude was unexpected, the state's response was sadly predictable. It followed a colonial pattern initiated by the Spanish Invasion almost 500 years before. Guatemala is 'la patria del Criollo' - 'the homeland of the Criollo' (Martínez Peláez, 2009), it governs to serve the interests of the small European descended elite and has done ever since the Invasion. However, this logic of coloniality has been obscured by modern discourses that have evolved over time, from civilisation and salvation during the Invasion, to market democracy and multiculturalism today.

1. Colonial Guatemala (1523-1821)

In Guatemala they say, "close your eyes and pray", and after you open your eyes you have the bible, but your lands are in the hands of others. (Edwin Bixcul – contemporary artist)

Edwin gets to the heart of the functioning of the modern/colonial dynamic that the Spanish initiated in 1524. That is, he draws attention to the modern discourse – Christian salvation, which obscured the colonial logic of the Invasion – the expropriation of land. In colonial Guatemala, this darker side of modernity was frequently made visible through acts of physical violence, but also through more covert epistemic violence, that is ‘violence exerted against or through knowledge’ (Galván-Álvarez, 2010). This can be seen clearly in the dominant narrative of the best-known event of the Invasion – the battlefield encounter between the K’iche king Tecún Umán and the Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado. As the story goes, Tecún Umán erroneously attacked Alvarado’s horse because he believed them to share the same body. This mistake cost Tecún Umán his life, thereby fulfilling the Spanish ‘conquest’ (Otzoy, 1999).

This myth serves to emphasise Tecún Umán’s imagined intellectual inferiority, and by proxy that of the Maya more generally (Warren, 1996). More than just a tale of conquest, the narrative is moralistic, implying that the Maya deserved to be defeated. As such, it was utilised as a form of epistemic violence to solidify Spanish hegemony, as Gálvan-Álvarez (2010) explains:

It is not only through the construction of exploitative economic links or the control of the politico-military apparatuses that domination is accomplished, but also [...] most importantly through the construction of epistemic frameworks that legitimise and enshrine those practices of domination (p.12).

History is written by the victors, and the Spanish were able to legitimise their domination through knowledge whilst simultaneously delegitimising the Maya as inferior. As Clemente Peneleu, an *ajq’ij* (spiritual guide) and the director of San Pedro’s cultural museum (Museo Tz’unun Ya’) expressed:

The Spanish said that everything that was ours was negative, bad, satanic, useless, that we didn’t know anything. We weren’t people to them, we were animals.

Unlike other Spanish colonies, Guatemala lacked significant mineral resources, and its main commodity was rather the Maya themselves. They were as the Guatemalan historian Severo Martínez Peláez (2009) describes, ‘the subsistence base of colonial society’, primarily through *repartimiento*, a parasitic system designed to extract tribute through forced labour. *Repartimiento* legalised exploitation, as all Indigenous men between the ages of 16 and 60 were obliged to offer their labour for a variety of tasks (ibid). To better administer the Maya and maximise their exploitation their populations were concentrated into so called *pueblos de indios* (Indian towns). In the case of Lake Atitlán, the formerly scattered Tz’utujil *chinamits* (communities) living around the lake were largely resettled into the town of Santiago Atitlán in 1547 (Carlsen, 1997), as shown below in Figure 15:

Figure 15: Indigenous Map of Santiago Atitlán 1585



Relaciones Geográficas (2020)

The Maya orchestrated frequent uprisings, which the colonial Archbishop Cortés Larraz attributed to their ‘invincible tenacity’ (in García Añoveros, 1987, p.72). To maintain the Maya’s position of subservience, the elites employed various tactics, notably the use of terror and violence. Another strategy was to keep the *pueblos de indios* isolated and closed in character, with an economic structure that prevented any possibility of advancement. As Martínez Peláez (2009) describes, they were ‘accorded only those elements of culture absolutely essential to the furtherance of their exploitation’ (p.255), given for instance metal tools to work the land, but not any which could be used as weapons. Fuentes y Guzman, an elite landowner of the period suggested it was better that the Maya ‘lack knowledge rather than be educated and opinionated’.⁸⁷

Although the Maya’s exploitation was central to the colonial regime, they were left physically on the periphery, far away from the Spanish and Criollo/Ladino⁸⁸ urban centres. One consequence of this isolationist policy was the preservation of Indigenous culture (Carlsen, 1997). The Tz’utujiles’ conversion to Christianity for instance was only nominal as the Spanish were much more concerned with their economic subjugation. As García Añoveros (1987) writes, while the Maya did not accept Christianity, ‘they accepted and submitted to the colonial order even less’ (p.157). As

⁸⁷ Fuentes y Guzman (1932) [1690-99] in Martínez Peláez (2009, p.298).

⁸⁸ Ladinos are Westernized individuals of predominantly mixed Spanish/Indigenous descent, or of Indigenous descent but who eschew Indigenous identity.

a result, they were largely left to manage many of their own affairs, and most significantly, they were able to retain control over their communal lands (Carlsen, 1997).

2. Post-colonial Guatemala (1821-1996)

Guatemalan Independence from Spain in 1821 did little to affect the colonial system in place since the Invasion (Martínez Peláez, 2009). The Criollo and Ladino elites merely pushed the Spanish off the top of a hierarchy exploiting the Mayan majority. As Batz (2017) states, the new Guatemalan State ‘maintained a colonial logic of extraction, often with a violent mindset’ (p.76), and this system continued relatively undisturbed until it was significantly recalibrated by the so-called Liberal Reforms in the 1870s. Inspired by Enlightenment thinking, Liberal reformers aimed to modernise the country’s feudal economic structure (Carlsen, 1997). They saw Indigenous land ownership as the main impediment to this vision, and so they opened up the economy to foreign investment. Within a few decades, most Indigenous communal land had been transferred to the Guatemalan elites and foreign companies, signalling the ascendancy of the brutal *finca* (plantation) system (Fischer and Victor, 2014).

The Liberals saw coffee and other cash crops like cotton and sugar as the primary means to fund the country’s modernisation, but until the land reforms were enacted, they lacked sufficient labour and land to realise their plans on a large scale (Grandin et al., 2011). The confiscation of communal lands provided the solution, through disenfranchising the Maya en masse and freeing up their labour for the *finqueros*’ (*finca* owners) use (Castellano Cambranes, 1985). This system was maintained through the coercive mechanism of debt servitude (McCreery, 1983). In this way, the oligarchy initiated a colonial pattern of exploitation which would dominate the rural economy well into the twentieth century. Pedranos were still seasonally migrating to coastal sugar, coffee, and cotton plantations until the 1960s (Figure 16) (Petrich, 2001a; Winkler et al., 2013).

Figure 16: “Machete stay in your sheaf” from the series “Cuadrilleros” (Day labourers). - Acrylic and ink on machete, Marlon Puac (2016)



This machete was used on the coast. Many generations survived working on the finca, but the conditions were terrible, they were completely dominated by the finca owner.

(Marlon Puac)

The *finqueros* exercised great influence on state policy until a revolution in 1944 initiated what became known as Guatemala's 'ten years of Spring' (Grandin et al., 2011). Guatemala's first democratic elections were organised and won by the leftist Juan José Arévalo, and the democratic transition continued with the election of his successor, Jacobo Arbenz in 1951. Both men pursued a socialist agenda favourable to the poor and the Indigenous population. They established a state-run health care system and ended forced labour on coffee *fincas*. Most significant of all was their commitment to land reform. The Arbenz's government passed an agrarian reform law in 1952 which attempted to redistribute uncultivated land to landless *campesinos*. This posed a direct challenge to the dominance of the elites, and even more perilously, to the interests of the United Fruit Company, the largest landowner in Guatemala (Dosal, 1993).

With the CIA's help, an opposition campaign was armed, culminating in a successful coup in 1954. This ushered in a succession of right-wing military dictators who would reverse all the progressive reforms of the revolution. It also led to the emergence of left-wing guerrilla groups, who by the 1960s were subject to extreme persecution by the state, often with military assistance from the United States. These events sparked Guatemala's 36-year long armed conflict,⁸⁹ which would reach a bloody climax in the early 1980s during a period known as *La Violencia* when many of the worst excesses were committed in a scorched earth campaign. The army viewed Maya communities as safe havens for the guerrillas, and their counter insurgency campaign targeted anyone of Maya ethnicity. By the time stability returned to the country with the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords, the conflict had claimed around 200,000 victims, 83% of which were Maya (CEH, 1999). The UN Commission for Historical Clarification found the army and paramilitaries responsible for 93% of these deaths, and it concluded that they had committed 'acts of genocide' (ibid).

San Pedro and countless other Indigenous towns suffered as the army exploited social cleavages through forcibly recruiting community members as agents and spies through the creation of PACs - *Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil* (Civil Self-Defence Patrols) (Sojuel et al., 2017). This was an insidious counterinsurgency measure which sought 'not only victims but accomplices' (Aguayo, 1983, p.2), as it 'turned petty feuding into a conduit for vigilante justice' (Green, 1994, p.251), and pitted families and neighbours against one another. Beginning in 1980, San Pedro experienced 25 abductions and killings, causing an endless *noche negra* ("black night"):

The same wrenching scenario—a night-time knock on the door, a capture, a vain effort to find the victim or his body—was replayed in San Pedro again and again over the next two years. People slept fitfully, fearing the sound of a footfall and finally blessing the arrival of dawn (Paul and Demarest, 1988, chapter I).

⁸⁹ Like Pedranos, I refer to it as the 'armed conflict' rather than the 'civil war' since this term is truer to the conflict's dynamic.

The legacy of this fear and distrust forms one of the main subjects of the work of the contemporary artist Manuel Chavajay, whose 14-year-old brother was disappeared during *La Violencia* (Weeks, 2018). One of his most provocative pieces is the video performance 'Sik' Ch'aooj', where he appears on a *cayuco* (a traditional wooden canoe) rowing in the lake (Figure 17). The *cayuco* moves in and out of the frame, with Manuel dressed first as a soldier and then alternatively in traditional dress, movements which are meant to reflect the legacy of internalized violence and unresolved pain in the community (Piedrín, 2017).

Figure 17: *Sik' Ch'aooj*. Manuel Chavajay (2015) video performance



Rumors of murders cross generational lines, and violence springs from feelings of mistrust and misplaced grief. Sik' Ch'aooj speaks of this dissonance within many Maya communities, which springs from the war's division of families

(Manuel Chavajay in Wellen, 2016)

Wellen (2016)

As a result of this distrust, *La Violencia* is a highly sensitive topic in San Pedro. Although it is rarely discussed in day-to-day conversations, it would sometimes crop up unexpectedly. For example, one afternoon I was having coffee and biscuits with my Guatemalan 'mother' Teodora, telling her about my new internet provider, when she offhandedly remarked that this man's father had been murdered during *La Violencia*, and his body had been discovered down the road in a clandestine grave beneath the basketball court which I passed every day.

The fear generated by *La Violencia* runs deep in Pedrano social memory, and it has resulted in an internal repression of Mayan identity:

[The culture] has been hit a lot, a lot of history, and there is [still] that fear, all these components continue, that fear of being able to speak the language, wearing traditional dress. (Manuel Chavajay)

This is due to the epistemic violence which accompanied acts of physical violence during the armed conflict (Molesky-Poz, 2006). Mayan sacred sites were destroyed, and cultural practices and markers of Mayan identity were persecuted, as the charismatic *ajq'ij* Tata Pedro testifies below:

I suffered three jailings and two kidnappings by the Army, and what was the crime that they accused me of? That I commanded a group of young men, this was to carry sacred fire to sacred sites in the mountains, and they thought I was a commander of an insurgency

After the worst horrors of *La Violencia* subsided, epistemic violence continued. For example, the state repressed Indigenous languages through a draconian education system in which teachers violently enforced the use of Spanish:

When we went to school, we lost a lot of our identity there, because they didn't allow us to speak Tz'utujil. It was a smack in the head, or a pinch of the ear when we spoke our language. (Clemente Peneleu)

Figure 18: Mural of San Pedro's Bloody History.



3. Post-Conflict Guatemala (1996-present)

Guatemala's Peace Accords were signed in 1996, bringing an end to 36 years of conflict and heralding increased recognition of Indigenous rights. The 'Accord on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples' (1995) for instance provided protections for distinct cultural identities, including the right of Indigenous peoples to speak and be educated in their own languages and to practise their spirituality and cosmovisions (Bastos, 2010). This advancement occurred in the context of increasing multicultural recognition of Indigenous rights across Latin America. 1992 was a focal point of Indigenous mobilisation (Gere and MacNeill, 2008), with widespread protests erupting against the

official celebrations of the quinquenary of Columbus's 'discovery' of the Americas.⁹⁰ Partly as a reaction to this, many Latin American governments ratified the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Convention 169 during the 1990s, including in Guatemala in 1996 (Sieder, 2007).

On paper, by the later 1990s, Guatemala appeared to have made a great deal of progress towards achieving racial equality. However, as Montejo (2005) argues, the Accords were more a result of intense international pressure than an organic commitment on part of the government to create a fairer society.⁹¹ What's more, the elites blocked their more revolutionary aspects, including a constitutional reform package which would have committed the state to recognising Indigenous peoples' collective rights, including the right to be subject to customary law, the right to bilingual education, and protections for communally held lands. The powerful business coalition CACIF - the 'Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial, and Financial Associations' is the most visible face of Guatemala's economic elites, and it orchestrated a poisonous campaign against the reform package, leading to its rejection by the electorate in a national referendum in 1999 (Warren, 2003).

Although the elites rejected the reforms, as Hale (2006a) notes, the transition to democracy *did* entail a behavioural shift in the wider Ladino population, who were much more inclined to condemn racism and show a greater respect for Indigenous culture. Even so, Hale argues that they refused to let go of their engrained racial privilege, a reluctance which was also conditioned by deep anxieties about the prospect of Maya ascendancy. The Peace Accords are thus largely deemed to have failed to address Ladino racial dominance,⁹² producing at best a limited democracy conducive to exploitation by the elites in a context of extreme inequality (Briscoe and Rodríguez Pellecer, 2010). CACIF ensured that the Peace Accords deferred mention of substantive economic issues (Granovsky-Larsen, 2017). For example, rather than addressing redistributive agrarian reform, the Socio-Economic Accord instead laid out a blueprint for the World Banks' neoliberal agrarian policy (Short, 2007). Arguably, the most significant outcome of the Peace Accords was the 2002 Development Council Law which saw the formation of Community and Municipal Development Councils (COCODES and COMUDES). It is through this mechanism that a more democratic and decentralised politics has emerged (Copeland, 2019a).

⁹⁰ It was also the year in which the Guatemalan K'iche activist Rigoberta Menchu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

⁹¹ The government for instance delayed ratifying the ILO-169 Convention on the grounds that it was unconstitutional.

⁹² See Arias (2006); Hale (2006a); Copeland (2019a); Cremers and Dueholm Rasch (2016).

Ultimately, coloniality continues in Post War Guatemala, and it does so because ‘there has not been a structural transformation that cuts the roots of injustices, exploitation and historical oppressions’ (Chirix García and Sajbin Velásquez, 2019, p.37/38). In Hale’s (2006a) words, Ladinos sought to ‘remake racial dominance in a gentler, less offensive, and more sustainable guise’ (p.31), and this ‘new cultural racism’ depends upon hegemonic rather than the brute coercive force. A colonial logic continues to underwrite the latest modern discourse of Guatemala’s history - multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism’s rise to prominence in Latin America was also accompanied by the worldwide extension of neoliberal agenda, primarily through the efforts of institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. As Kymlicka (2012) notes, neoliberalism is fundamentally about creating effective market actors and competitive economies. Previously, ethnic identity was seen as a hindrance to achieving this goal, but in the 1990s economists and policymakers came to understand it as a source of social capital, an asset capable of increasing the success of market participation (ibid). It was this development which led to the emergence of what has been termed ‘neoliberal multiculturalism’ (Hale, 2004).

This phenomenon emerged as a result of policymakers’ recognition that free market policies were failing to efficiently provide for aggregate social need and environmental sustainability (MacNeill, 2014a). As MacNeill (2014a) states, ‘what was missing, it was presumed, was an intangible social glue, a level of trust, and community organization which would make democracy work, protect environments, and foster economic growth’ (p.310). Multiculturalism was deemed to provide this, and so neoliberalism appropriated it, in the process transforming its aims from building fairer terms of democratic citizenship, to instead harnessing diversity as a competitive asset for cosmopolitan market actors (Kymlicka, 2012). As significant carriers of social capital, Indigenous peoples were particular targets of this policy.

Although neoliberal multiculturalism has provided Indigenous peoples with certain advantages,⁹³ it has come under heavy criticism, most compellingly articulated by Charles Hale (2002; 2004; 2006a). As I touched upon briefly in Chapter 2, such criticisms centre on how neoliberal multiculturalism functions through clearly articulated limits, ‘managing’ multiculturalism to remove the radical threat that it may pose to the hegemonic order status quo (Hale, 2002). Rights are only

⁹³ For instance, allowing them to bypass paternalistic regional and state agencies (Warren and Jackson, 2003).

granted to those Indigenous groups which adhere to a restricted notion of cultural politics that do not directly confront capital or historical inequalities (Copeland, 2019a). These constraints shape and contain the terms of political contestation in what Hale describes as the space of the *Indio Permitido* - 'Authorized Indian'. The 'Authorized Indian' is the Indigenous subject willing to abide by these strict limitations, in acquiescing, they are deemed appropriately 'modern' and 'rational' and consequently rewarded and empowered as the authentic representation of indigeneity by powerful economic and political actors such as the state, NGOs, and international agencies (Postero, 2007).⁹⁴ As Hale (2004) states, 'The authorized Indian has passed the test of modernity, substituted 'proposal' for 'protest' and has learned to be both authentic and fully conversant with the dominant milieu' (p.219).

In contrast, those who 'fail the test' through actively challenging the status quo by seeking the redistribution of power and resources are instead represented as what Hale (2006a) terms as *Indios Insurrectos* – 'Insurrectionary Indians'. The 'Insurrectionary Indian' is constructed as the 'Authorized Indian's' binary opposite, i.e. an Indigenous subject that is inauthentic, conflict prone, radical, irrational and backward, and so they are punished through exclusion and repression. In this way, neoliberal multiculturalism produces sanctioned forms of Indigenous agency compatible with neoliberal economic policies through acts of 'disciplinary assimilation' (Hale, 2006a). Consequently, while 'Neoliberal multiculturalism holds out the promise of both equality and cultural recognition, [it] Grants only the latter' (ibid, p.38).

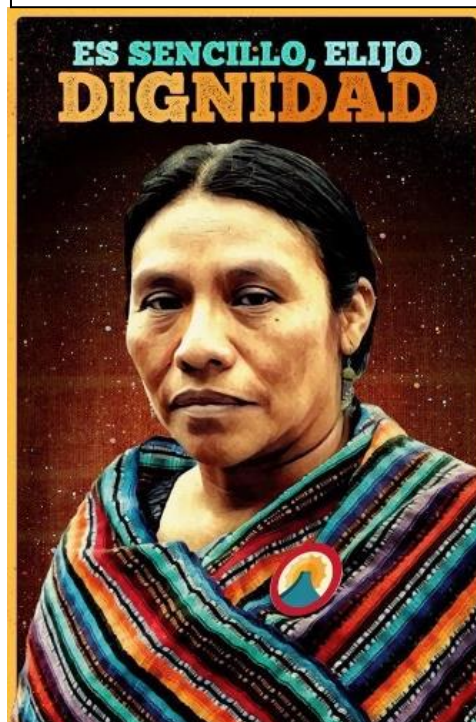
Hale (2004) developed his critique with particular attention to the Guatemalan context, and he holds neoliberal multiculturalism responsible for the Peace Accords' failure to reconfigure the country's racial hierarchy. For example, in 1999 CACIF appealed to the notion of the 'Insurrectionary Indian' to stoke the public's fears that the constitutional reform package could encourage 'reverse racism' against Ladinos (Montejo, 2005; Sieder, 2007). The limits of the 'Authorized Indian' frame contemporary Guatemalan politics and public narratives of the Indigenous communities. For example, most forms of autonomous Maya organization are construed as "'clannish" self-marginalization, a cause of conflict rather than a response to inequality' (Hale, 2006a, p.144), and as a threat to harmonious national coexistence.

A clear demonstration of the space of the 'Authorised Indian' could be discerned in the treatment of Thelma Cabrera (Figure 19), the main Indigenous candidate to contest the 2019

⁹⁴ Yet as MacNeill (2014a) notes, 'indigenous peoples in Guatemala have not simply been passive receivers of rights regimes and discourses on indigeneity' (p.314), Maya activists were also influential in their production through their own organisational efforts.

Presidential elections (Aguilar, 2019a). Thelma Cabrera is the Mam leader of the MLP (Movement for the Liberation of the Peoples), and she was depicted by the media as a classic ‘Insurrectionary Indian’, and a threat to the country, mainly due to her ambitions to nationalize the country’s resources (López and García, 2019; Chapas, 2019). Despite the odds being stacked heavily against her, Thelma Cabrera shocked the establishment by winning over 10% of the vote, making her the most successful Indigenous candidate ever. Even so, she only came in fourth place, and Guatemala is a long way off following Bolivia’s trajectory (McNeish, 2008).

Figure 19: Thelma Cabrera



Midianinja (2019)

In Guatemala, there are few Indigenous political representatives in Congress (Pallister, 2013; Romero et al., 2018),⁹⁵ and this issue was raised by the K’iche anthropologist Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj, at whose documentary film screening ‘500 years: Life in Resistance’ (2017) I attended during my fieldwork.⁹⁶ At this event, she asked the predominately Indigenous audience how many Indigenous women they thought were members of Congress. When they failed to provide the answer, she replied as follows:

We have one woman. We don’t know where she is from, what her name is, and what laws she has proposed in Congress [...] You don’t know her, that is to say, she isn’t a political woman who makes an impact.

⁹⁵ Despite being around half the population, they have achieved no more than 22 seats in Congress (13% of total seats) (Global Americans, 2017).

⁹⁶ The film was directed by Pamela Yates, and it prominently depicts Irma during the trial of Guatemalan dictator Ríos Montt for genocide.

As Irma implies, the problem is that even in their exceptional state, Indigenous politicians are limited to *marginal* roles (Arias, 2006). Indigenous cabinet members have for instance only ever occupied the largely ceremonial post of Minister of Sport and Culture. As Aguilar (2019a) states, ‘The processes of political participation in Guatemala [...] have promoted a neoliberal multiculturalism that gives crumbs’. Following this revelation, a young Indigenous man in the audience asked Irma if she expected increased numbers of Indigenous members of Congress would make a difference. She replied that what Guatemala really needed was a reimagining of the state:

Right now this system is profoundly colonial, so we would have to think firstly in transforming the system [...] We need a new law for political parties, [...] the law as it is doesn't function, it functions for them, but it doesn't function for Indigenous people.

Irma's talk took place several months before the 2019 Presidential elections, but the failing of the political system which she describes is exactly what Thelma Cabrera would seek to address through her candidacy. Her campaign was committed to reimagining the ‘failed state’ of Guatemala, calling for a Plurinational Constituent Assembly to create a truly representative government (Ordóñez, 2019).

The modern discourse of multiculturalism masks a continuing logic of coloniality in 21st century Guatemala. This can be seen clearly in the state's cosmetic multicultural policies which Bastos and Camus (2003) suggest are less concerned with the Indigenous population than improving the state's image in the eyes of international organizations.⁹⁷ As the Pedrano community leader,⁹⁸ Chico Puac put it:

The ordinary laws of the country, they mention Indigenous peoples, the thing is that the label says one thing, but the other is the operability, the translation to public policy [...] There are no policies, there is no strategy.

The cosmetic nature of Guatemala's multiculturalism is supported by hard facts. In 2018 the UN special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous peoples reported that the implementation rate of the 1996 Peace Accords regarding the ‘Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples’ was just 19% (Tauli-Corpuz, 2018).

One of the main areas of concern in this regard is state education and the CNB – (Guatemala's national curriculum), which has been criticised for only superficially addressing Mayan

⁹⁷ Here a notion of cosmetic multiculturalism is used as opposed to Hale's (2004) notion of neoliberal multiculturalism because the authors seek to draw attention to the superficial nature of such policies rather than to highlight a link between politics and a macroeconomic framework (see also Bastos (2012)).

⁹⁸ Chico is a prominent and eclectic presence in San Pedro's politics. He owns a Spanish School, and he is also a spiritual guide and the president of San Pedro's ‘Committee of Campesinos’.

culture. Chico Puac, who was once tasked with reforming the CNB through his job on the advisory commission for education reform explained to me his frustrations:

[The CNB] is multicultural but with no control over quality, and the 5% where they speak of Mayan culture, they do so only as information, as historical dates, as a cultural practice. Specifically, it is a filling that I would call an appendix about Mayan culture, but it doesn't form the essence of the curriculum. It's just like something like, "Mmmm the taste, we're missing a little pinch of salt....ahhh [let's sprinkle it on] like this" nothing more. It's a rhetoric of inclusion, but in reality it's not inclusion.

More than just a lacking commitment to multiculturalism, state education is worryingly seen to perpetuate epistemic violence against the Maya, albeit more subtly than in the past. For example, Mayan children are no longer beaten for speaking Indigenous languages in school - the 'Law of National Languages' (passed in 2003) actually obliges their inclusion, but it is not widely applied (Chirix García and Sajbin Velásquez, 2019). The cosmetic nature of this multicultural reform is evidenced by the limited weight Indigenous languages are afforded relative to Spanish. As one Pedrano criticised, classes in Tz'utujil amount to just a few hours of classes a week:

Now supposedly Tz'utujil is taught in schools, but not in the same way that Spanish is taught. (Clemente Peneleu)

The coloniality underpinning the curriculum can also be seen in its content, which is highly Eurocentric in orientation:

We need to learn our own reality [...] In the curriculum, what we learn is the capitals of Europe. (Luis Canel - teacher)

Guatemala's Colonial Paradigms

In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss the three main colonial paradigms that frame Guatemalan society, and which are also relevant to the megacollector conflict - paternalism, extractivism, and racism. These paradigms are what Pedranos' revindication movement actively sets out to challenge.

1. Paternalism

The first paradigm that I will discuss has a direct bearing on the previous discussion of state education, since this is seen to be one of the main areas where the state's paternalistic tendencies manifest. State education is understood by Pedranos as a means to keeping the Indigenous communities in a perpetual state of dependency. This is in no small part due to the fact that it is severely underfunded, which has led to low standards of attainment. Half the population has obtained only a primary education, and less than 10% of the labour force is estimated to hold a university degree (Orozco and Valdivia, 2017). In her talk at the documentary film screening

mentioned in the previous section, Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj stressed that as an Indigenous academic, she was a clear exception to the rule:

The Indigenous have exceptions, few professionals, few politicians [...] and so we can see in all areas there are exceptions. What Guatemala needs is no more Maya with exceptions.

The low quality of education is seen by Pedranos as intentional move on the part of the government to ensure the Indigenous communities' ignorance:

The quality of education in Guatemala is very low. They don't even educate you to read, so it's like we are a species of ignorance (Pablo Horacio Garcia Cruz - artist)

There are many that know how to read, but they are functionally illiterate, and this is what makes us speak about 'Papa state', 'Papa mayor', 'Papa project', 'Papa programme' (Chico Puac)

These poor educational standards don't impact the elites, who are able to privately educate their children abroad (Tauli-Corpuz, 2018). This racial segregation feeds further prejudice as Otoniel, a young graphic artist describes below:

The powerful families don't educate their children in Guatemalan schools, they send them to the USA or Europe. So when people are educated in different places, their mentality is not of the culture that we have, and from here stems the problem, because they say to us, "the Indigenous don't have value, they're not intelligent, they don't know anything, so it's better that we exclude them".

The ignorance that state education engenders leaves the Indigenous communities vulnerable to manipulation:

I always say education is a doubled edged sword, it can liberate you or it can manipulate you, but normally in Guatemala education has served as manipulation (Luis Canel)

Even more importantly, it ensures that the Indigenous communities are less likely to be critical of the state. As the headteacher of one of San Pedro's schools told me:

It's convenient for the system that I have my eyes closed, my ears shut, to not be able to speak, a thousand times better. But if I open my eyes, 'Ahh, where am I? It's bad, I have to change it'. This doesn't suit the government

Throughout Guatemala's history, the Criollo/Ladino elites have intentionally provided the Maya with only the bare minimum to ensure their exploitation (Martínez Peláez, 2009). In the colonial period Indigenous labour was required for the *repartimiento* system, and later in the post-colonial period as indentured labour on the coffee *fincas*. Today, Guatemala's economy still depends upon exploitive labour conditions, most notably in the *maquilas* (textile factories) which export cheap clothing to the United States (Ramírez Pérez, 2015). Several interviewees argued that state education is designed with the purpose of forming easily exploitable labour:

On leaving the school system what do you know how to do? Nothing, you can barely read and write [...] they leave you there so that you can go to the maquila job market where you are pressing a button, you don't have to think. (Rony Lec – director of IMAP, the Mesoamerican Permaculture Institute)

Beyond the education system, paternalism also imbues Guatemalan politics. This is especially noticeable during election cycles, when politicians distribute chemical fertilizers to *campesinos* for free (or at heavily subsidised rates) in exchange for votes:

*[The politicians] buy the campesinos, as they have made campaign promises, they are irresponsibly manipulating them, they control them, they dominate them.*⁹⁹ (Luis Xet Coche – teacher and *ajq'ij*)

Such populism is inbuilt into the Guatemalan constitution, as the community leader Chico Puac highlighted:

*The constitution of the republic says, 'Indigenous people are a national heritage', not actors. So they have to be maintained by the state, and from there emerges political populism. The paternalistic programmes of the state are a means to maintain the government's power [...] so more or less this is a replica of the bread of the Romans.*¹⁰⁰

2. Extractivism

Extractivism - the large-scale exploitation of resources for export purposes, has always been a defining characteristic of the Guatemalan economy.¹⁰¹ However, a new wave of extractivism has surged in the 21st century, not just in Guatemala, but across all of Latin America (Rivera Andía and Vindal Ødegaard, 2019; Schorr, 2019; Villareal and Muñoz, 2020). As Raftopoulos (2017) notes, extractivism in this context is not limited to classic extractive activities like mining, but rather refers to 'the accelerated pace of natural resource exploitation at an industrial level and the construction of mega-projects and infrastructure intended to make full use of natural resources' (p.388). And so while 21st century extractivism has diversified into new areas such as hydroelectricity, it follows the same logic as in previous eras, namely an economic system which creates and deepens inequalities, through concentrating wealth into the hands of a few (Ye et al., 2020).¹⁰²

⁹⁹ It is important to note that while many Pedranos frame fertilizer distribution in this way, it could equally be understood as more indicative of clientelism than paternalism.

¹⁰⁰ That is, to generate public approval by offering a palliative (bread) as a distraction, rather than through good public policy.

¹⁰¹ What Chivalán Carrillo and Posocco (2020) refer to as the 'expropriating vampirism' of Guatemala's 'colonial machine'.

¹⁰² Although there are variations between this sort of extractivism, and Bolivia and Ecuador's more redistributive model of 'neo-extractivism' (Veltmeyer and Petras, 2016).

Guatemala's new wave of extractivism is a direct result of a series of neoliberal policies such as the 1997 Mining Law which followed the Peace Accords (Mash-Mash and Gómez, 2014; Way, 2016).¹⁰³ Combined with a concurrent worldwide commodity boom, these circumstances accelerated extractivism to unprecedented levels, not just mining, but hydroelectric projects and agribusinesses too (Yagenova and Garcia, 2009). Indigenous communities have felt the full brunt of this extractivist expansion, which has also been accompanied by a policy of militarisation and the criminalisation of those attempting to defend their territories (Figure 20), often using anti-terrorism legislation to do so (Sieder, 2017; Global Witness, 2020; CIDSE, 2021). The onslaught has been so brutal that it has been labelled a 'Fourth Invasion' by Indigenous communities (Batz, 2017; Chivalán Carrillo and Posocco, 2020).¹⁰⁴ As one interviewee lamented:

They keep killing us. They keep killing the defenders of the land and the water, they keep criminalizing them [...] it's permanent, the attack has been constant. Peace was signed, but after that came more megabusinesses [...] and the attack was more direct, there are more deaths than in the war right now. (Tzutu Kan – artist and rapper)

During the armed conflict some of the worst atrocities were carried out in the name of gaining access to natural resources (Dearden, 2012). Despite the signing of the Peace Accords, companies involved in extractivist conflicts employ the same insidious tactics that the Guatemalan army used during the armed conflict. Community members are often bought off, sowing seeds of internal division and conflict.

Figure 20: 'Freedom to Political Prisoners! No to criminalization!' – Poster at the 'Semillas de Pensamiento' Defence of Territory Festival. Quetzaltenango August 2018



¹⁰³ The Mining Law decreased the amount of royalties from 6% to only 1% (Urkidi, 2011).

¹⁰⁴ After the Spanish Invasion, the Liberal Reforms, and the armed conflict.

An irony with 21st century extractivism is that has unfolded in the context of unprecedented recognition of Indigenous rights (Sieder, 2016). As I mentioned earlier, Guatemala has ratified the ILO-169 Convention, and this guarantees the Indigenous communities the right to prior consultation, as stated in Article 7 of its framework as shown below:

Article 7) The peoples concerned shall have the right to decide their own priorities for the process of development as it affects their lives, beliefs, institutions and spiritual well-being and the lands they occupy or otherwise use, and to exercise control, to the extent possible, over their own economic, social and cultural development. In addition, they shall participate in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of plans and programmes for national and regional development which may affect them directly (ILO, 1989)

Although the ILO-169 Convention provides Indigenous communities with a mechanism to challenging extractivist development, as Romero et al., (2018) argue, ‘the State not only does not recognize, respect or promote the rights to consultation and territory, but rather it is criminalizing the demands of indigenous peoples to these rights’ (p.42).

Notably, the state has failed to provide any form of guiding legal regulation or framework for the process, and *consultas comunitarias* (community referendums) have been ignored in practice (Romero et al., 2018; Sieder, 2007). Since the mid-2000s, a wave of *consultas* have taken place,¹⁰⁵ and the grassroots appropriation of the right to consultation has helped to unite a divided Indigenous movement at a national scale (Costanza, 2015; Laplante and Nolin, 2014), especially through the emergence of the DOT (Defence of Territory) movement (Copeland, 2018). Unfortunately, very few of these efforts have successfully halted projects (Urkidi, 2011; Xiloj and Porras, 2008), and even those which were initially successful managed only to delay the implementation of projects (Global Americans, 2017). This is largely because *consultas* have not been ruled to be legally binding, and so several success stories have seen their hard-fought gains lost as companies resume operations years later (NISGUA, 2019). When Indigenous communities’ right to prior consultation is violated, their only recourse is to present a *recurso de inconstitucionalidad* (constitutional challenge) or *amparo* to the Constitutional Court, which is the route Pedranos have taken against AALA (see Chapter 9). As of 2018, there have been more than 30 Court judgements recognising the right to consultation as a fundamental right of the Indigenous communities, but unfortunately this recognition does not afford concrete protections (Romero et al., 2018).

This harsh colonial reality of extractivism is obscured by a modern discourse of ‘progress’ and ‘development’. The state frames those Indigenous communities blocking extractivist

¹⁰⁵ More than 80 (Romero et al., 2018).

development as classic ‘Insurrectionary Indians’ who are obstructing Guatemala’s path to modernity (Costanza, 2015; Xón Riquiac, 2014), using their ‘backwardness’ to justify the presence of companies (Bastos Amigo, 2020). Don Salvador Quiacaín Sac, a respected *cargador* (director) of San Pedro’s ‘Elder Council’ vehemently opposed this modern narrative by drawing attention to its unjust colonial logic:

They say, “the ungrateful Indigenous are fools, who do not want to use natural resources for development”. Is it development to take 99% for themselves and leave the owners just 1%? Is that development? No, that is injustice.

One day, they risked telling me “It’s that the Indigenous don’t understand, they don’t have the capacity to understand this”. It’s not that we don’t have the capacity to understand things, but in conclusion, we prefer, even if they treat us as ignorant, to die above our gold, and not to die poor with our gold in the hands of others.

Figure 21: Guatemala’s Colonial Present – A Facebook post widely shared by Pedranos



The old and new criollo/mestizo white elites have used the state in a planned and organised way to legitimise their powers and loot resources to maintain their privileges, reproducing the colonial relations of colonial power and the mentality of racial hierarchies.

(Chirix García and Sajbin Velásquez, 2019, p.32)

Socialist courier (2016)

In her book ‘Lineage and Racism’ Marta Casaús Arzú (2007) traces the genealogy of the landowning oligarchy from the Spanish invasion onwards, discovering that power has always been condensed in an elite of roughly 150 families who maintained their position through high levels of intermarriage. In place of coffee, the oligarchy have shifted their attention to biofuels (Winkler et al.,

2013), and Indigenous smallholders are today being dispossessed by the rapid expansion of monocultural sugar cane and African palm plantations (Brodzinsky, 2013; Alonso-Fradejas, 2018; Pietilainen and Otero, 2018). They have also extended their influence in a wide array of non-agricultural sectors, such as banking and the corporate world (Gutiérrez, 2016). As a result, they are able to profit from most extractivist developmental projects in the country (Bayas and Galindo, 2019), and this is due to their successful intrusion into the state through a network of corrupt relationships. Their power is largely derived through their control over mass media, the hiring of lobbying firms and influence in the court systems (ibid). These political-economic networks enable the elites to aggressively defend their interests with impunity (Contreras and Olivia, 2019). As Chirix García and Sajbin Velásquez (2019) condemn, this corrupt co-optation of the state has generated a permanent crisis that has weakened the political system.

Extractivism has taken on new forms in the 21st century, it can also be distinguished in new economic sectors like tourism, which has rapidly become one of Guatemala's leading sources of income (Little, 2004). 'Cultural extractivism' refers to the way the state profits the Mayan culture whilst excluding actual Indigenous communities from economic and political processes (Xinico Batz, 2019). Indigenous women for instance form the main image used by INGUAT (Guatemala's tourism agency) to promote international tourism, but they are often excluded from the promotion of their own culture, with Ladina women instead 'dressed up' as Indigenous women at international tourism fairs (Figure 22). This cultural appropriation contributes to the 'folkloricisation' of Indigenous culture (Velásquez Nimatuj, 2004).

Figure 22: A Folkloric 'Tz'utujil' Mona Lisa



Painting by Diego Bizarro (Guatemala.com, 2019)

The contemporary artist Antonio Pichilla captures well the elites' folkloric treatment of Indigenous people. In our interview, he described the controversy surrounding the sale of the Juannio's winning art piece in 2015.¹⁰⁶ Given the Juannio's prestige, winning pieces are normally snapped up by wealthy buyers. However, in 2015 there was little interest in the winning piece by Edgar Calel, a Kaqchikel artist from San Juan Comalapa. As shown in Figure 23 below, the artwork 'B'atz' ('Threads') is a photograph of Edgar in a corn field wearing a jumper embroidered with the names of Guatemala's 21 Mayan ethnicities. Antonio divulged why he thought nobody was willing to purchase Edgar's work:

Generally, the people that have money, the people that buy artworks, they buy what the Indigenous produces, "What a beautiful textile, I'll buy it!". But why not the image of Indigenous man in front of them? This work question you, that you only value the Indigenous for what he produces, but you don't want to share with him, you don't want to get to know him more.

Figure 23: B'atz Constellation of Knowledges - Edgar Calel (2015)



Iñigo Clavo (2020)

¹⁰⁶ The Juannio is Guatemala's main annual contemporary art competition.

3. Racism

Racism is a weapon created by the ruling sectors of society to favor their hegemony
(Adams, 2005, p.169)

The Indigenous presidential candidate Thelma Cabrera was an outspoken critic of extractivism, and she therefore threatened the elites' interests (Aguilar, 2019a; Pradilla, 2017). This explains the mainstream media's hostility towards her, but only partly. Their hostility was also predetermined by Thelma Cabrera's ethnicity and the racism which serves as a legitimising factor for Guatemala's ruling class (Xinico Batz, 2018; Romero et al., 2018). Racism operates in a variety of different overlapping forms in Guatemala – racial discrimination, institutional racism, structural racism and internalised racism, and in this section, I will discuss the connections between them.

Racial discrimination is ubiquitous in Guatemala, as Velásquez Nimatuj (2011a) describes below:

'[Racism] has invaded every area of our lives. We live it and feel it through discriminatory words and acts on city and rural buses, in public and private offices, in the streets, in restaurants, on university campuses, in public and private schools and colleges, in leisure areas and even in places of worship. (p.528).

As harmful as racial discrimination is, it can at least be easily identified. Institutional racism on the other hand is often subtle and more difficult to condemn because it is conveyed by the established and respected forces in society (Ture and Hamilton, 1967). This can be clearly seen in the media's treatment of Thelma Cabrera, who was often dismissed as uneducated and thus an incompetent candidate (Quispe, 2019). Through brandishing her educational credentials, the media was able to avoid direct accusations of racism. However, their attacks helped to naturalise individuals' racist attitudes and solidify a general sense of Ladino superiority, as the K'iche journalist Lucia Ixchiú (2019) criticised below:

A few days ago, I saw how in a comment on Twitter a white woman, obviously Ladino, was referring with hatred and viciousness to Thelma Cabrera, hinting that she is a vegetable seller and a tomato farmer [...] Thelma's level of education has also been discussion and is something that makes me laugh, because when it comes to Ladino and white troglodytes who can't even read, people applaud happily and vote for them without questioning anything.

The normalisation of Ladino superiority (and Indigenous inferiority) is the principal means by which racism is reproduced over time as an ideology (Cumes, 2004):

[Ladinos] don't view us as people that also have our own form of thinking and our own intelligence. (Otoniel)

This notion emanates from every facet of Guatemalan society, and due to the internalisation of this notion of Indigenous inferiority (i.e. internalised racism) (Cumes, 2004), many Indigenous people are

also themselves likely to have considered Thelma Cabrera incapable of governing, as Irma explains below:

There exists the idea that we can't do it, the idea that we're not capable, the idea that those who have political power are the Ladino, but not the Indigenous [...] When we internalise racism, we feel inferior, and so we continue generating the same myths, the same stereotypes that the Ladinos and the Criollo elite of this country have constructed

Internalised racism greatly affects children,¹⁰⁷ and incentivises the abandonment of Indigenous identity:

Figure 24: 'Weaving over skin colour, a metaphor for racism' - Marlon Puac (2017)

If I told a group of children, "Paint this area skin colour", what colour do you think they would choose? Automatically they would use pink
(Marlon Puac)



Our very people no longer accept that they are Mayan descendants. We don't know what the results will be this time with the census. We are more than 60% Indigenous, but when the result comes we arrive at less than 40%.¹⁰⁸ (Clemente Peneleu)

Calameo (2018)

While the notion of Indigenous inferiority harkens back to the Spanish Invasion, it continues to justify Ladino racial dominance today through epistemic violence, as Sandra Xinicio Batz, a Kaqchikel activist and journalist explains:¹⁰⁹

Over time, both the policies and the vision of the State have been transformed but their homogenizing and monocultural essence has not changed. Racism, in order to consolidate and normalize itself socially has needed to put history in its favour to validate lies and stereotypes, which have become truths to justify its existence and durability.

In this way, the notion of Indigenous inferiority is perpetuated as truth. Yet what began as a lie has the potential to be materially produced in a self-fulfilling prophecy as a result of structural racism – i.e. the reinforcement of racial inequalities through social, economic and political systems (Lawrence and Keleher, 2004; Velásquez Nimatuj, 2010). Structural racism is produced through a general budget which is highly skewed in favour of the elites. CACIF routinely blocks attempts to raise taxes, and the elites are highly adept at tax evasion, for which there are almost no legal repercussions owing to the country's weak tax administration (Gagne, 2016). They are also skilled at exploiting

¹⁰⁷ This is something I witnessed at first-hand when living with a Pedrano couple whose young daughter refused to speak to them in Tz'utujil, despite their best efforts.

¹⁰⁸ This process is what Chirix García and Sajbin Velásquez (2019) refer to as 'statistical ethnocide'.

¹⁰⁹ I attended her conference on racism in San Pedro during my fieldwork (organised by Pedrano contemporary artists).

loopholes to build exemptions and privileges as a result of their influence over the political system. Analysis of Guatemala's 2015 national budget revealed that the state invests five times more resources on Ladinos than Indigenous citizens (Romero et al., 2018).

These systemic deprivations and exclusions exacerbate inequalities, and the statistics are shocking. 80% of Indigenous Guatemalans live in poverty, and they are three times as likely to live in extreme poverty than non-Indigenous Guatemalans (Romero et al., 2018). Their life expectancy is 13 years shorter (Wulfhorst, 2017), and Indigenous children average half as many years of schooling as non-Indigenous children (INE, 2014). Such statistics are numbing, but Figure 25 provides a human face with the case of Jackeline Caal, a seven-year-old Maya Q'eqchi' girl who died in the custody of the US Border Patrol in 2018 after days without food or water (Martin, 2018). Her family, like countless others, were forced out of desperation to send family members north to earn an income (Strochlic, 2019). 95% of those under the age of 18 who migrate are indigenous (Sullivan, 2016).



Martin (2018)

So stark is the divide between the predominately rural Indigenous and non-Indigenous urban populations, that the World Bank suggests the existence of 'two Guatemalas' (World Bank, 2020). Although separate, these two nations are connected to one another by the same colonial relationship that defined earlier historical periods. The elites are still dependent upon the exploitation of Indigenous labour, and they have little incentive to transform the very system from which they benefit economically. As Otis (2012) highlights, the denial of workers' rights is central to the logic of the country's economic system, especially agribusinesses, which are reliant upon

informal workers (including children). Such jobs are characterised by poor working conditions, without legal protections or social security. Given the lack of job opportunities in the formal sector (owing to underinvestment), the Indigenous poor are left with little choice but to work in the informal sector (or to migrate) (Garcia Escobar and Rabanales, 2020). Even so, the informal economy is often critiqued by the elites for reducing the state's revenue (Cuffe, 2019). I encountered this belief myself when speaking to Walda, a Ladina governmental employee:

What would be awesome, but utopic, is that [rural] municipalities sustained themselves financially. They are all sustained with the money from taxes from people from the city [...] None of them get funds from collecting their own taxes or from their own projects, no. They get funds from the state that are usually from taxes from middle class and higher class that are from the city, so basically the city is supporting the rest of the country like that, and it shouldn't be like that.

In Walda's opinion, the 'municipalities' (i.e. rural Indigenous municipalities) are a drain on Guatemala's urban middle and upper classes. Pedranos however take the opposite view, rightly seeing them as the main force upholding the Guatemalan economy (Cojtí Cuxil, 1995). This is communicated powerfully in Figure 26 below, drawn by the contemporary artist Manuel Chavajay in 2011. It shows a Pedrano elder carrying the bank of Guatemala on his back using a *mecapal* - a head strap traditionally used to carry heavy loads in Mesoamerica. In both 2015 and 2020, the image was widely adopted in anti-corruption protests in Guatemala City. It is this same sentiment which drives Pedranos' revindication movement and their opposition to the megacolector.

For that small colonizer that they carry inside, we Indigenous will never stop being beasts of burden
(Ixchiú, 2019)

Figure 26: Pedrano carrying the Bank of Guatemala



courtesy of artist

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the modern/colonial dynamic which has characterised the Criollo/Ladino elites' relations with the Indigenous communities throughout Guatemalan history. This lays the foundations for the next chapter, where I will more closely examine San Pedro's particular experience of modernity/coloniality at the hands of the elites. This context is driving processes of revindication in the community, the articulations of which will be explored in Chapters 6 and 7. This context is also critical to Part 2 because Pedranos see a modern/colonial dynamic in the advancement of the megacolector (i.e. modern discourses obscuring a colonial logic), which they also understand as motivated by elite interests. Furthermore, the colonial paradigms that I discussed here are also reproduced in the megacolector conflict and will therefore be revisited later on (most comprehensively in Chapter 9).

Chapter 5: Modern ‘Contamination’

This chapter extends Chapter 4’s analysis by more closely examining how modernity/coloniality has affected San Pedro, the context of which is driving processes of revindication. First I will introduce the metaphor of ‘contamination’ which many Pedranos use to describe the accelerated effects of modernity/coloniality on the community. I will explore what modern ‘contamination’ signifies both pragmatically and ontologically, and then through (predominately) elders’ anecdotes, reconstruct an impression of San Pedro in the 1960s/1970s, the reference point by which many Pedranos measure modernity/coloniality’s accelerating effects. I will compare this idealised past to San Pedro’s ‘contaminated’ present, after which I weigh up various interpretations for the perceived loss in sense of community, looking to both ontology (the erosion of ancestral values) and political economy (the coffee and tourism industries) for explanations. I will conclude with an examination of the colonial logic of modern ‘contamination’, a dynamic central to the megacollector conflict.

The ‘Plasticisation’ of San Pedro’s culture

We are so contaminated that all the ideas we think are contaminated

Many say the problem of this new generation, [is that] they are contaminated, they have a lot of contamination in the head

We are so contaminated that we accept everything

The mobile phones, the watches, it’s contamination

We are absorbed by a mental contamination of Western education

We consider garbage contamination, but there is also garbage that contaminates the mind

Pedranos are preoccupied by contamination. While the lake’s algal blooms brought the word firmly into the everyday lexicon, many Pedranos apply it outside of this literal context. The quotes above are taken from a range of Pedranos who utilised the term to emphasise the destructive effects of modernity on their community.¹¹⁰ Although as I outlined in the previous chapter, San Pedro has been negatively impacted by modernity/coloniality for 500 years, Pedranos somewhat essentialise their own history, identifying a more recent ‘uncontaminated’ past standing in contrast to a more ‘contaminated’ present. This discrete division is imagined to have occurred around the 1960s, when the effects of modernity/coloniality greatly accelerated. Until this point, the

¹¹⁰ Although they didn’t necessarily refer to it as ‘modernity’, using instead a range of terms such as ‘globalisation’, ‘Westernisation’, ‘modernisation’ and ‘development’.

community's ancestral values were robustly observed, but the 1960s marked their gradual disappearance and the unravelling of community ties:

Everything changed and the people here adapted very rapidly to the West [...] it's bad for the town. Why is money so important? Why is there hate and jealousy amongst us? That was created [by] the West. We used to be in peace, in harmony, in equilibrium with mother nature (Viento Tuy Navichoc).

Pedrano contemporary artists often use plastic (which first entered the community at this time) to stand as a metaphor for this transition to a more 'contaminated' modern/colonial present. Benvenuto Chavajay's series 'Suave Chapina' (2009-2013) for instance consists of the plastic straps of a brand of mass-produced flip-flop (Suave Chapina) attached to stones from the lake to demonstrate how the community has been 'plasticised' by modernity, as he explains further below:

It's that modernity is also part of the plastic. Plastic is also what changed a structural culture of the town. So plastic simplified the culture, and the culture is now plasticised, it's part of our system now (Benvenuto Chavajay)

Figure 27: Suave Chapina



Universes (2020)

Manuel Chavajay makes a similar point in his piece below – 'Kuku' (2015). A *kuku* is a traditional clay water jar, however they have since been replaced with plastic equivalents. Manuel highlights how this process also involved a concurrent displacement of the Tz'utujil word '*kuku*' for the Spanish word '*tinaja*':

Figure 28: Kuku' (2015)



Photo courtesy of artist

We used to say, "grab me a kuku", but now it's, "grab me a tinaja", the word 'kuku' is no longer used [...] so then at once the object invades the language, then also the traditional dress, and the way of thinking

We have a richness within our culture because we think differently, we speak differently. But there is this contamination that right now is in danger of disappearing not only the traditional dress, not only objects, but our language. And if they disappear [...] the way of thinking disappears too.

(Manuel Chavajay)

This ‘different way of thinking’ that Manuel refers to can be understood as Pedranos’ relational ontology,¹¹¹ and its ‘contamination’ by modernity is perceived by many Pedranos as destructive, indeed Manuel described it ‘as a bomb that has functioned in society’. As I will show in this chapter, it is perceived in this way because of the harm that it has caused to the bond between the community and the environment. I discussed this process with the *ajq’ij* (spiritual guide) and community leader Chico Puac, and he drew an illustration to better explain its implications. This has been adapted in Figure 29 below:

Figure 29: The biocentric ‘cosmogonic spiderweb’ and anthropocentric modernity

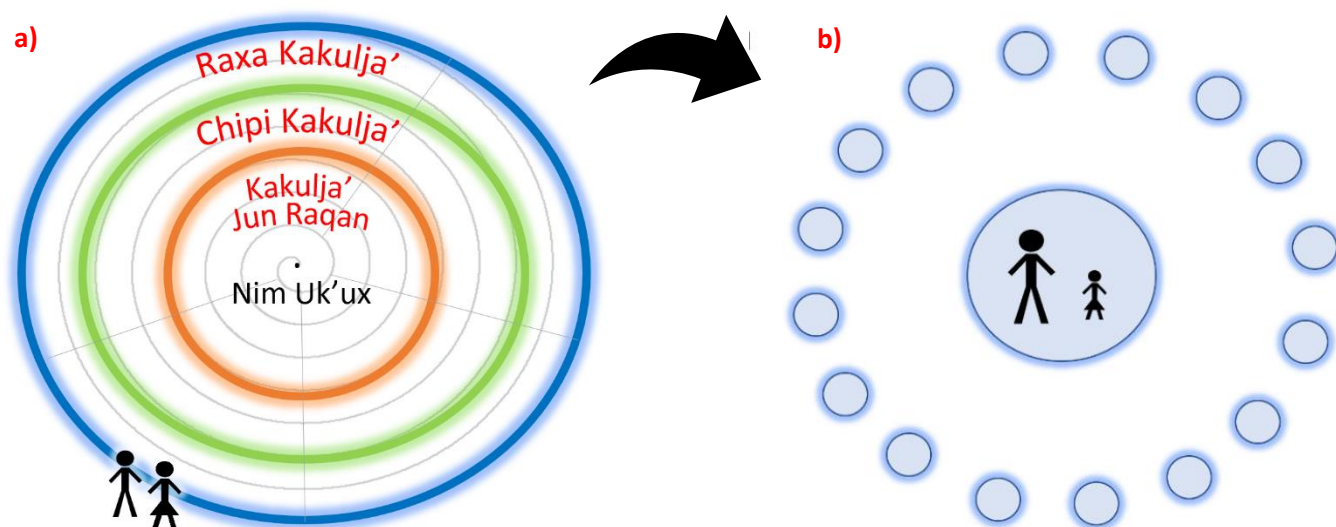


Figure 29a) depicts Chico’s interpretation of the Mayan ontology in a form which he termed as the ‘cosmogonic spiderweb’. Within it, all living beings are interconnected to one another, and mutually constituted through (horizontal) relations with other beings. It is thus a classic relational ontology insofar as it assumes ‘the relations between entities [as] more fundamental than the entities themselves’ (Wildman, 2006, p.1). Beyond this abstract model, I found this notion commonly expressed in interviews with Pedranos, as in the eloquent words below of a 15-year-old girl:

We take the environment into account because it’s part of us, that’s to say, it is the same life, because if we stain it, it’s like we are staining ourselves.

This understanding of humanity’s co-dependency on other forms of life forms the basis of the Mayan cosmovision. As a result, we can think of the Mayan ontology as being performatively ‘worlded’ (Blaser, 2013a) into being through respectful behaviour:

I believe that Mayan spirituality is no more than respect, respect to mother earth, respect to the universe, respect to the sun, respect to the [...] elements. This is our cosmovision. (Tzutu Kan – artist and rapper)

¹¹¹ That is, an ontology which understands the mutual interdependence of all existing life (Blaser, 2009a).

The other obvious distinguishing feature of the cosmogonic spiderweb is the peripheral position of human beings, as Chico put it, ‘we are only a micro part of this amniotic bag of the cosmos’. This stands in marked contrast to the modern ontology (Figure 29b), where Chico depicts humans in the centre, in a position of domination over all other beings.¹¹² As well as being hierarchical, the modern world, or ‘OWW’ (Law, 2011) is non-relational, premised on a Cartesian separation between humans and nature. This blindness to humans’ fragile dependency has facilitated nature’s subordination for human gain through short-sighted extractivism (Schorr, 2019), and in Chico words, caused ‘[humans to] become predators of our own brothers and sisters who live and coexist in the same amniotic bag of the cosmos’. This in turn has engendered an array of modern ecological crises which are threatening ‘the biophysical integrity of the planet’ (Escobar, 2016, p.24). The modern ontology is anthropocentric, but on a community level we can see that it is also egocentric, favouring the primacy of the individual. In this sense, modernity is worlded through individualistic behaviour.

From an ontological perspective, the modern ‘plasticisation’ of San Pedro’s culture can be understood as a sort of ontological displacement. Yet this process is incomplete and patchy. Using Rivera Cusicanqui’s (2012) notion of *ch’ixi*, we can think of overall there being more plastic than clay fragments, but these clay fragments are still extant.¹¹³ Even so, there is a general perception expressed by many Pedranos of a creeping individualism and a loss of sense of community as a result of the community’s ‘plasticisation’. It is this loss which is in part driving the community’s revindication movement. In the following section, I will delve into Pedranos’ perceptions of their less ‘contaminated’ past so as to better understand this impetus for revindication. Through drawing upon the anecdotes of elders,¹¹⁴ I will also demonstrate how Lake Atitlán is *more than* just a water resource to Pedranos.

Memories of San Pedro

By the 1970s the small town of San Pedro’s rapidly growing population stood at around 5,000 (Rogoff, 2011). Around this time, most Pedranos made a basic living through farming and fishing, and the lake was the focal point of social life, with water collection an important daily routine:

¹¹² As well as patriarchal domination over women as indicated by the male and female figures’ size disparity.

¹¹³ This ontological ambiguity will be the main focus of Chapter 7.

¹¹⁴ In the following section I have decided to anonymise my participants, stating only their age and gender because this is the most pertinent information to the discussion, and also because the 20 elders I interviewed mostly shared the same pattern of occupation – *campesinos* (men) and homemakers (women).

I remember very well that every day we used to go collect water from the lake. These were healthy activities, of laughter, of conversation (Pedrano, 74)

As Rogoff (2011) notes in her ethnography of San Pedro during the early 1970s, water collection presented an opportunity for women to socialise with one another and catch up on events. This was especially important in light of the rigid social constraints that women faced - 'Pedrano women are trained to keep their place, to remain in their own backyards [...] to enter no homes except those of relatives' (Paul and Paul, 1976, p.715).¹¹⁵ Water collection also presented young male suitors with a valuable opportunity to approach the opposite sex as they made their way back to their homes:

Figure 30: Water collecting (1946)



These customs formed part of a couple's courtship, because the man would wait for a woman coming with her kuku' full of water. The man would talk with her so that later they would become sweethearts. It was very pretty and beautiful

(Pedrano, 73)

Atitlán Archaeology (2020)

Women also frequently visited the lake to launder their family's clothes:

Women used to wash clothes in the lake, but they used natural soap, they weren't chemicals. They used 'soap of the earth', tzijol and pig soap.¹¹⁶ It was all natural. (Pedrano, 99)

There were places to wash clothes, places to swim, and places for drinking water. Each place was respected, it was very well ordered. (Pedrana, 87)

They would also take advantage of this opportunity to fish:

I remember that my grandmother would take me to the lake to fish [...] we made little crumbs of tortillas, because the fish were in easy reach, they lived on the shores of the lake. The quantity of fish! (Pedrana, late 60s)

¹¹⁵ Such restrictions are absent from elders' accounts which nostalgically paint this era in a highly positive light. Even though their past is essentialised in this way, it is no less real to Pedranos in their framing of their contemporary struggles.

¹¹⁶ Tzijol is a native plant species similar to an onion. Pig soap is produced from pig fat and ash.

The abundance of fish was matched by that of other lacustrine species:

If one didn't have anything to eat for dinner, they went to the lake to fish, and they fished a lot. It was a very and fun and interesting life for a child. The plants that grew in the lake, like tul, the birds like the pato poc.¹¹⁷ (Pedrano, 80s)

Figure 31: Local Crabs for Sale in Santiago's Market



I remember as a child that if a person moved a cayuco, they would see a huge number of crabs beneath! It was impressive!

(Pedrano, 80s).

When it was windy, sometimes we would leave at 4am to get crabs, it was easy, they didn't move because of the cold!

(Pedrano, 68)

At this time the lake was renowned for its deep blue hues and its tremendous visibility for which it earned its famous epitaph as 'the most beautiful lake in the world' when Aldous Huxley (1934) passed through the area in the 1930s.

Figure 32: San Pedro (Paul and Paul, 1941)



The colour of the lake was very different to now. It was a pure mirror! The beautiful lake, clean, clean, clean! From ten metres away one could see the fish

(Pedrano, early 60s)

¹¹⁷ An endemic species of duck, driven to extinction in the 1980s (LaBastille, 1990).

Beaches were an important community space, where children could play games:

Children played football on the beach, it was a very important element for us, it was our natural park (Pedrano, late 40s)

Figure 33: Pedrano Children (Paul and Paul, 1941)



Rogoff (2011)

They could also play safely in the town, in the large patios that existed between houses, and also along the wide unpaved streets which were free of traffic.

Figure 34: Pedrano Street Mid-twentieth century



Atitlán Archaeology (2020)

San Pedro was connected to other communities by dirt paths through the mountains. The only way to transport goods was through human labour - men would carry huge loads on their shoulders using a *mecapal*:

Figure 35: On the Road to Lake Atitlán (Eadweard Muybridge 1875)



Before there were no shops in San Pedro. Everything that we consumed we went for on foot. I remember very well my father used to go for corn and other things to the coast and return on foot.

(Pedrano, 74)

photohistory (2020)

The quickest way to travel to other lakeside communities was by *cayuco*, and the journey fee was halved if the passenger was willing to paddle.

Twenty, thirty people [could fit] in these cayucos, and they would take water from the lake whenever they were thirsty (Pedrano, 77)

Figure 36: Cayuco (Barbara Rogoff, 1975)



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Rogoff (2011)

Life was hard, and for many a hand-to-mouth existence, but people made the most of the little that they had:

Before we didn't use shoes, when I was 14 years old, I didn't have shoes (Pedrano, 68)

Many people suffered from hunger, and they didn't eat exactly. For example, in my childhood, a tortilla in the morning, one at midday, and one in the afternoon, with water and salt only. Many people experienced this way of life (Pedrano, late 40s)

Portions were often meagre, but the diet was healthy and natural:

My father never lost a tooth, but I am white haired, yet neither my father nor my mother were white-haired, [even when] my mother died at 70 years old. Because they ate only herbs.¹¹⁸ (Pedrano, 68)

Figure 37: *Chu'umpa ch'am* – a traditional dish consisting of herbs, lime juice and fish



Figure 38: Leaves of *Maxán* used as wrapping in the market



Gaia (2020)

Leaves of the banana-like maxán plant were used to wrap goods in the market (Figure 38). Nothing was wasted, and organic waste (including human waste) was recycled:

Every family gathered their garbage and put it in a sack, this type of garbage was organic fertilizer and they used it on their crops (Pedrana, 80)

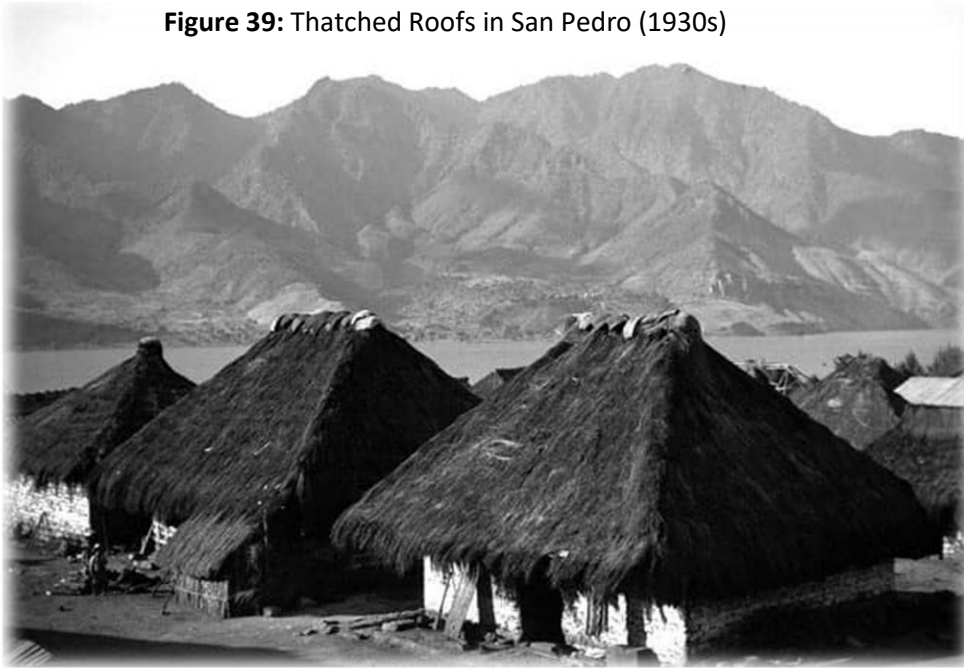
There were many herbs where we used to shit outside, large plants with big leaves and thick stems, really good plants! There was no damage to nature because everything assimilated to the earth. (Pedrano, 50s)

Infant mortality was extremely high, with only two thirds of children making it into adulthood (Rogoff, 2011), but on account of their healthy lifestyle, many lived well into old age:

The elders didn't have illnesses like we see now. They were strong, healthy. I think they were like this because they were very natural, everything was related to nature, the medicines, the activities, the resources, the transport, everything was natural (Pedrano, 99)

¹¹⁸ The term Pedranos use to refer to a range of local spinach-like plants.

Figure 39: Thatched Roofs in San Pedro (1930s)

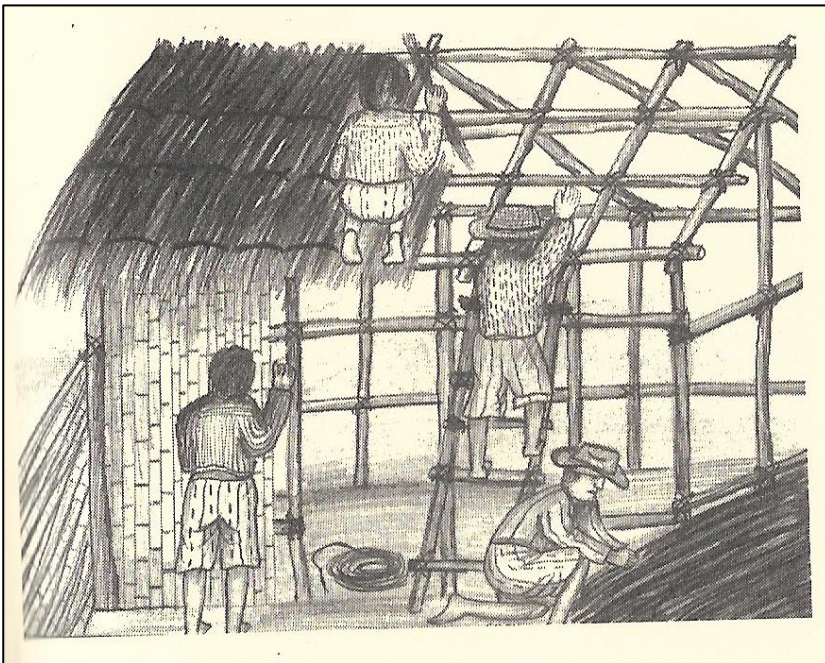


Atitlán Archaeology (2020)

San Pedro's houses were traditionally constructed of *adobe* (clay), and until the 1960s, they were largely roofed with thatch, which was gradually replaced, first with terracotta tiles and then later by *lámina* - tin sheets.

Before, houses were very natural, and apart from being natural, they were beautiful
(Pedrana, 60s)

House construction was a collective endeavour, with neighbours helping one another to construct a house quickly:



*There was a lot of solidarity, they gathered people together, and in three days they built a house without a problem, without paying anybody. They would give them a *jícara* of *atol* and they would do it with fun and joy, even whilst joking.¹¹⁹*

(Pedrano, 50s)

Cholsamaj (2006)

¹¹⁹ A *jícara* is natural gourd-container and *atol* is a corn-beverage.

A strong sense of community pervaded the town:

You could pass through people's land, you could take somebody's onion, and it was fine, one or two from somebody that you know, it wasn't a lack of respect (Pedrano, 40s)

San Pedro's economy was largely cashless, based instead on the exchange of goods, known as *jaloos*, *k'eexooj*:

If a person wanted limes, they would carry a little corn to exchange it (Pedrano, 47)

This system was upheld by Pedranos' honesty:

One of the principles that our ancestors had 60 years ago was the value of the word. When the elder says, "this is yours" automatically it is yours forever, without any document. And the mutual respect between them, "you help me today, and I will help you tomorrow", and there is no need for money (Pedrano, late 40s)

Respect in San Pedro was paramount, especially towards authority figures:

Respect before was a fundamental value in every family. What they said was respected and one complied for the good of the family and of the population (Pedrano, 45)

Most important of all was respect for elders, which was deeply ingrained in Pedrano etiquette:

You must greet the elder so that they bless you, there is a custom here kissing the back of the hand, so that God blesses you. And if there is an elder in the street, you can't run past them. (Pedrano, 50s)



De Carufel (2015)

Elders embodied respect through their ritualised interactions with their surroundings:

On approaching the lake they would offer a great respect, including before touching, taking or carrying the water home, the elders would ask for permission from God and mother nature, kneeling and kissing the lake. (Pedrano, 91)

My grandfather would tell me every time that he wanted to cut a dry branch of a tree, he would always ask permission to mother nature. (Pedrana, late 20s)

Elders' interactions with nature were guided by respect, but also by their senses. They were perceived to possess a unique sensorial capacity, which provided them with a sort of 'intuition', enabling them to 'read' the *señales* (signs) in the landscape, such as the rain and wind and the form of the clouds:

My parents taught me to read the signs, they couldn't read or write, they only read the signs. (Benvenuto Chavajay)

Figure 41: The *Xocomil* – a turbulent wind unique to Atitlán which suddenly appears over the lake in the afternoon



Elders were respected for this ability, and most importantly because of the *valores ancestrales* (ancestral values) which they carried. They would impart this wisdom to younger generations through *consejos* (advice):

The elders always gave us consejos, respect always had to prevail in us, with nature and with ourselves. Before taking or doing any activity, you should always ask permission from nature and God so that everything goes smoothly. They taught us that everything that revolved around us was life, that we depend on each other. Respect was a fundamental value. (Pedrana, late 60s)

One of the *consejos* most often mentioned by Pedranos was a warning against throwing trash into the lake, since doing so would supposedly result in a stomach-ache. In this way, the underlying message of such *consejos* was typically to stress the importance of respecting nature:

One of the many consejos of our grandparents was not to waste water, because it's life and without it we can't exist. These consejos I will never forget! (Pedrana, 70)

Elders would often pass on their *consejos* at mealtimes when sat together with their grandchildren beside the fire:



Cholsamaj (2006)

When we were children, at sunrise when we were having breakfast, at 6am or earlier, they told us to take a little seat, then they told us stories of the past, obediently one would learn how our ancestors were and how we are now.

(Pedrano, early 70s)

Although there was a school in the town, attendance was low, and formal education was not considered worthwhile (Paul, 1950). Instead, adults would educate their children during domestic activities, fathers with their sons in the fields, and women in the home:

My parents said that people hid their children from going to school, the family was their own school. (Pedrano, 33)

I'm grateful to have spent a lot of time with my grandfather when I was a child. Innocently I hit trees, and he said, "No, no, no. The tree will cry, would you like to be hit if you were doing nothing? It would hurt you, yes, it has life, let's care for it". Always there was this scathingly, "No no, please do this, do that" (Pedrano, 29)

San Pedro 'Contaminated'

Figure 42: San Pedro in 1961 and 2020



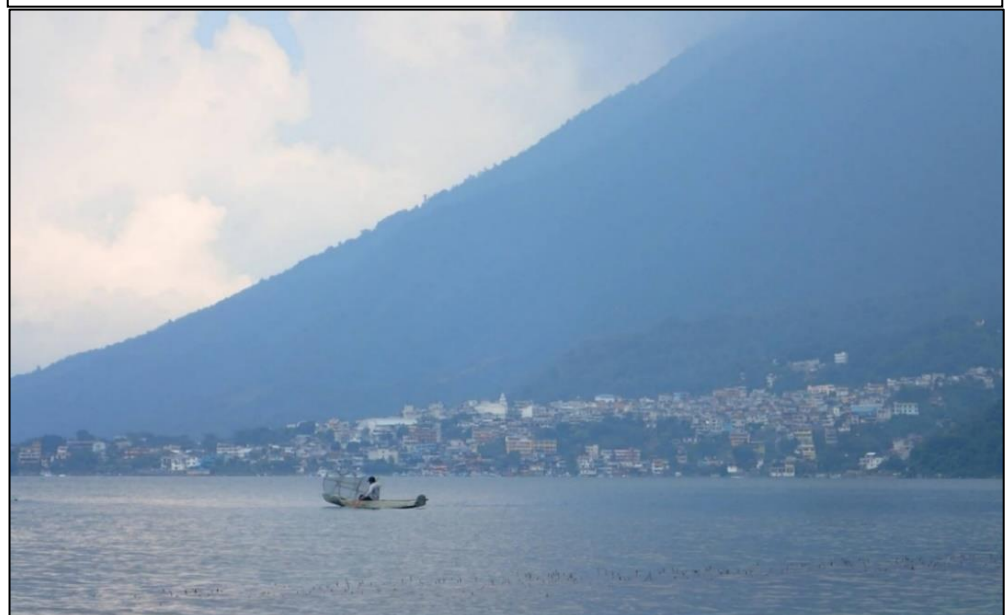
Laselle (1961)



photo courtesy of Juan Carlos Chavajay

Contemporary San Pedro is a stark contrast to elders' memories. To begin with, its physical makeup has been utterly transformed. Noisy tuk-tuks clog its streets, and there are few remaining green spaces. New concrete and corrugated metal roofed buildings rise to two, three or even four levels, connected to one another by a tangled web of telephone wires. Their construction destroyed San Pedro's beaches through the extraction of vast quantities of sand. Few people visit the lake, most families do so only during the Easter holidays. They are more likely to swim in one of the recently built popular swimming pools, which is also the safer option, given the lake's polluted state. This contamination, along with the introduction of non-native species has wreaked havoc on the lake's ecosystem and the local fishing industry:

Figure 43: A lone fisherman



The quantity of fish that there were! It was very easy to fish before. It was marvellous! The fish we fished before are no longer seen these days.

(Pedrana, 70)

Plastic trash litters San Pedro's streets, likely originating from one of the numerous small convenience stores selling *chatarra* - plastic wrapped snacks (e.g. crisps, chocolate, soda):

There is a virus of many shops, a goddamn store here, another there, another store to hell! I'm tired of seeing so many stores like this, and everything inside all packaged. (Manuel Chavajay)

Many of these stores also sell alcohol:

It's a lot of contamination! A lot has changed in San Pedro, a lot. Before there were only three or four cantinas [bars] for drunks, but now how many cantinas are there? My god, cantina here, cantina there, cantinas everywhere you look. (Carmen – clothes vendor)

Numerous street vendors sell pizza, fried chicken and fries, the cuisine of choice in place of the traditional corn and vegetable-based diet:

Figure 44: Corn cobs drying on a roof (left). The contemporary artwork on the right, 'Ixiim' (corn) (2016) by Marlon Puac critiques the displacement of the traditional corn-based diet by modern equivalents like 'cornflakes'.

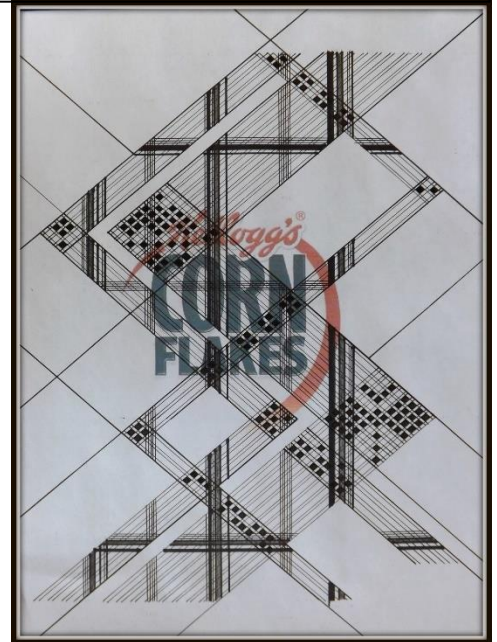


Image courtesy of artist

The teenagers that hang around at San Pedro's street corners speak to one another in Spanish rather than Tz'utujil. This modernised San Pedro is the only San Pedro they know, and they have never seen the crystal waters that the lake is famed for:

The new generations don't even go to the mountains, or the lake. They are on Facebook, they are in front of the television (Luis Canel)

A lot of children don't know how to swim when it was natural for us. Many children haven't walked in the forest, they only go in tuk-tuk (Juan Manuel – community leader and director of the educational NGO Taa' P'it)

For this age group, drug addiction is also recognised as a serious problem:

In my time it was alcohol which was the problem, now it's drugs, children, 12, 14 years old.
(Pedro)

Their upbringing also significantly differs from previous generations, as one millennial explained:

From 1997 onwards there was a boom of television here, almost the majority of families could watch it. And the children from this epoch onwards were orientated in a different way by the media, they are no longer interested in the grandparents' way of thinking, only the Western way of thinking. Children from 2005 onwards almost don't speak Tz'utujil. (Otoniel)

A major consequence of this language shift has been a decline in inter-generational communication, as was explained to me by Juan Quiacaín Navichoc – an employee of ALMG (Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala), the governmental organisation which regulates the use of the 22 Mayan languages spoken in Guatemala:

At the moment we have lost 90% of communication between the grandparent and their grandchild, because the grandchild nowadays speaks Spanish and the grandparent Tz'utujil. There isn't a good relation, the grandparent isn't able to express themselves directly the cosmogonic part with their grandchildren.

Elders' pedagogical role has been supplanted by the school, and their *consejos* (and the ancestral values they contain) replaced by modern education. This has had far reaching consequences, as can be seen in the account of an old blind *campesino* and his wife who I encountered living in great poverty in their ramshackle house on the edge of San Pedro:

Figure 45: Boys Flying *Barriletes* (kites) – a traditional Pedrano pastime



Before there were no schools, no one was studying, people were engaged in work, contact with nature all the time, respect was profound. But the schools and studies came to change a lot. Young people have different perspectives, other visions, another way of life. They consider that now is better. I agree. But the sad thing is that they have been forgetting what gives us life, the wealth that is around us. It is unfortunate, but it is the reality. If you talk to them about the respect that there was before, sometimes they ignore you. They have more focus on what the world offers them now. [modernisation] came to change people's mentality and way of life. They no longer care what life was like before. They only care about today, period.

The old couple's account hints at a more profound modernisation to have occurred in San Pedro. Every elder I interviewed lamented the loss of respect in the younger generation, and as I mentioned earlier, respectful behaviour towards other lifeforms is the main way Pedranos' relational ontology is worlded. Younger Pedranos are instead more likely to be worlding the modern ontology into being through consumerism and individualistic behaviour. This ontological displacement is multicausal, but the state's intrusion through modern education is seen by many Pedranos as an important factor, given how it disrupted the transmission of Pedranos' relational ontology through supplanting elders' pedagogical role. Their modern pedagogical replacement is instead criticised by many Pedranos for forming self-interested consumers:

At the end of the day they are educating us for a world of consumerism. (Juan Maurilio – contemporary artist and sculptor)

Here one sees education like, from my experience, to have a good job. There isn't an idea of thinking more, to help the community. (Luis Canel)

Of course, San Pedro was never a perfectly egalitarian society, materialistic and individualistic impulses have always existed. However, many Pedranos recognise that their collective behaviour has decidedly shifted in recent years:

Respect and solidarity were very important. Where we're heading now, if you're ill, you'll die. Nobody will help you these days, because of consumerism, materialism, hate, envy, egocentrism, that is what predominates nowadays [...] and there is no longer that equilibrium, that peace, that humility, that solidarity, that essence of "I will help you and you will help me". If we respected like we used to before, things would be different (Juan Quiacaín Navichoc).

Figure 46: 'Loq'ooj' – 'Buying' by Marlon Puac (2015) critiques the increasing influence of consumerism in the community

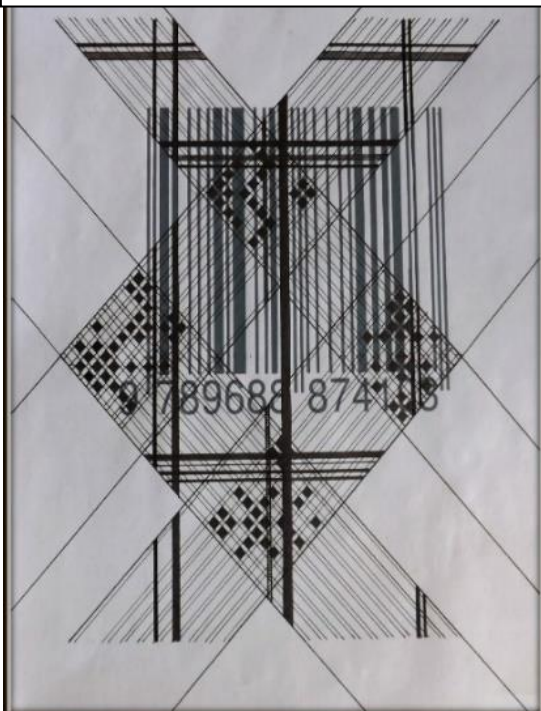


Image courtesy of artist

Figure 47: Tuk-tuks and advertisements in Gringolandia



Atitlanliving (2020)

Many Pedranos remarked on what they deemed to be a decline in the community solidarity:

The context of San Pedro is foregrounded by a “how much will I earn from this, I’m not interested if the people suffer, so long as I’m fine, and if my children are fine. Brilliant, if the rest suffer, I don’t care”. (Edwin Bixcul)

People don’t want to work for the town [...] People only want to know how much they can earn. (Chepe Pop)

Chepe Pop is the president of the COCODE of Tzanjay, and he made his comment in reference to the difficulty in finding individuals to take on the unpaid voluntary role of Cocode. His critique about Pedranos’ dedication to the community often emerged during my fieldwork. For example, when the municipality called for volunteers to help with a tree-planting event they were coordinating, I decided to participate myself. Yet I discovered the majority of those in attendance were in fact paid municipal employees or employed by other organisations which had obligated their attendance. Similarly, during 2018’s disastrous forest fires, many Pedranos criticised the community’s lacklustre response to the municipality’s call for volunteers to help extinguish the blaze.

Figure 48: ‘Voluntary’ tree-planting



The Association of Fishermen carries out beach cleans on a monthly basis (Figure 49), and its president Nicholas Tumax, lamented that few fishermen would partake without the incentive of a free meal. Of course, this is not to discount the role that poverty plays, Nicholas also acknowledged that an individual’s ability to volunteer is also conditioned by their material deprivation. Even so, many Pedranos recognise that independent of economic circumstance, fewer people are willing to freely devote their time to the community.

Figure 49: The Association of Fishermen after a monthly clean-up



Aviña Escot (2020)

There are many different causes of this perceived loss of sense of community in San Pedro. One of those most frequently cited by Pedranos is increasing egocentrism:

We have become closed off in egocentrism, and that egocentrism does not allow us to see beyond ourselves. It has created a crisis with the environment. We are not able to see what is really happening with the environment because we don't think about anything other than ourselves. First me, and later you, but not the community. (Marlon Puac)

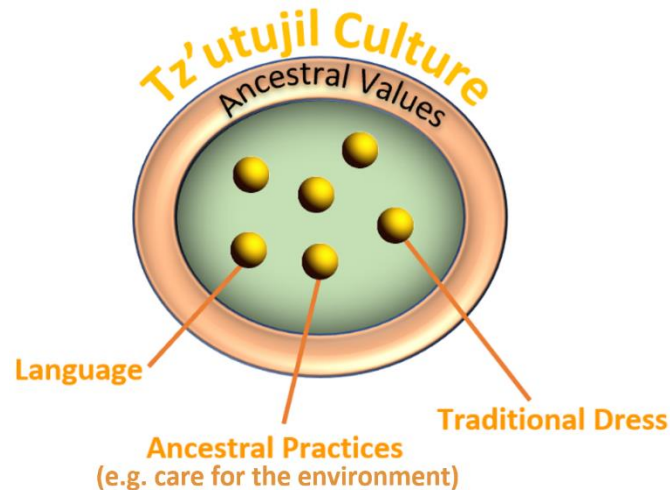
This in turn was explained as a result of the erosion of ancestral values, and the diminished worlding of respect as a result. From this perspective the weakened sense of community could be interpreted as the result of modernity's displacement of Pedranos' relational ontology. Understanding how requires us to examine ancestral values and their specific functioning in society.

The Erosion of Ancestral Values

Sketching out his ideas in a diagram which has been adapted in Figure 50 below, Cristobal Cholutio, the director of San Juan's Environment Committee claimed ancestral values as a sort of protective ring holding different aspects of Tz'utujil culture together. He further argued that without this protective ring, a culture is unable to sustain itself. To make his point, Cristobal cited the example of waste disposal, a major aspect of his job:

The most fundamental thing that makes a culture well-defined are the values that you have as a person - reverence, gratitude, conscientiousness for example. If you throw garbage on the floor, as a person you are cheating yourself, damaging yourself. A little [plastic] bag causes all of this to be destroyed, so it is a matter of values of principles, of values. If I consume something and take it to the place where it should be, I think this is what makes the culture.

Figure 50: The Function of Ancestral Values



Cristobal highlights how an individual's ancestral values, through encouraging the respectful disposal of waste, ensures a sustainable culture. The proper disposal of waste can thus be understood as a worlding of Pedranos' relational ontology. In this way, he also sheds light on the connection between San Pedro's literal and metaphorical contamination, that is, how the modern 'contamination' of the community (through the erosion of ancestral values) leads to the actual contamination of the environment. It is similarly through this relational understanding that many Pedranos recognise their ontology as life-sustaining, and modernity as destructive:

Over time, through the influence of commerce, we began losing all that cultural knowledge that I could say is 'a culture of life' and little by little we were grabbing, taking and doing as our 'culture of death'. (Don Salvador)

As Don Salvador describes, consumerism is promulgating a 'culture of death' that is slowly killing both the community and the environment. We could say then that consumerism is a form of 'slow violence' (Nixon, 2013), that is, 'an attritional violence that is not typically viewed as violence at all' (ibid, p.2).

Figure 51: The Erosion of Ancestral Values

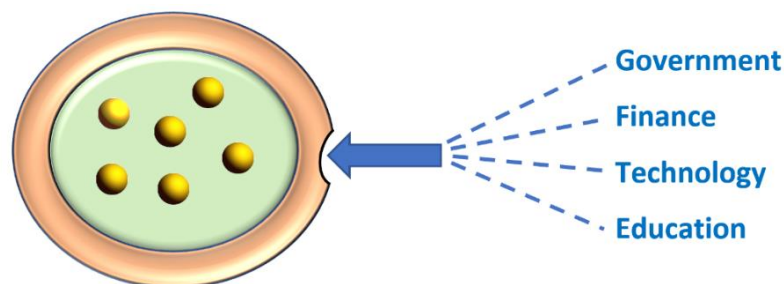


Figure 51 above depicts my adaptation of Cristobal's visualisation of the erosion of the 'protective ring' of ancestral values by a host of modern influences that he sketched out on his ipad during our interview. Like him, many Pedranos suggest that this process has led San Pedro down a self-destructive path, as community-orientated respect has been replaced by individualistic

behaviour. The problem with this assumption is that it depends on a rather abstract notion of ancestral values. As I noted in Chapter 2, it is important to pay attention to the pragmatic functions of what Indigenous people say and do (Cepek, 2016). Only through examining how ancestral values functioned in practice can we understand why they encouraged respectful behaviour. I found such an explanation in the Tz'utujil notion of *xajaan*, which loosely translates as 'sin'. Many Pedranos mentioned how the designation of disrespectful behaviour as *xajaan* helped to regulate a normative moral framework. In the accounts below we can see how *xajaan* functioned in everyday contexts as an informal form of policing between community members:¹²⁰

My father told me that we had to wash the fertilizer container away from the lake, he would say, "Don't dirty the lake, you have to wash it higher up". Whatever action one did with the lake, "It's xajaan, do not disturb the lake". (Antonio - tailor)

They would always say, "xajaan - it's a sin, it's a sin, don't waste water, don't dirty the water, that is a sin, you have to respect the water. Don't speak badly of water". (Leonel Quievac Yojcom – academic and educator)

Applying this analysis of *xajaan* specifically to the context of water use, we can see how an ontological displacement occurred in practice. As Leonel describes above, one pragmatic function of *xajaan* was to encourage judicious water use. However, the arrival of modern plumbing undermined this purpose, due to the ease at which water could now be accessed:

Obviously we preferred to have water at home instead of having to make three or four journeys to the lake for water (María Quiacaín Batzin – market vendor (aged 87))

[Pedranos] didn't waste water because they had to carry it from below, and carrying it wasn't easy, and that's why they cared for it. But technology made us different. Now just turning the tap 'whooosh' the water comes out. (Clemente Peneleu)

In this case, modern plumbing carried a compelling emancipatory rhetoric which lived up to expectations, but as a consequence, Pedranos' contact with the lake was significantly reduced. Many elders directly attributed the lake's contamination to this spatial/cognitive separation:

I realised after the incorporation of tubes in houses people became isolated from the lake. People stopped going to the lake, and I believe that was the start of our undoing. They thought that having everything already at home, nothing else mattered. This was the way the population started to contaminate. (María Quiacaín Batzin)

Because of the incorporation of drinking water everybody forgot about the lake, they worried less what was happening to it. (Francisco Rocché Puac – former fisherman (aged 83))

Ontologies are 'done and enacted' (Mol, 1999), and an ancestral respect for water was formerly worlded into being on a daily basis in San Pedro through the act of water collection. The sudden

¹²⁰ Through a lens of political economy, *xajaan* can be understood as one of Ostrom's (1990) self-governance mechanisms preventing the 'tragedy of the commons' (Hardin, 1968).

arrival of modern plumbing abruptly ended this worlding practice with knock-on effects for Pedranos' relational ontology. Pedranos are well aware of this performative aspect of their ontology, as one Pedrano put it, 'we don't read out philosophy, we practice it'. As I will explain in Chapter 8, it is partly for this reason that Pedranos oppose the megacollector, which they view as further contributing to their modern separation from the lake.

Ontologizing political economy

As Asher (2017) states, it is important to do go 'beyond abstract or generalized representations of Indigenous people's material relations to nature [...] to understand how past, present, and future nature-cultures are shaped within specific conjunctures of political economy, state policies, and cultural politics' (p.523). Although few ontological analyses pay sufficient attention to political economy (Hornborg, 2015), an ontological focus is not incompatible with this context. Burman (2016) for instance recommends actively putting them into conversation through 'ontologizing political economy'. In this section I hope to do just this, widening the scope of my analysis to better consider how the modern displacement of Pedranos' relational ontology is shaped by political economy.

To begin, it is important to recognise that some critical contexts were likely missed by my fieldwork. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, the armed conflict had a devastating impact on the cohesiveness of the community of San Pedro. Trust was broken by the activities of PACs (Paul and Demarest, 1988), but owing to the sensitive nature of these experiences, the legacy of the armed conflict rarely emerged in conversations with Pedranos. For this reason, I am unable to comment on its influence in relation to the declining sense of community, although I suspect it plays as significant a role as the (ontological) erosion of ancestral values. One subject that I can more confidently discuss however is the issue of paternalism.

In Chapter 4 I explained how paternalism functions as a colonial paradigm of state control, but it doesn't only operate at the state level. It has also filtered down to become a normalised aspect of Guatemalan society. For example, at celebratory community events, the municipality usually hands out free gifts,¹²¹ and free lunches are an indispensable component of monthly COMUDE meetings.¹²² NGOs operate in a similarly paternalistic fashion. Following the Peace

¹²¹ Usually plastic tupperware containers.

¹²² It is important to note that free lunches could be understood from a different perspective - as sharing food in sociality (Dunbar, 2017). Yet at the same time, many Pedrano community leaders vocally complained about this practice, indeed the issue came to a head a few times during community meetings when attendees were admonished for abruptly leaving after the lunch was served.

Accords, they arrived in large numbers to aid the country's reconstruction (Newton and Early, 2015), but some Pedranos criticise them for commercialising civil participation, through for instance paying people to attend their training workshops.

At the moment sadly the trend at the national level is "I support you, but what will you give me in return?" [...] The other problem is, for example, I've seen that people don't work unless you give them subsidies, unless you give them food, unless you give them something.
(Cristobal Cholotio - director of San Juan's Environment Committee)

The growth of paternalism was itself a consequence of increasing state penetration of San Pedro's community structure. Over the last few decades, the municipality has taken on various civic responsibilities that were formally carried out domestically or under the supervision of traditional religious or civic institutions. The anthropologist Benjamin Paul for instance speaks of the powerful 'incentive system' which formed the social basis of the community in the 1940s:

men are expected to subordinate personal interest to community welfare. [...] show proper respect for tradition and authority, and honorably discharge his successive servicio obligations. Motivation to achieve these ends consists of the desire to avoid the sting of ridicule or the penalty of lawsuit, to forestall bad luck by obeying the mandates of the moral and mystical powers. On the positive side, society holds out the reward of exalted status for those who graduate from community service to become village elders. (Paul, 1950, v)

This incentive system collapsed as the municipality usurped traditional community organisations.¹²³ Even more significantly, many Pedranos presumed their individual community responsibilities to be absolved by this transferral of authority. For this reason, many Pedranos today see the municipality (and the mayor in particular) as the sole caretaker of the community's wellbeing:

The municipality has to do everything, it has to clean [the town], and what do I do? Where is the part that I have to put myself? This is what we don't understand. (Luis Xet Coche)

When I questioned Pedranos about the perceived decline in sense of community, the example most often cited was the widespread unwillingness to pay for the municipality's solid waste disposal services. As with water collection, this was formerly carried out in the domestic sphere. Pedranos were responsible for the disposal of their waste (at this time largely organic) which they recycled on their *milpa* (agricultural plot). However, the municipality now sends out garbage trucks several times a week to transport the waste to the processing plant above town (Figure 52a). They carry out this service at a highly subsidised rate, charging only one quetzal per bag (around ten pence). Even so, some Pedranos are reluctant to pay, and instead leave their waste in clandestine

¹²³ Although it is also important to recognise that this wasn't just a matter of state penetration. Many Pedranos were themselves keen to escape from the financial obligations that the *cofradías* (Catholic brotherhoods) required of them (the so-called 'cargo system'). It is partly for this reason that conversion to Protestantism has been so pronounced in Guatemalan Indigenous communities (Sexton, 1978).

dumps (Figure 52b). Their reluctance is not necessarily due to material deprivation - almost all Pedranos can afford this fee. Rather it stems from a perception that this simply isn't their individual responsibility. This mindset was recognised as a serious challenge by both NGO and governmental personnel alike:¹²⁴

They complain a lot about the contamination, but they're not really doing much about it. They want their trash to be taken care of, they want the dirty water that's coming out of their house to be taken care of without paying anything, without taking responsibility for anything (MARN (Ministry of the Environment) employee)

Figure 52: Solid waste management in San Pedro



Disposable Addiction (2018)

Through 'ontologizing political economy' as Burman (2016) suggests, we can see that it is not only an individual's personal ancestral values which keep the community and the environment in balance through conditioning respectful behaviour. As important are the formalised community structures and the shared value system (and normative guidelines of behaviour) that they engender, and also *enforce* (Ratner and Rivera, 2004). Pedranos' unwillingness to pay for services isn't only due to the infiltration of modern egocentrism. It is also a result of the deterioration of community institutions by market and state forces (Rivera, n.d.).

The Promise of Modernity

if you don't pursue the carrot [of modernity] we will entice you to it with the stick (Blaser, 2013a, p.883).

¹²⁴ Even though they both encourage this paternalistic dependency through their own practices.

Any discussion of San Pedro's modernisation and the declining sense of community is incomplete without mentioning wider processes of capitalist expansion. As with the state's intrusion, the replacement of collective labour by wage labour has altered the community structures which formerly maintained a sustainable balance between the community and the commons. The establishment of a cash-based economy has had a pronounced impact on Pedranos' valuation system. As a result of the growth of consumerism, a Pedrano's worth is increasingly measured by their material possessions rather than the respect that they hold within the community. The carrot and stick dynamic that Blaser (2013a) mentions above is central to this. Modernisation is propelled forward by the compelling rhetoric of 'progress' as well as the colonial stigma of 'backwardness'. In this section I will explore this modern/colonial dynamic through the two most important economic developments in San Pedro's recent history – coffee and tourism.

- Coffee

In the 1960s most Pedranos lived a hand-to-mouth existence. Just to survive, many men had to seasonally migrate to the coast to work on sugar and cotton *fincas* in oppressive conditions (Chapter 4). It is little wonder then that chemical fertilizers were eagerly adopted when they were first introduced by a governmental modernisation project aimed at expanding export-orientated agriculture - 'SFEI' - *Servicio Fomento Economía Indígena* (Indigenous Economy Promotion Service). In their analysis of the desires of Maya broccoli farmers, Benson and Fischer (2006) state that 'broccoli production is compelling because it responds to conditions of poverty, violence, and social suffering [...] the global promise of 'something more' feeds on desperate conditions' (p.4). As they argue, modernity is often moralised as a hegemonic imposition, the 'imperialist and corrupting expansion of capitalism', but 'what appears hegemonic from one angle [...] may also comprise resistance from another perspective' (Green, 2003, p.53 in Fischer and Benson, 2006). This is pertinent in San Pedro's case, where the higher crop yields of chemical fertilizers liberated *campesinos* from the tyranny of the migrant labour system.

Following the introduction of chemical fertilizers, San Pedro became an important centre of coffee production in the 1970/80s. As a consequence of the injection of capital, San Pedro's achieved greater economic prosperity relative to other lakeside towns. This fuelled investment and entrepreneurship, with Pedranos establishing many businesses, such as the lake's first motorised ferry service (Tally and Chavajay, 2007). It was also on the back of the coffee industry that Pedranos' educational possibilities expanded, contributing to the trailblazing reputation that San Pedro retains to this day.

Figure 53: Coffee drying on the shore



San Pedro's coffee-fuelled modernisation provided undoubted benefits, but also significant problems, not least the lake's contamination. The coffee industry was also characterised by precarity, and Pedrano *campesinos* today use chemical fertilizers for survival rather than profit (Copeland, 2019b).¹²⁵ As Carey (2009) notes, fertilizers have shifted rather than alleviated Indigenous exploitation at the hands of the market economy. Soil quality has decreased through the long-term application of chemical fertilizers, resulting in diminishing returns. *Campesinos'* dependency is further exacerbated by rising fertilizer prices, and it is this dependency which enables the elites to leverage political control through the paternalistic system of fertilizer distribution (Chapter 4). When coffee prices collapsed in 2001/2002, many Pedrano *campesinos* were left destitute, and this greatly accelerated San Pedro's transition to a tourism-based economy.

- **Tourism**

Like coffee, tourism too carried a great emancipatory promise, and this can be seen in the earliest attempts to develop the industry. In 1958, an alliance of hotels in conjunction with Pan American Airways introduced the black bass in an effort to make Atitlán a world-renowned sportfishing destination (LaBastille, 1990). This proved to be a modern 'contamination' par excellence, as the bass is a voracious predator and it wiped out numerous lacustrine species. Tourism in the 2000s has proven more economically beneficial for Pedranos. However, like the

¹²⁵ It is rather the coffee exporters who make significant profits from this industry.

coffee industry, it is also characterised by precarity, revealed whenever tourist numbers drop due to extraneous shocks.¹²⁶ Tourism has also intensified competition between Pedranos, particularly as a result of land speculation as outsider-owned businesses have entered the community,¹²⁷ and the construction of bars and hotels along the shore has additionally restricted access to the lake (Peneleu Yocom, 2017).¹²⁸ Through tourism, San Pedro has also gained notoriety as an international party destination - ‘San Pedro la Locura’ (‘San Pedro the madness’). New forms of ‘contamination’ are perceived by Pedranos to have emerged as a result, such as plastic trash and malign social influences:

From the 1990s the first bars and restaurants arose, and so did the consumption of new products [...] new invasive packaging, so people started to generate more solid waste as a result.

(Leonel Quievac Yojcom)

A lot of tourists come to smoke marijuana, and we copy what we shouldn’t copy.

(Chato – boat pilot)



Uneven Modernisation

Overall, the coffee and tourism industries raised Pedrano living standards, access to education and Western medicine increased, and infant mortality fell. More Pedranos were able to afford modern technology, plumbing, electricity, fridges and gas stoves. Women benefitted especially, no longer having to dedicate as much time and effort to domestic chores.¹²⁹ As Mignolo (2018a) states, ‘the rhetoric of modernity [...] aims to persuade you through promises of progress,

¹²⁶ For example, as a result of COVID-19 a group of around 90 Pedranos involved in the tourist industry were forced to travel to Canada to pick cherries for three months.

¹²⁷ Although this was less severe than in other lakeside communities (Rosales and Mohammed, 2006).

¹²⁸ For example, in 2020, the Israeli owner of a lakefront hotel refused to allow local women to pass through his property. Believing these women to be an eyesore for guests, he also removed the stones that they use for laundry.

¹²⁹ Paul (1950) for instance describes how Pedrano women in the 1940s would have to grind corn for tortillas for at least four hours a day.

growth, development, and newness of object' (p.139), and this rhetoric was so effective because it did in many cases make life much easier. However, this benefit also masked the uneven effects of San Pedro's modernisation.

While living standards were low in the 1960s, this hardship was felt relatively equally amongst the community as a whole. The injection of capital from coffee and tourism disrupted this relative egalitarianism. It was replaced by a widening economic disparity between those *with* and those *without* money. For the latter, the rhetoric of progress was especially alluring, fuelling their consumeristic desires, not just for the comforts and conveniences that modern objects provided, but as markers of progress in their own right:

It's that they are selling us on television to buy ourselves the biggest television possible to watch the World Cup, I'm not saying you shouldn't, but it's our sense of progress still. (Vinicio Chavajay – community leader)

The aspiration of modern consumption is evident throughout the town, in the flashy Americanised homes built by return migrants,¹³⁰ and the modern gas ovens proudly displayed within, used more often for storage than actual cooking. This allure is so powerful that in order to feed modern consumption habits, many Pedranos have been tempted by predatory banks' offers of loans on credit, becoming saddled with debt as a result.

Figure 55: Contrasting traditional and modern architecture



The rhetoric of modernity doesn't convince everyone. Leonel Quievac Yojcom, an academic and educator for instance explained to me his family's decision not to buy an electric shower in preference of continuing to bathe in the lake:

¹³⁰ So-called 'remittance architecture'.

We don't have a shower here, and we must go to the lake, but it's not because we don't have the possibility [to buy a shower], but rather to feel that contact, there is something that concerns us as human beings, with natural elements. And one feels better swimming in the lake than taking a shower.

Many Pedrano women still wash clothes in the lake for similar reasons (Murillo, 2012), rejecting modern washing facilities, such as the recently built *lavaderos públicos* (washing places) (Figure 56) so as to maintain contact with the lake. In cases such as these, the allure of progress is insufficiently convincing.¹³¹ However, modernisation isn't propelled forward only by the discursive power of persuasion, it also exercises a coercive 'push' (Blaser, 2013a). As Mignolo (2018a) states, 'Coloniality names the (un)intended consequences of the narratives of modernity' (p.140) - and the (un)intended consequence of San Pedro's modernisation is the stigma of 'backwardness'.



This stigma interacts with the phenomenon of internalised racism (Chapter 4), extending its purview to those ancestral practices closely associated with Tz'utujil identity. This can be in the statements below, where Pedranos demonstrate how various expressions of ancestrality are denigrated within the community:

With the comforts of the West we say, "No that doesn't work anymore, these adobe houses are useless, our roof tiles are useless, better lámina" (Andrea Rocche Chavajay)

Parents don't want to see their children with those ancestral customs, because they could be criticised, so more than anything, they try to teach them recent things, recent ideas, recent customs. (Rudy – young municipal trash collector and father)

¹³¹ It also speaks to their relationality with the lake, as I will explore in Chapter 7.

Now if you cross yourself on the beach to give thanks for life, many will see you as strange. Some people will laugh, or bully you, they will say you are crazy. (Luis Xet Coche - ajq'ij)

We are no longer conscious of the environment, and many compatriots aren't interested, because for them this is a backwardness. (Don Salvador)

This stigma operates through a vicious cycle, as tradition increasingly becomes the preserve of those poorer community members who cannot afford to modernise, accelerating the marginalisation and community-wide abandonment of ancestral practices:¹³²

The uneducated children of less developed parents are the ones that speak Tz'utujil, they preserve the culture, they are the ones that know types of trees, that climb like monkeys in the trees. (Juan Manuel)

The Colonial Logic of Modern 'Contamination'

For the sake of comfort [the Indigenous communities] themselves have lost their identity, they are the ones that no longer wear all the traditional dress, but that buy adidas, they themselves are the ones who eat junk food

(Luisa Cifuentes, executive director of AMSCLAE)

Luisa's remark that Pedranos have opted to modernise of their own accord is not wrong, but it is an overly simplistic rendering of the situation. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, San Pedro's modernisation is a complex, multicausal affair. It was certainly driven by Pedranos' inclinations for modern comforts, but only in part. Modernisation was also conditioned by the shiny rhetoric of 'progress' and the colonial stigma of 'backwardness', as well as a wider context of state and market intrusion of the community. Although Pedranos suffer the destructive effects of modern 'contamination', they are often publicly blamed for this condition of precarity themselves.

Pedranos frequently turn this narrative on its head. For example, in their *amparo* against the megacollector, they point out how the loss of their lake-valuing cosmovision was due to:

*an irresponsible intervention through actions with which **we have been promised a development that has never become reality**, [and through which we] have made the lake suffer and some inhabitants to turn it even into their sewer*

Colectivo San Pedro (2019a, p.1)

Likewise, in interviews, Pedranos often blamed modern education for leaving the community acutely vulnerable to the destructive effects of modern 'contamination':

This education system isn't good for us because they never tell you the effects of a new product that comes [...] only that it's useful, it's really good at that, but they don't tell us the damage that it does afterwards (Clemente Peneleu)

¹³² Of course, those in a stronger financial position are less pressured by this stigma, which perhaps explains why Leonel's family (who are relatively wealthy) feel comfortable continuing to bathe in the lake.

In fact, I was struck by Pedranos' proclivity to blame outside interests for their community's modern 'contamination'. A neat illustration of this can be seen in the community leader Concepción Batzin's defence of women washers below:

Figure 57: Lampoon posted by the municipality's Facebook account

*Somebody in the municipality said,
"It's that you women contaminate".
I replied, "Excuse me, but we
women don't contaminate [...]
What contaminates are the
businesses, because if the
companies didn't come to sell
[chemical] soap, it would never
arrive here, it's not from San Pedro"*
(Concepción Batzin)



Muni San Pedro (2018)

The detergents women use to wash their clothes are insignificant compared to other sources of contamination (Murillo, 2012), but they are often the target of public vitriol in this way (Abbott, 2016). Concepción suggests however that blame should instead be directed towards the companies which profit from the lake's contamination. On many occasions Pedranos defended *campesinos'* use of chemical fertilizers on similar grounds. That is, they highlighted the wider capitalistic relations that Pedranos are enmeshed in, and the colonial inequalities inherent to these relations.

Figure 58: San Pedro's vast landfill site



This point is well illustrated in the case of solid waste. Several Pedranos highlighted that this is mostly brought in from outside to supply the tourist industry (Wex, 2007):

15,000 tourists generating trash. This is what contaminates more, not us (Clemente Peneleu)

95% of the solid waste comes from the companies, and 5% is what the community produces as community trash (Chico Puac)

But more than this, Pedranos draw attention to modern contamination's colonial logic, that while capital's expansion is indiscriminate, profits *always* accrue towards the elites. Put differently, they notice that Guatemala's elites profit from their community's contamination. In this vein, Carmen, a clothes vendor made a stringing critique of the bottled drinks company 'Salvavidas':

Do you know where the contamination comes from, what many people have said? Look, [Salvavidas] brings plastic bottles containing purified water. They make a lot of money [...] They are benefiting greatly and they are destroying the town, the lake. The plastic bottles end up in the lake. "It's good, it's favourable to buy water, more so the water of 'Salvavidas'" [with sarcasm], but it doesn't salva vida [save life]. "Salva vida" they say, but I say, "it destroys life!"

(Carmen)

Figure 59: Boy offering coca cola to a masked dancer



'Salvavidas' is owned by one of Guatemala's principal oligarchies, the powerful Castillo family which owns over 90 companies, including Guatemala's largest bank and Central America's largest brewing company (Aguilarcastillolove, 2020; Diaz, 2017):

Salvavidas are bringing tonnes of rubbish on a weekly basis. The same people that produce that quantity of trash are the owners of pharmacies, the owners of chains of hospitals. They are poisoning us, we're buying our illnesses from them, but when we want to cure ourselves, we go to their hospitals, their pharmacies, the end result being that we impoverish ourselves more and more. (Domingo Tuch – president of San Pedro's Environment Committee)

As Domingo criticises, the elite's stranglehold over different sectors of the economy enables them to profit from multiple aspects of modern 'contamination', meanwhile the Indigenous communities

bear the socio-economic costs.

This colonial dynamic was recently lampooned at the annual September Independence Day protests, where, evoking the artwork of Manuel Chavajay (p.118), Pedranos used *mecapales* to carry the logos of the companies which burden the Indigenous communities (Figure 60). This proves just how widespread the community's awareness of the modern/colonial dynamic is, despite the elite's tactic of victim-blaming. The events surrounding San Pedro's 2016 plastic ban (Chapter 1) may have contributed to this awareness. Before the ban, the municipality was preoccupied with how rapidly their landfill site was filling up with plastic. They sought to encourage the use of the organic wrapping materials – *maxán* leaves and paper bags which were used before plastic entered the community. However, this move was immediately challenged by the business association of plastic producers *Comisión Guatemalteca del Plástico* (Escobar Anleu, 2017). For fear of losing profits, this association attempted to have the plastic ban legally suspended through an *amparo*. In the process however, they publicly brought the colonial logic of modern 'contamination' to light. In moving against modern 'contamination', Pedranos were met with the elites' 'stick' (Blaser, 2013a).

The problem is that the big businesses have utilized us as objects to obtain their profits.

(Beatriz – elder and homemaker)

Figure 60: Independence Day Protests – Burdened by the Elites



Photo Courtesy of Josue Chavajay

Conclusion

In this chapter I aimed to communicate something of Pedranos' understanding of modernity/coloniality. Through the metaphor of 'contamination', many Pedranos note the coincidence between the contamination of the environment and the erosion of their sense of community. As I have shown, many Pedranos see modernity as a double-edged sword, exhibiting an awareness of the colonial logic lurking behind its shiny rhetoric. In the remaining two chapters of Part 1, I will explain how this perception is driving processes of revindication. This experience of modernisation has also bred a scepticism that significantly frames their reception of the megacollector. As I will discuss in Part 2, many Pedranos see the megacollector as yet another example of modern 'contamination' by which the elites are deemed to profit at the community/environment's expense.

Chapter 6: Revindication

So far in Part 1 I have discussed the effects of modernity/coloniality in San Pedro and its ontological implications. In particular, I have highlighted how modernity/coloniality has historically constrained Pedrano epistemic and political autonomy and contributed towards a declining sense of community. This context engenders San Pedro's decolonial revindication movement as a response of people 'who do not want to be oppressed, exploited, and disposed by modernity/coloniality' (Mignolo, 2018a, p.145). As I argued in Chapter 5, Pedrano ancestrality (ancestral values) serves a pragmatic purpose in keeping the community and environment in balance. The revindication of ancestrality is thus an antidote to modern 'contamination' insofar as it aims to undo its colonial logic and restore a sense of community.

In this chapter I will get to the heart of revindication in San Pedro, first tracing its origins, and then exploring the three principal modes by which it unfolds - self-valorisation, epistemic disobedience, and epistemic restitution. I will conclude this chapter with a discussion of the extant tensions within the revindication movement, using this as a lens to critiquing the disjuncture between MCD and the subaltern praxis of decoloniality.

Rising/Returning

The knowledge, the Mayan identity still flows in our blood, and this ensures that our DNA makes us revindicate our culture [...] One might not want to do anything, one can say, "this is valueless" but in their blood, it says that it has to be done, that it has to act.

(Javier Méndez – employed by the Ministry of Sport and Culture in the revindication of the *Pelota Maya* – Mayan ballgame)

Figure 61: Submerged buildings



photo courtesy of Carlos Francisco

The waters of Lake Atitlán are rising. In 2010, they rose suddenly by several metres, submerging lakeside buildings (Figure 61) and shocking foreign business owners (Maynard, 2012). Older residents however were less surprised, they remembered the higher water level during their childhood and understood that the lake was simply *returning*. There is no certainty as to why the lake's level changes, but many Pedranos speak of a fluctuating cycle which repeats itself every 50 years (Tax, 1937). Their understanding is likely rooted in the Mayan cosmovision, which conceptualises time as cyclical rather than linear. For example, what pop-culture erroneously depicted as the Maya's belief in 2012 as the 'end of the world',¹³³ was according to the Mayan calendar, just the end of a cycle (NISGUA and Artemaya, 2015; Chavajay, 2016).¹³⁴ Far from signalling an apocalypse, several Pedranos hopefully claimed 2012 as the start of a new era consciousness, the return of Mayan ways of being and thinking.

The lake's cyclical behaviour offers a useful analogy for thinking about San Pedro's revindication movement. Just like the lake's water level, it has sudden surges, but critically it is *always* in constant motion. This is because decolonial resistance has been present since the beginning of modernity/coloniality (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). Although I refer to a 'revindication movement' in San Pedro, in reality it is just the sum of 500 years of continuous revindication. What has changed however is the *momentum* of these processes, in the last few years they have culminated into a powerful surge. The megacollector conflict is unfolding on the crest of this surge of revindication. But before exploring this further, it is important to introduce the Pedranos who formed the first decolonial 'cracks' (Walsh, 2018) in the modern/colonial project, which the contemporary surge is in the process of widening. As Bastos Amigo (2020) notes:

Community and indigenous being are fortified in these spaces. But they are also transformed, because the community institutions, identity, and sense of what it means to be indigenous, are not the same as they were prior to these processes (p.12).

In other words, revindication is less the *return* of ancestrality than its *rearticulation*.

A Decolonial Legacy

As Bastos Amigo (2020) states, 'Indigenous communities reinterpret their history as an experience of autonomy resulting from the resistance maintained to preserve their being' (p.12), and his observation is clearly evidenced in San Pedro where the legacy of those Pedranos who historically challenged modernity/coloniality has remained pertinent. For example, there is a popular Tz'utujil oral tradition which recounts the bravery of Tz'utujil women who committed suicide rather

¹³³ E.g. Roland Emmerich's disaster movie '2012' (2011), and Britney Spears' (2011) single 'Till The World Ends'.

¹³⁴ The end of the twelfth *baktun* – a cycle of 144,000 days.

than be violated by the Spanish invaders. Their sacrifice is remembered in the poem ‘The Flight of the Virgins’ penned by the Pedrano historiographer Luis Batz:

Tender muses persecuted by the invaders, exhausted and scared they reached the precipice of the cliff looking it straight in the eyes, the beating of their hearts marked the moment of throwing themselves into the abyss, the wind rejoiced in the departure of the maidens, falling they opened their wings and changed into white doves [...]

Remembering the achievement, their descendants placed elusive, skittish little clay doves on their humble houses, that not tomorrow, not ever, will you be unknown (Batz, 1980, p.24).

Figure 62: ‘La casa’ (Benvenuto Chavajay, 1978)



Chavajay (2018)

Their legacy continues to inspire Pedranos, as in the case of the contemporary artist Benvenuto Chavajay (in Ciudad Imaginacion, 2015, p.42):

It reminds us that from the time of the so-called colonial plundering, the Indigenous woman always has been the first to resist.

There are also two notable figures from San Pedro’s more recent past who serve as important inspirations to the contemporary revindication movement. The first is Taa’ Pi’t (Agaptio Cortes Peneleu), one of the first literate Pedranos, and one of San Pedro’s earliest Indigenous teachers (Figure 63). In 1970 the Guatemalan Ministry of Education issued an edict forcing teachers to wear a tie and shined shoes. However, Taa’ Pi’t steadfastly refused to abandon his traditional dress, and the Ministry was eventually pressured by other teachers to make an exception for him (Rogoff, 2003).

Figure 63: Taa’ Pi’t in the Classroom (Rogoff, 1975)



Rogoff (2011)

The second decolonial figure is still living - Don Feliciano Pop, a 90-year-old renowned sculptor and former mayor of San Pedro (1986-88) during the aftermath of *La Violencia* (Chapter 4). At this time, and despite the dangers of doing so, Don Feliciano stood on a radically socialist platform, speaking out against Pedranos' exploitation at the hands of Ladinos. At his political rallies he placed red banners of the guerrillas alongside posters of Che Guevara:

During the period of repression, he was the only one who raised his voice in the midst of the storm, asserting himself as the redeemer of San Pedro (Batz, 2000, p.182).

Against the odds, Don Feliciano won the election, shocking the right-wing establishment:

Forums, round tables, panels, and discussions were held in the Capital City. How is this possible? The town of San Pedro is the only one of the 330 municipalities which elected a candidate of the socialist party (ibid, p.184).

One of his first acts was to dissolve the PACs which had terrorised the community (Chapter 4), but due to his political activities, he was jailed before his term concluded (Jordán and Izard, 1992).



Barnatanko (2015)

The strong convictions of Taa' Pi't and Don Feliciano were brought to my attention because of the very way their autonomist discourse is valued by Pedranos today. There is for instance a local

NGO named in Taa' Pi't's honour which offers a radical alternative to modern education. It conducts classes in nature so as to reconnect children to their ancestry. Likewise, as I will explore later in the chapter, Don Feliciano's legacy is celebrated by the town's contemporary artists. These very processes of valorisation bring us to the first mode of revindication that I will discuss.

1. Self-Valorisation

Dussel (2012) posits self-valorization as the first step towards the decolonisation of postcolonial cultures. As he states, 'This first step represents a reminiscence of the past from an identity that is prior to Modernity or which has imperceptibly evolved in the inevitable and furtive contact with Modernity' (p.44/45). This aspiration can be discerned in the community's efforts to visibly *valorar lo nuestro* - recognise and honour their elders. Take for instance the parades of the *feria* (fair).¹³⁵ I have witnessed these over three consecutive years, and they usually consist of colourfully decorated floats celebrating material aspects of Pedrano traditions (e.g. basket weaving, adobe house construction). 2018 was strikingly different, children instead marched in a poignant tribute to the town's living male and female elders, holding aloft their portraits (Figure 65). Implicit in this shift was a recognition that ancestry is less about material displays of disappeared practices than the immaterial value of respect as embodied by living elders.



¹³⁵ The week of festivities accompanying San Pedro's patron saint day in the last week of June.

This recognition is also implicit in the numerous murals of elders painted by the art collective ‘Canal Cultural’. For example, the first sight that greets you when you disembark from the dock is a colossal painting of an elderly Pedrana, the late Chona Rax. She was a highly skilled *iyom* (traditional midwife), who over many decades delivered most of the babies born in San Pedro.¹³⁶ Likewise, the Pedrano *curandero* (traditional healer) Taa Platz dominates the centre of town, with his portrait covering the side of the *cancha*.

Figure 66: Chona Rax and Taa Platz



Photo courtesy of Josué Samol

It is not just elders that the artistic community are commemorating per se, but their ancestral skills or ‘endogenous epistemology’ (Xón Riquiac, 2014), as Manuel Chavajay of ‘Canal Cultural’ explained:

[Elders] have the force of our history, they are the certificate that these people existed, and that they continue working with plants, with dreams, words, energies, fire, smoke, all these people are very important to us, and to commemorate them is to say that, “Yes they existed and they will continue existing”.

It is this endogenous epistemology which San Pedro’s contemporary artists especially value in Don Feliciano. Aside from his short-lived political career, Don Feliciano is also a sculptor, carving stones into anthropomorphic figurines. However, he does so through personally communicating with them, and in our interview he explained that the energies of the stones tell him what to carve.¹³⁷ Many

¹³⁶ As documented by Barbara Rogoff (2011) in her book ‘Developing Destinies: A Mayan Midwife and Town’.

¹³⁷ Utilising the ‘sensorial capacity’ which I described in Chapter 5.

contemporary artists cited Don Feliciano as an inspiration, and Benvenuto Chavajay made a documentary film about him,¹³⁸ and further organised an exhibition of his work in Los Angeles in 2017 (Figure 67):

We need to forget a little of the West, I believe we have a cultural legacy [...] Pablo Picasso is ok, he exists, ok, but we also have a 'Feliciano Pop' as well (Benvenuto Chavajay)

Figure 67: Feliciano's sculptures in his home and in Los Angeles



TV Tz'unun Ya' (2019a)



Chavajay (2017)

¹³⁸ 'Josol ala's historia en la mirada de Don Feliciano Pop' (2014).

The importance of these homages is not just that elders and their endogenous epistemology are being recognised, but that it is Pedranos themselves who are doing the recognising. As such, Pedranos affirm the very subjectivity that modernity/coloniality has long denied them (Chapter 4).

For us as artists, we didn't wait for somebody to come from outside and recognise that [they] are geniuses. We did it ourselves, we showed that we also have the capacity to recognise that they are geniuses. (Antonio Pichilla).¹³⁹

Furthermore, as I explained in Chapter 4, ancestrality is devalued by modernity as 'backward'. Accordingly, the process of self-valorisation necessarily entails a rejection of the modern valuation system itself, implicating self-valorisation as an act of 'epistemic disobedience' (Mignolo, 2011).

2. Epistemic Disobedience

I face Western philosophy squarely, I put Adorno as an adornment, and I discard Descartes
(Benvenuto Chavajay)

In publicly valorising their elders, Pedranos reject modernity's most important metric of valuation - modern education. They refuse to accept elders as 'uneducated' due to their lack of schooling, and this refusal constitutes what Dussel (2012) terms the 'negation of negation':

There is much of, "Ahh, it's that the elders didn't study, our elders don't know", but they are more educated than us, they are the wisdom (Clemente Peneleu)

A student that believes that he's educated, and that he's right, but no, it's the ancestors that really know the definition of education, of respect (Rosa - shopworker)

Rosa's refusal to accept the value of modern education is also an affirmation of ancestral respect as a valid metric of valuation (Chapter 5). In a similar vein, many Pedranos also denied the negative connotations of illiteracy:

It would be stupid to call an elder illiterate simply because they don't know how to read or write in Spanish which isn't even our own language. That doesn't interest us anyway, what does interest us is their knowledge, and they have more knowledge than the very same person that is calling them illiterate. (Marlon Puac)

The contemporary artist Benvenuto Chavajay has written an academic journal article on this subject, titled 'I'm from the generation of illiterate parents' (Chavajay, 2018). In the article, he rejects a pejorative view of illiteracy, re-appropriating the value of his parents' illiteracy by explaining how it advantageously prevented them from losing their richer way of sensing the world:

Although my parents couldn't read or write maybe it was an advantage, because they spoke with the stones and they washed in the lake. In contrast, those who know how to read and write in a Western fashion, maybe they've never been in the lake, never touched a stone (Chavajay, 2018, p.32)

¹³⁹ Antonio made this statement in reference to the artist Gonzalez brothers, who were the focus of his documentary film 'Miradas Bionicas' (Bionic Looks) (2017).

The alternative metric by which Benvenuto validates his parents is through their sensorial capacity (Chapter 5), something which is both unrecognised by, and incomprehensible to modernity:

Figure 68: Benvenuto Chavajay - *Piedras* (Stones) (2009)



My parents couldn't read or write [...] but they spoke with the stone, they felt the stone, they communicated with each other.

(Benvenuto Chavajay)

Camila Montalvo (2020b)

One clear manifestation of epistemic disobedience is Pedrano artists' attempts to break out of the modern 'equivocations' into which they have been forced. As de la Cadena (2015a) defines them, equivocations 'are a type of communicative disjuncture in which, while using the same words, interlocutors are not talking about the same thing and do not know this' (p.27).¹⁴⁰ In San Pedro, we can see the concepts of 'art' (and 'artist') as equivocations. 'Art' as a term does not exist in Tz'utujil (Camila Montalvo, 2020b; Iñigo Clavo, 2020), and the closest approximations have deep spiritual connotations. Reflecting this spiritual connection, Antonio Pichilla conducts ceremonies and makes offerings before producing his work, which he describes not as art, but rather *manifestaciones sagradas* (sacred displays).

Using de la Cadena's (2015b) phrasing, it could be said that Pedranos like Antonio ontologically *exceed* the narrower modern labels they are obliged to assume - they are *more than* artists but are forced into equivocation as such.¹⁴¹ Differing from de la Cadena's definition however, Pedrano artists know that 'art' is an equivocation, they accept it only because of colonial power relations, as Benvenuto Chavajay explains:

I have to talk about art so that the other can understand me [...] We have to accept the titles of others so that we can communicate with each other.

¹⁴⁰ The notion of 'controlled equivocations' was introduced by Viveiros de Castro (2004) but has since been appropriated by PO (e.g. Blaser, 2009a and de la Cadena, 2015a).

¹⁴¹ Similar circumstances also apply to some of San Pedro's poets and musicians.

Benvenuto however has attempted to break out of this equivocation through publicly defining himself as a *chunchero*, that is somebody who works with ‘chunches’ (a ‘thingy’ or a useless object) i.e. a ‘junkman’ (MADC, 2016). Antonio Pichilla similarly committed an epistemic disobedience when, to the surprise of many, he designated his mother as his official curator at a recent exhibition in Guatemala City. He explained that though she lacked a formal education, with 60 years of experience weaving textiles, she was much better suited to the role.

What’s in a Name?

Our names had a deep meaning and a reason for being, connected with the stars and the universe itself

(Viento Tuy Navichoc)

Pedranos are breaking out of equivocations, but they are also reclaiming the Indigenous names that have been suppressed as a result of modernity/coloniality’s epistemic violence. Historically, both the names of people and places were gradually hispanised due to colonisers’ inability to pronounce them. These names hold great significance, as can be seen in Cristobal Cholotio’s explanation of his surname:

Translated from Kaqchikel “Cholotio” is a trickle [...] that means my surname signifies a little piece of the lake [...] my name is part of the lake, my origin is part of the lake, so I am part of the lake.

The same is true of Tzutujil toponyms, which transmit critical environmental knowledge.¹⁴² As such, the reclamation of Indigenous names is more than just epistemic disobedience, it is epistemic restitution – a reclamation of the ancestral knowledge disavowed by modernity/coloniality. Figure 69 below depicts Benvenuto Chavajay’s performance ‘Ixtetelá’ (2016) in which he had his mother’s Indigenous surname tattooed below his navel. Her name, ‘Ixtetelá’ was hispanised to ‘Gonzalez’ decades before by a municipal functionary who couldn’t pronounce it. His performance sought to counter the epistemic violence that had been committed against her.

¹⁴² Similar to Basso’s (1996) description of the knowledge encoded in the landscape of the Western Apache.

Figure 69: 'Ixtetelá', performance art. Benvenuto Chavajay (2016)



Universes (2016)

On a larger scale, Tz'unun Ya' (San Pedro's precolonial name) is re-emerging through a community-wide movement to reinstate its use. Like the majority of the lakeside town, Tz'unun Ya', which poetically translates as 'water of the hummingbird', was hispanised and replaced with the name of an apostle, finally becoming 'San Pedro la Laguna' in the 19th century after various other transitions (Navichoc Sajquiy, 2007). Many Pedranos would like to see their community's original name officially restored because from their perspective 'San Pedro la Laguna' doesn't communicate anything about their community's uniqueness:¹⁴³

I want to recuperate the original name because it is unique, how many San Pedros are there in the world? There are loads! (Marlon Puac)

In reality San Pedro is a Catholic name, a European name, it's not of our people, the town of our people is Tz'unun Ya'. This is the revindication. (Juan Manuel)

A vocal group of Pedranos plan to raise the issue in COMUDE where it can be debated. Furthermore, many organisations in San Pedro have already employed Tz'unun Ya' in their titles, such as the local TV station (Figure 70), and the megacollector's opposition movement - Comunidad Tz'un Ya'.

Figure 70: San Pedro's TV station



TV Tz'unun Ya' (2018)

¹⁴³ And as one interviewee pointed out, 'San Pedro la Laguna' is also factually incorrect, Lake Atitlán is *not* a lagoon ('La Laguna').

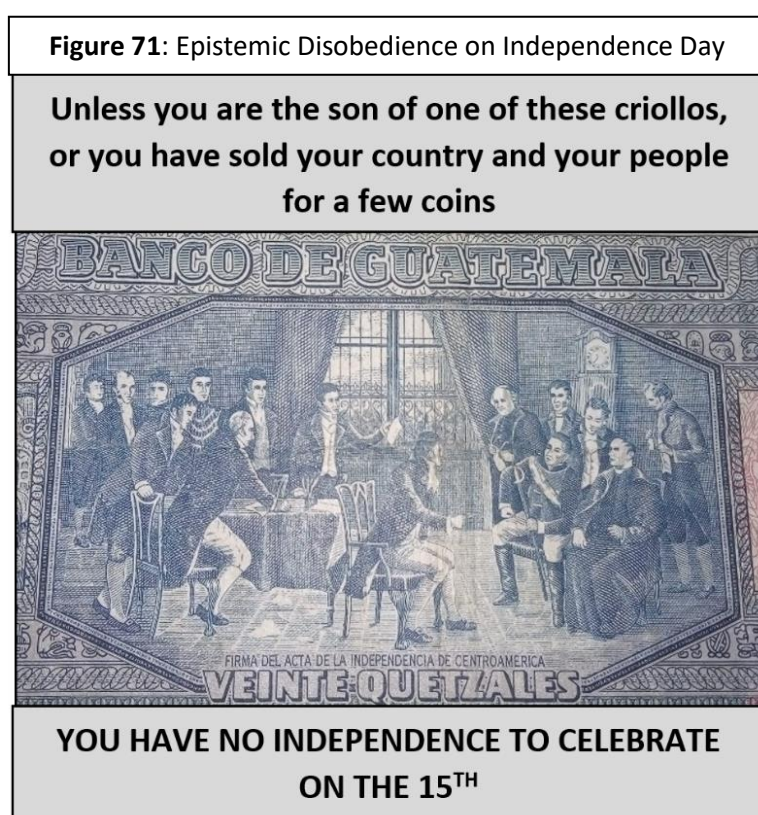
In reclaiming their names, Pedranos are also reclaiming their subjectivity to define history on their own terms:

It is important to recognise our true history, not as they have always explained it to us, but as what we really want to see it, because we have had a very systematic education with very outdated concepts to ensure that we continue to believe that this is the real story. (Marlon Puac)

The school tells you to memorise who conquered America, but America was never conquered, it was invaded (Manuel Chavajay)

In day-to-day conversations with Pedranos I became aware of just how widespread epistemic disobedience is. Like Manuel above, Pedranos universally spoke of the Spanish ‘Invasion’ rather than the ‘Conquest’ and they further refuted the notion that America was ‘discovered’ by Columbus. Every year during Independence Day celebrations on September 15th, many Pedranos take to Facebook to reject the notion that they have achieved Independence, as in the case of the meme widely shared in 2020 (Figure 71). Some Pedranos even reject the name of ‘Guatemala’ altogether in favour of alternatives like ‘Guatemaya’ or ‘Ixim Ulew’ (‘land of corn’).¹⁴⁴ Benvenuto Chavajay describes this process as ‘dusting off’:

They didn’t come to discover America, but to cover it [...] the colonial world covered us, what we are doing is removing that blanket, dusting it off and recognising many things



Calderon (2020)

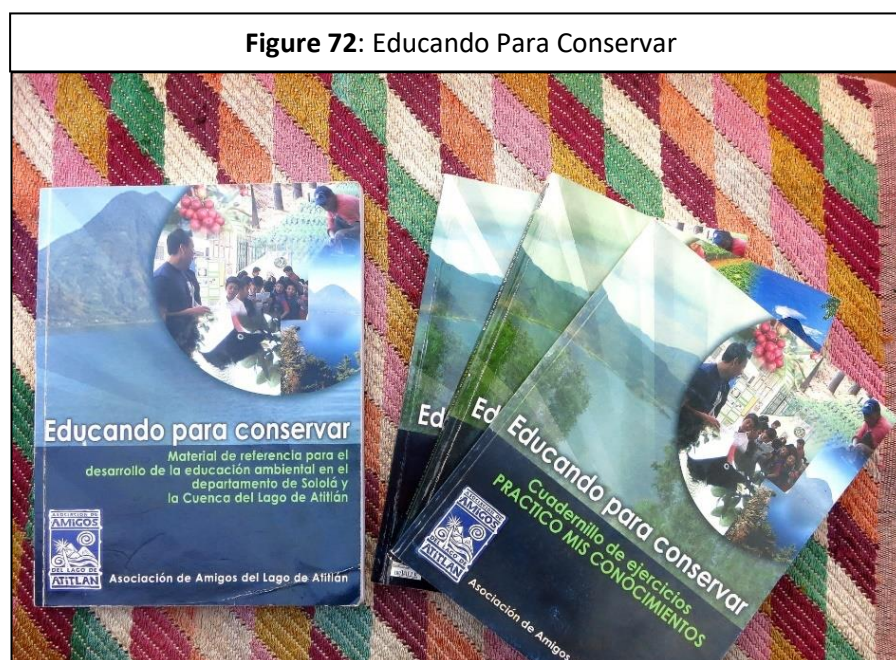
¹⁴⁴ ‘Guatemaya’ replaces the ‘mala’ (‘bad’) for ‘maya’, whereas ‘Ixim Ulew’ emphasises the importance of corn to the Maya (Huff, 2006).

3. Epistemic Restitution

San Pedro is unique, San Juan is unique, San Marcos is unique. In the USA each state has its own laws according to their customs, it should also be like this in Guatemala. We are pluricultural and multilingual. I'm not Mam, the Mam have their customs, they should make a law for them, and a law for Tz'utujiles.

(Domingo Tuch – president of San Pedro's Environment Committee)

As much as some Pedranos are committed to epistemic disobedience, there are limits to their efforts to assert their epistemic autonomy owing to the hegemonic power of the state. One useful illustration of this can be seen in the community's response to an environmental education curriculum – 'Educando Para Conservar' ('Education for Conservation'). The curriculum was designed by AALA, and they published a series of books to be used by students and teachers in schools throughout the entire department of Sololá (Figure 72). However, this has proved highly controversial in San Pedro, where a group of community leaders publicly rejected it.



Indiegogo (2017)

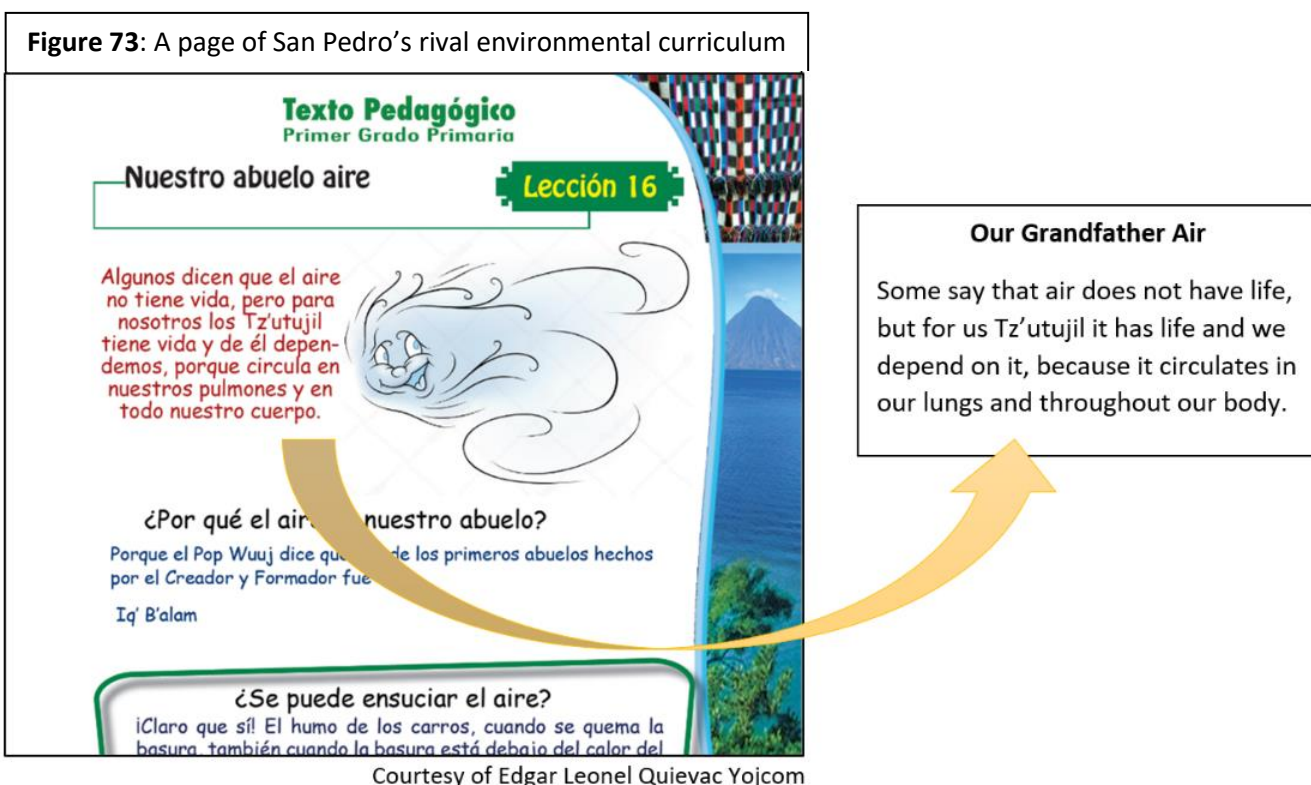
Although some Pedrano school directors support 'Educando Para Conservar' and implement it in their schools, most Pedranos I spoke to were strongly opposed to it, principally because of its failure to contextualise San Pedro's reality:

It's practically decontextualized [...] the educational material they have produced does not specify the local situation that is needed, and the situation in San Pedro specifically. (Leonel Quievac Yojcom)

In this sense, the curriculum can be understood as an assault on Pedranos' epistemic autonomy:

The problem is that practically it's removing what was our own reasoning to impose theirs. (Maggie Garcia – young Indigenous activist)

As a consequence, the municipality has commissioned their own rival environmental curriculum written from a Pedrano perspective. This alternative content is firmly grounded in San Pedro's particularities and their relational ontology. A cosmogonic perspective is imbued throughout (Figure 73), unlike in 'Educando Para Conservar' where the Mayan cosmovision is confined to a specific chapter.



AALA has taken Pedranos' actions as a challenge to their authority, as Leonel Quievac Yojcom, the author of the 'rival' curriculum explained:

AALA never made efforts to say, "How is your book, let's see it", on the contrary, they look at me as an enemy

In 2018, AALA successfully lobbied the Ministry of Education to make 'Educando Para Conservar' a mandatory requirement for every school in the department. When I brought this subject up with Anna Apolito, AALA's managing director, she bitterly remarked:

Remember also that all of our materials are approved by the Ministry of Education, it took a lot of time to do it. The fact that San Pedro is making its own material, equally it will have to be approved by the Ministry, because, well it's the job of the Ministry to say "Yes" or "No", not the mayor, nor the teachers.

The state's certification sets limits on Pedranos' aspirations to realise epistemic autonomy. As Pedro notes below, parents will be deterred from allowing their children to study at schools which lack the Ministry of Education's approved syllabus:

A school that uses the mayor's curriculum won't advance. Parents won't send their children to this school. The laws of Guatemala don't allow Indigenous people to do our own things, only their things, they always have themselves in mind. They will always teach in the schools what's agreeable to them, because if they let us learn and teach what is good for us, it is bad for them, they don't like it and won't allow it. (Pedro Oswaldo – law student)

The same circumstances underlie many other Pedrano attempts at epistemic restitution. For example, as I mentioned earlier, the local NGO Taa' Pi't attempts to offer an alternative to modern education. They provide children with scholarships for an experiential learning experience to connect them with their ancestrality, involving lessons outside of the classroom, swimming in the lake, or hiking to nearby sacred ceremonial sites. However, as one Pedrano put it:

Taa' Pi't do a lot, they break the education scheme a lot, the children learn many things there, but there is no certification from the Ministry of Education

Beyond the field of education, these circumstances demonstrate that epistemic self-determination is impossible without greater political autonomy. This explains why autonomist discourse is the key driver of Indigenous mobilisation in Guatemala today (Bastos Amigo, 2020). For example, the organisation Waqib' Kej (2015) (the Mayan National Coordination and Convergence) has advanced proposals for a plurinational state, and this was also adopted as the main campaign promise of Thelma Cabrera, the Indigenous presidential candidate and leader of the MLP (Chapter 4) (López and Garcia, 2019). In the 2019 elections, 56% of San Pedro's electorate voted for her plurinational platform, by far the highest result of any municipality in the department (TSE, 2019).¹⁴⁵ These elections also provide a useful reminder to the point that whilst revindication may be especially pronounced in San Pedro, these processes are unfolding on a national scale against the threat of neoliberal dispossession (Bastos Amigo, 2020). A clear example of this is the re-emergence of ancestral authorities across the country (Abbott, 2020; Way, 2016). Many were displaced by municipal governments over the course of the 20th century, but several have been recently re-established around the lake,¹⁴⁶ including San Pedro's in 2017.

The state itself was the instigator of this revindication movement through its 1995 'Accord on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples' which allowed Indigenous communities to practise their traditional forms of social organization (Abbott, 2020). It was further bolstered by the Municipal Code of 2002 which obliged municipal governments to 'recognise, respect and promote ancestral authorities [...] including their own forms of administrative functioning' (CGC, 2002). Even so, as Romero et al., (2018) note, the Municipal Code provides only weak recognition of ancestral

¹⁴⁵ With also one of the highest participation rates in the country (90%) (TSE, 2019).

¹⁴⁶ Santa Lucia Uatlán in 2015 (Joj Patzán, 2018), San Lucas Tolimán in 2019, and San José Chacayá in 2020.

authorities, and the concurrent Development Council Law which saw the establishment of COCODES actually makes it easier for municipal governments to ignore them in practice. They further criticise how ancestral authorities are referred to as only 'auxiliary authorities', highlighting that they are often excluded and marginalised by state institutions operating locally.

Despite this disparity, the re-establishment of ancestral authorities represents a great step forward, not just in the revindication of Indigenous political autonomy, but also their epistemic self-determination (Sieder, 2011). This is because of their principal function, which is to administer justice through the Mayan legal system (Romero et al., 2018; Tzul Tzul, 2015). As Hessbruegge and Ochoa Garcia (2011) state, 'Mayan Law is [...] incredibly diverse and shaped by local needs, preferences and history' (p.9), but it is unified by its grounding in the Mayan cosmovision, according to which the universe, nature and the human community are all part of an integrated order:

[Mayan] Law is an expression of this order. Its primary purpose is therefore to maintain communal harmony and equilibrium and not to guarantee the enjoyment of individual rights and entitlements (ibid, p.10).

The refounding of San Pedro's Elder Council was motivated with this explicit purpose in mind. Innocente Bocel, one its four *cargadores* (directors) explained to me how he saw the revindication of Mayan Law as key to more effectively counteracting the community's spiralling drug problem and rising crime levels from their own cosmovision (McAllister and Nelson, 2013). As Sieder (2011) argues, it is important to recognise that Mayan justice systems are neither harmonious nor static, especially in light of how Indigenous communities have been transformed by war, migration, and religious conversion. Even so, Hessbruegge and Ochoa Garcia (2011) point out that despite these historical processes, Indigenous communities often 'insist on the ethical, moral, and epistemological unity of Mayan law and perceive their work as an effort to recover, rediscover, and strengthen this' (p.8). This observation is accurate in San Pedro's case, and can be discerned in the wording of the act which re-established the Elder Council (Bocel Roquel, 2013):

*The Mayan legal system has not been extinguished, it is there hidden in anonymity
The Mayan legal system suffered a severe rupture due to the imposition of the Spanish legal system during the invasion in 1492 [...] The savageries committed by priests, bishops and the Spanish army, were the cause of the deterioration of the Mayan legal system, today we cling to the reconstruction of that legendary justice through the lived experience of the elders of the town to regain the application of Mayan justice.
[...] It is essential that the autochthonous society recovers its legal autonomy*

As Bastos Amigo (2020) notes, the prevalent autonomist discourse of Indigenous

mobilisation in Guatemala tends to prefigure ancestral authorities as anti-state entities in this way, even though they in reality they were only ever granted ‘controlled autonomous power’ (Esquit, 2014, p.27) by colonial powers. Nevertheless, the symbolism of the Elder Council’s refounding is significant as a source of moral authority in the megacollector conflict (Part 2), and this wider national revindication movement in which it is imbedded has largely succeeded in gaining *recognition* of Indigenous autonomy. However, these refounded ancestral authorities have been less successful in their mission to gain *political power*, since they remain subordinate to municipal governance. These same circumstances apply to their epistemic authority, since the Mayan legal system is still treated as inferior to the Western justice system (Xón Riquiac, 2018). In 2016, national efforts were directed towards achieve greater epistemic parity through a bill for Constitutional reform, but this failed due to the lobbying of CACIF, which argued that parallel legal systems would undermine legal certainty and generate confusion (Rocha, 2017). This argument of ‘incompatibility’ is often used by the ruling elites as a defence against revindication efforts, and it presents a formidable obstacle to the Indigenous communities’ desires for epistemic and political autonomy.

It was this realisation which spurred on one of San Pedro most significant revindications – the formation of the CICC - *Centro de Investigacion Cientifica y Cultural* (Scientific and Cultural Research Centre) (Figure 74). Founded in 2014, the CICC is the only Indigenous-led research centre in the entire department, and various Indigenous linguists, anthropologists, scientists, and educators are affiliated to it. Below, its founder the Pedrano mathematician Domingo Yocom explains how the CICC was borne out of the very argument of ‘incompatibility’ that Guatemala’s elites use to deny Indigenous self-determination:

Talking about the logic of our grandparents is difficult and inoperable for our universities because the formal structure doesn’t permit it or simply because they choose to shield themselves with the need of international standards that claim to form competent citizens for the industry. (Yocom, 2015, p.16).

Figure 74: The CICC



Rather than waiting for an inclusion which he knew would never come, Domingo created the CICC as an alternative locus of knowledge production. The CICC acts to restore Indigenous

subjectivity and achieve epistemic restitution, or what Santos (2020) terms as ‘cognitive justice’. As Domingo explains further below:

The initial idea of the centre was to train people that investigate their own culture, because all the foreigners have always taken advantage of us [...] And so I said, “No, we have to train people for whom this is their own culture, and so that they explain their culture themselves”

Gaspar Yatáz Pop, a young Atiteco mathematician and CICC affiliate affirmed this objective:

The centre for us is a space to share our vision and try to create projects immersed in our culture.

The CICC thus marks a shift in the long-established trend of outsiders speaking for Pedranos and of Pedranos being treated as objects of outsiders’ interpretations.¹⁴⁷ Still, it is worth reiterating an earlier point - revindication is *not* a novel process. Luis Batz, the Pedrano historiographer whose poem ‘Flight of the Virgins’ featured earlier, has for decades been writing texts about San Pedro and its history from an endogenous perspective (Batz, 1980; 1991; 2000). What *is* novel about this current moment however is that for the first time, the CICC provides Pedranos with a formal means to *institutionalising* their epistemic restitution.

A Heterogenous Movement

Now that I have explained the various modes by which revindication in San Pedro is articulated, it is important to shed light on some of its extant tensions. As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, revindication is not a discrete movement so much as a surge of processes. These processes share a similar aim – to achieve greater political and epistemic autonomy for San Pedro. However, their form is not homogenous. I have privileged San Pedro’s intelligentsia and contemporary artists within my discussion, but there are both internal cleavages within this group as well as in relation to the wider community. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explore this heterogeneity in the hopes of providing a more representative account of revindication.

In Chapter 2 I explained how my attachment to PO led me to essentialise Pedranos’ accounts and over-emphasise ontological difference. In much the same way, after encountering MCD, I became fixated on understanding revindication only through a lens of decolonisation. Take for instance this extract of my interview with the poet Pedro Chavajay:¹⁴⁸

Me: *When you say “re-form autonomy”, are you speaking about decolonisation?*
Pedro Chavajay: *Look, you say decolonising because it is a term that one can apply. What I am saying is that what I want is a return of our autonomy, and that is maybe a very simple word, to decentralise power. I don’t like to use [the term] decolonising.*

¹⁴⁷ E.g. Tax (1937; 1946); Paul (1950); Paul and Paul (1976); Rogoff (2011); Oertling (2021) and of course myself.

¹⁴⁸ Whose poetry attempts to communicate Mayan philosophy on its own terms (Chavajay 2007; 2012; 2016).

Despite Pedro's opposition to the notion of 'decolonisation', throughout our interview, I kept trying to steer the conversation back to my own reading of the situation. It was only several interviews later that I stopped trying to fix Pedranos into an MCD narrative. By then I had come to realise that although San Pedro's revindication movement is understood by some Pedranos as decolonisation, this is something which is also contested.

In a later public event,¹⁴⁹ Pedro further expanded on his opposition to the notion of decolonising:

Our culture already has a value, you have to forget that burden that we feel injured. I think that it's a burden that has to be left behind. It no longer has value, that was in the past, and the past no longer exists. We are in the here and now, our culture must be rebuilt from now on.

His opinion was also shared by Domingo Yocom (the president of the CICC) during our interview:

I don't need to decolonise, I don't need to, and why? Because if I say that I will decolonise myself, I am assuming that I was colonised, but I have never assumed that I was colonised, I don't feel colonised, so I speak [instead] of relative epistemology.

Pedro and Domingo don't deny that revindication is occurring in San Pedro, but they don't understand it in terms of decolonisation. As I identified in Chapter 2, there is potential for MCD's notion of decoloniality to become oppressive, and I think this point is pertinent here. Even though Mignolo and Walsh (2018) stress that there are many ways to do and conceive of decoloniality, and that their framework is only an *option*, my reading of MCD led me to neglect alternatives, at least initially. Although I stand by my decision to employ an MCD framework, these circumstances highlight the importance of ensuring that MCD does not drown out alternative local expressions.

Besides these academic contestations, there is a more obvious disjuncture between San Pedro's intelligentsia and the wider community. This is especially true of San Pedro's contemporary artists, who are probably the individuals most committed to epistemic disobedience in San Pedro. However, their work often fails to reach a wider Pedrano audience, as the contemporary artist Antonio Pichilla points out:

If a piece of work does really well, it goes to a biennale abroad, a museum or a private collection. With respect to raising awareness, who can see the work in a museum in Venice? Not the people here! But what we want is that the raising of awareness comes from here.

More than just a question of access, there is a lack of local interest in artists' decolonial work, reflected in the low attendance at the local contemporary art exhibitions and talks. This is largely due to the conceptual nature of their work and the intellectualised vocabulary of decoloniality that it employs. Matias, a well-known artist of naïve paintings for instance explained to me his difficulty in understanding Antonio Pichilla's conceptual pieces:

¹⁴⁹ Sandra Xinico Batz's racism conference (Chapter 4).

[San Pedro's contemporary artists] take a dirty sandal and exhibit it because that is what they studied, but only they understand because they studied the reason behind it. Antonio Pichilla has abstract textiles, I like them, but I don't understand it, what it means. Only he understands what it means.

While a constant stream of international curators and art magazine journalists make their pilgrimage to San Pedro to interview its acclaimed decolonial artists (Camila Montalvo, 2020b; Cornejo, 2013; Iñigo Clavo, 2020), these artists' messages of revindication aren't often transmitted to the community at large. There is a dissonance between their intellectual project of decoloniality and its vernacular expression in the wider community.¹⁵⁰ Most community leaders speak about the defence of territory, not delinking. Such tensions came to the fore at one of Ajpop Tinamit's assemblies I attended. After the main presentation, David, a young community leader from San Marcos stood up and started speaking about the importance of decolonising ourselves and delinking from modernity/coloniality. He spoke energetically for several minutes, meanwhile the other, mainly older assembly participants looked on in confusion. An exasperated Pedrana community leader to my right nudged me and grumbled that nobody knew what he was going on about.

Her confusion stems from the disjuncture between theory and praxis that MCD scholars have been accused of neglecting (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012).¹⁵¹ For older Pedranos, there is no need for an overly intellectualised vocabulary of decoloniality, they have been defending Indigenous sovereignty long before the decolonial turn:

The intellectuals start from top to bottom, but the elders start from the bottom up, so there are two types of currents that will never merge [...] the majority of intellectuals are in another orbit, they are in another world. (Pedro Chavajay)

Rivera Cusicanqui (2012; 2014) argues that this disjuncture can 'neutralise' Indigenous political mobilisation, and she recommends that we ignore the word games of high-brow intellectuals in favour of connecting with the direct language of subalterns. I agree with her to an extent. It is certainly notable that none of San Pedro's contemporary artists appear to be engaged in the megacollector's opposition movement. However, it is not a case of either-or. It is possible to both utilise MCD *and* to 'engage with knowledges otherwise that stand further removed from the language of academics' as Blaser (2010, p.17) suggests.

There are a group of Pedranos who already do this successfully, the art collective 'Canal Cultural' who were introduced earlier in the chapter. Manuel Chavajay, one of its principal members produces higher brow conceptual work (p.115; p.94), but also banksy-esque work (p.112) which connects to a wider audience. He and other members of the collective are well-versed in MCD, but

¹⁵⁰ See Copeland (2018) for a discussion of Ixil peasants' aversion to the intellectualised concept of Buen Vivir.

¹⁵¹ But it also speaks to a tension which has arisen as a result of social change, and the increased participation of young people in community politics (Bastos Amigo, 2020).

they collectively translate their intellectualised understandings into the community's local lexicon and political praxis. Besides their murals of elders, they have also painted several other murals which communicate straightforward messages about the importance of defending Pedrano sovereignty from outside interests, as in the examples below against mining and the privatisation of water. Unlike San Pedro's conceptual artists, Canal Cultural envisage art as a 'transformative social practice' (Nabulime and McEwan, 2011) which prioritises engagement with the wider community. For example, they organise painting workshops with children and often include them in mural painting. Due to this grounded and praxical relation to the wider community, Canal Cultural is arguably more pertinent to San Pedro's epistemic restitution than the high-flying careers of its more famous conceptual artists.

Figure 75: Canal Cultural's Murals

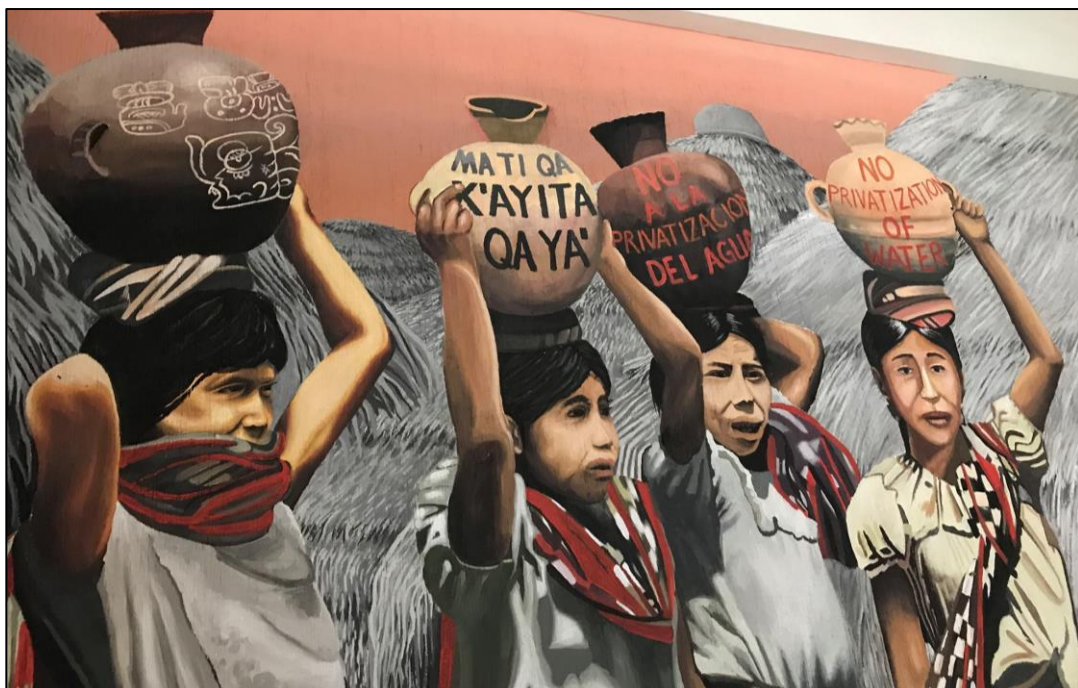


Figure 76: Canal Cultural painting in the *cancha*



Photo courtesy of Josue Samol (2018)

Conclusion

In this section I have outlined the various dynamic modes of revindication happening in San Pedro. As I will discuss in Part 2, this context is important as these same modes can be discerned in Pedranos' opposition to the megacollector. In this chapter I further highlighted the tensions inherent to the revindication movement, showing how some strands of revindication are more impactful than others. In particular, my analysis has shown the importance of 'think[ing] theory through from the political praxis of subaltern groups' (Escobar, 2007, p.185). In the next chapter, I will build on this by concentrating more squarely on the community's praxical efforts at revindication, especially as they relate to Lake Atitlán.

Chapter 7: Ontological Ambiguities

While Chapter 6 centred on the revindication movement's opposition to modernity/coloniality, this chapter will focus on revindication's pluriversal objectives. In particular, I will utilise an ontological perspective to critique PO's over-emphasis on ontological difference, by instead demonstrating how revindication is premised on ontological ambiguities. This will be achieved through focusing on transmodern/ch'ixi worlding practices in community life. In the first half of this chapter, I will explore a number of formal and informal expressions of ontologically ambiguous revindication in San Pedro. The remainder of the chapter will focus on these same processes, but as they relate specifically to Pedranos' relationality with the lake. This discussion will illustrate how the lake is more than just a resource to Pedranos, thereby providing critical context to how the megacolector conflict is more than a mere a resource conflict. This chapter thus provides a natural bridge to Part 2.

Ontological Ambiguities in Community Life

In May 2018, a curious stone structure slowly began to take form in front of San Pedro's Catholic church. Over the following weeks, the sound of workmen's hammering and chiseling could be heard above the usual din of tuk-tuks and market vendors. Curious onlookers watched as little by little, the structure rose higher and higher. Finally, on June 21st - the summer solstice, the completed structure was inaugurated with a ceremonial mass and blessing with hundreds of community members in attendance:

Figure 77: The mass for the kumuk's inauguration



The 'kumuk' - as the structure is known, is not exactly a new addition to San Pedro's townscape. It is a copy of the previous kumuk which had existed for centuries before it was demolished in the 1960s. The CICC, which coordinated the kumuk's reconstruction, explicitly framed its inauguration as a revival of Pedrano history and ancestrality. In this way, the kumuk appears as a physical manifestation of the revindication movement. However, as I will show, it also embodies the inherent ontological ambiguities of revindication, the entangled 'partial connections' (de la Cadena, 2015a) which exist between modernity and Pedranos' relational ontology.

The kumuk's reconstruction was the brainchild of Domingo Yocom, the president of CICC. The day after its inauguration, I attended a public presentation which he gave to explain its deeper significance. At first glance, with its church-front location and its stone crucifix, the kumuk appears to be a staunchly Christian structure. Indeed, it does have a great significance to Catholics, and it was rebuilt primarily through the support of San Pedro's *cofradías* (Catholic brotherhoods). Yet Domingo explained that it also plays a non-Christian spiritual, astronomical and geopolitical role.¹⁵² The cross is a Mayan symbol predating the imposition of Christianity (Bell, 2012a), and its form relates more to its previous use as a time marker to trace the passage of the sun.¹⁵³ Incredibly, this former significance has been revived. Domingo explained in a recent interview (in Camila Montalvo, 2020a, p.74) how it is still acts as a conduit to the worlding of Pedranos' relational ontology:

Months later [after its inauguration], we [went] to put out these candles. [...] The [brotherhood of the cross made] a flower necklace. But the most interesting fact is that they came to salute the zenith as they used to. This was not planned. And seeing all the Elders there made my eyes water

[...] People appropriated the original meaning of the kumuk for the Tz'utujil system of thought. Proof of this is the fact that people kept saluting the sun, even for years after this space had disappeared



TN23 (2019)

¹⁵² It is located at the centre of cosmic energy in the town, and at the cross section of San Pedro's four *cantones*.

¹⁵³ Its precise height of 260 centimetres mirrors the 260 days of the Mayan calendar.

Domingo suggests that the kumuk embodies the entanglement of different worlds. On the one hand, the Catholic priest views it as a shield for Catholicism, but it is also a focus of ancestral spirituality:

I do not know if people can see the difference or if they are even more confused. What is certain is that there are two discourses on the same object, which is impressive, and it could be more than two. I would say this is syncretism. (Yocom in Camila Montalvo, 2020a, p.79).

The kumuk thus unsettles the notion of clearly defined ontological difference - it is a focus of Catholicism *and* ancestral spirituality, one doesn't negate the other. Its syncretic religiosity is commonplace in the Guatemalan Highlands, where such practices have been performed since the Spanish Invasion (Tarn and Pretchel, 1997). For example, in his discussion of Santiago Atitlán, Carlsen (1997) highlights the Mayan core paradigm of 'Jaloj-K'exoj' as a mechanism by which Atitecos have subversively integrated intrusive foreign elements into their culture.¹⁵⁴ As he states:

Over time virtually no aspect of Atiteco culture was to be left untouched by European contact. Nonetheless, reflecting cultural resilience and transformative capacity, most aspects could be traced to the pre-Conquest past. (ibid, p.5).

Religious syncretism of this nature is widespread across Latin America (Beyer, 2009; Montero, 2018), and indeed in many other parts of the world (e.g. Ezenweke and Kanu, 2013; Picard and Madinier, 2011).

The longer I spent in San Pedro, the more often my binary way of thinking was challenged by ontological ambiguities below the surface of community life. In his research in Siberia, Mézáros (2020) notes that Sakha individuals often shift between different realities, for them 'basic ontological assumptions do not necessarily form an integrated and univocal system' (p.3). The same is true of some Pedranos, as I discovered in a conversation with Luis Xet Coche, a respected *ajq'ij*. He explained how some Evangelicals would surreptitiously seek out his services, but only after dark so their neighbours wouldn't notice. Luis too demonstrated this ability to shift between different realities. When I asked his opinion about the cause of the lake's rising water level, he first posited a cosmological reason (a new cosmological cycle), and afterwards a Western scientific reason (climate change). From his perspective, these explanations are not mutually exclusive.

I encountered another interesting ambiguity in the form of a couple and their young daughter who I lived with for several months whilst improving my Spanish. The mother is from a strict Evangelical background, and her husband from a devout Catholic family. However, in turning to *costumbre* (traditional Mayan ceremonies and ancestral spirituality), something neither one was raised in, they have forged a new path for their family, a sort of hybrid 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994).

¹⁵⁴ The most well-known example being the cult of Maximón (Bell, 2012b).

They could therefore be said to be revindicating ancestrality through their daughter, Aweex.¹⁵⁵ Yet this revindication is not a disavowal of Christianity, as they still encourage Aweex to attend both Evangelical and Catholic services with her grandparents. Such ambivalent circumstances blur the limitations of existing boundaries, demonstrating a mode of articulation that engenders a new possibility (Bhabha, 1994). Even so, hybridity implies fusion, but as Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) notes in her discussion of *ch'ixi*, such worlds may not necessarily completely fuse or meld. Aweex could embody a *chi'ixi* sensibility insofar as the different worlds she inhabits coexist 'without complete fusion of elements from different realities' (Burman, 2017, p.935).

Although such ontological ambiguities abound in San Pedro, the notion of clearly defined ontological difference continues to be attractive to many, myself included.¹⁵⁶ There were however a few Pedranos who notably challenged this notion of a strictly defined modernity:

What we call for example, 'Western culture' is not Western culture. We are wrong, because we know that it doesn't come from there. It comes from the Egyptians, a little from the Greeks, a little from the Arabs. (Domingo Yocom)

Or ancestrality:

We have to understand that there is a mix of traditions, customs, and habits that people express as if they were Maya, but the reality is that they're no longer Maya. (Chico Puac)

For Chico, this hybridity is not syncretism (as Domingo asserted in relation to the *kumuk*), because in his view, 'pure' ancestrality no longer exists as such:¹⁵⁷

So it isn't syncretism, because syncretism is very clear, it's as if there is oil with water together, and they don't mix. Syncretism is manifestations of Mayan culture interspersed with manifestations of an external, foreign cultural character [...] but [there] are no longer original [expressions] from the Mayan cosmovision, philosophy, epistemology or axiology and the taxonomic forms that the Maya classify their vision of their environment [...]. There is a mix, and they call it 'our culture, our cosmovision'. It's not true.

Following this explanation, Chico warned me about my own discussion of ancestrality in my thesis:

You must be careful in drawing conclusions, to affirm that "this is Mayan culture" and "this is Mayan thought", in saying, "It's that a member of the Elder Council of San Pedro told me this or told me this or that". This isn't trustworthy, because it's likely that their thoughts are also a mix of everything.

¹⁵⁵ A Tz'utujil name which translates as 'young corn seedling'.

¹⁵⁶ As with my initial tendency to erase or play down references to Christianity in discussions of Pedranos' relationality with the lake (Chapter 2).

¹⁵⁷ This also goes for Pedranos themselves, who are noted for being lighter-skinned and taller than neighbouring Indigenous communities due to likely Spanish admixture at some point during colonisation (Tax, 1937; Paul, 1950).

It was only on confronting my own essentialist tendencies that I was finally able to grasp Chico's point. Much of what is presented as ontologically distinct is, under closer analysis, much more ambivalent. As MacNeill (2014b) states:

Contemporary Maya cosmovision is an evolving discourse that has been co-created from ancient Mayan texts, strong oral tradition, and formalization by Western anthropologists and indigenous Guatemalan linguists [...] through relations with the international indigenous rights movement. (p.22)

With this insight, we can resist the temptation to assume San Pedro's revindication movement as an ontological conflict between non-modern ancestrality and modern 'contamination' (Chapter 5). The reality is more complex, as revindication is also characterised by ontological ambiguities, and this is most clearly seen when its objectives are more closely examined.

Transmodern Objectives

In Chapter 6 I explained how some Pedranos are challenging modernity/coloniality through acts of epistemic disobedience. But despite this seemingly antagonistic stance, a closer examination of their objectives reveals a more conciliatory approach than supposed by MCD and its concept of 'delinking', which Mignolo's (2018a) defines as:

using the imaginary of modernity rather than being used by it. [...] Delinking entails a shift toward using instead of being used. It proposes to delink from the decolonial entanglement with modernity/coloniality (p.146/147).

Many Pedranos do, as Mignolo suggests, emphasise the importance of *using* rather than *being used* by modernity (Einbinder and Morales, 2020):

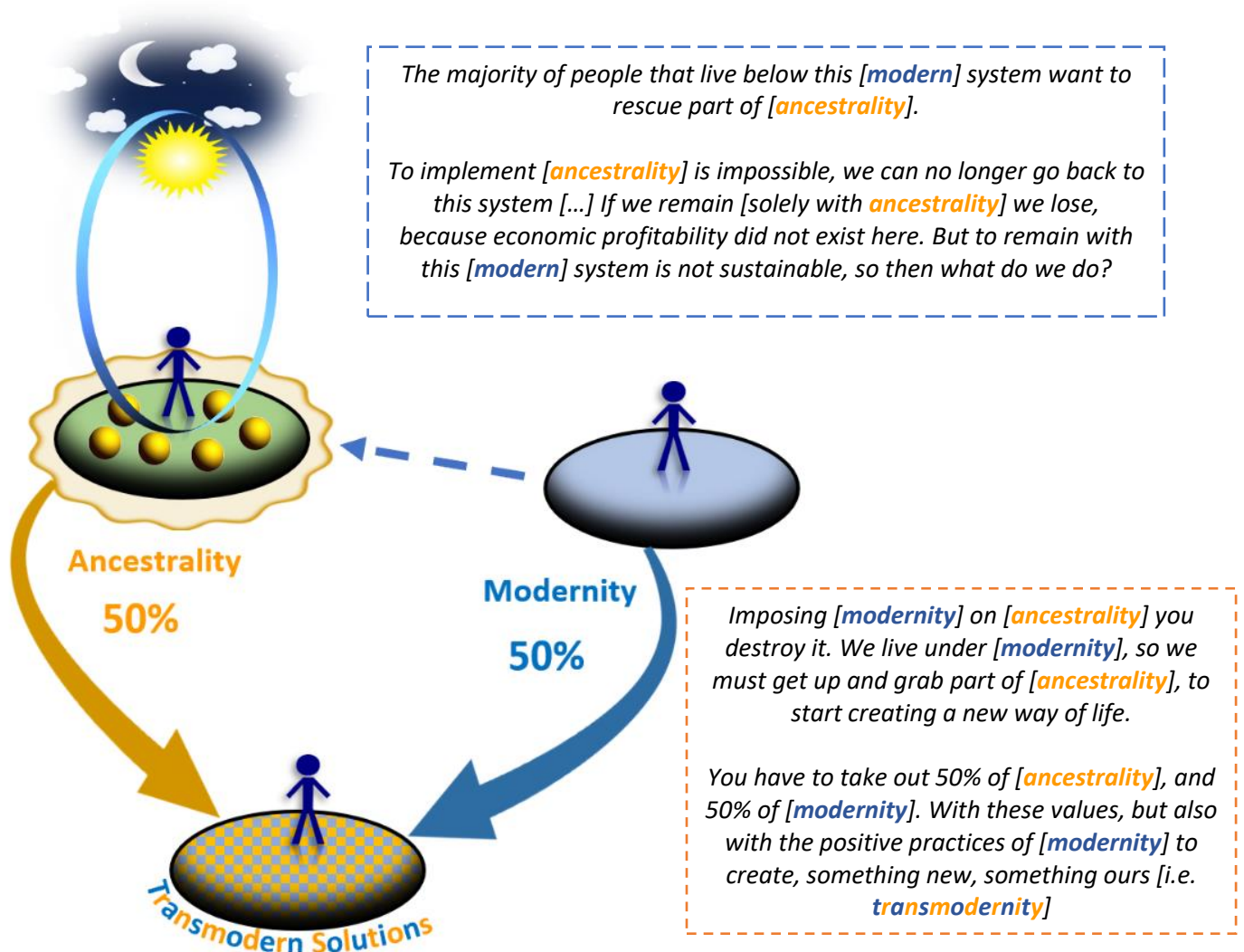
I accept globalization but globalization shouldn't give me orders. No! I have to support my culture. I accept globalization, I have the Internet in my house, but this system serves to educate me. (Domingo Tuch – president of San Pedro's Environment Committee)

However, they did not share Mignolo's notion of a wholesale rejection of modernity. By and large, Pedranos explained revindication as a means to *mitigating* modernity's destructive effects and ensuring their community's 'futurity' (Escobar, 2018). Their opinions are thus more suggestive of Dussel's (2012) notion of transmodernity and its vision to *transcend* modernity/coloniality.

Dussel (2012) explains transmodernity as a 'future-orientated project' which aims to reconstruct modernity from 'below' by assuming its 'positive moments' and merging them with 'critical elements' of non-modern cultures. While only some of San Pedro's contemporary artists mentioned the concept of transmodernity explicitly, I found its basic premise reflected in the descriptions of many more Pedranos who argued that modernity would better serve the community if it were reorientated by ancestral values. This view was most eloquently articulated by Cristobal Cholutio, the director of San Juan's Environment Committee, whose conceptualisation of ancestral

values was displayed in Chapter 5. He drew out a model of his transmodern ideas which has been adapted in Figure 78 below:¹⁵⁸

Figure 78: Cristobal's transmodern vision for the community



Cristobal explains that it is impossible and undesirable to return to San Pedro's ancestral past because modernity's impacts are permanent, and there is no way to revive the ancestral practices which have already disappeared. However, he does believe it is possible to reinstate ancestral ethics:

So I can manage businesses, but from my cosmovision, with environmental, social, cultural and community responsibility, [...] This is what I see [...] If we had a politics that grabbed part of this and part of that, it would be ideal.

¹⁵⁸ He discussed the situation in terms of 'modern' and 'traditional systems', which I have interpreted as 'modernity' and 'ancestrality'.

Cristobal's view was expressed by several Pedranos:

I say to people that we need to look behind us. It's not to go backwards, the terminology shouldn't be confused. To go backwards is damaging, but to re-encounter ourselves again, we will have a better world (Viento Tuy Navichoc)

We need to re-start, we need to take other things from the ancestors to be able to move forward. (Josué Samol – artist and photographer)

It's necessary to have a model that is born locally and that Western knowledges contribute to as well, and to combine them [...] that fusion makes it function better. (Marlon Puac)

In this way, while Pedranos aim for a sort of decolonial 're-existence' (Walsh, 2018), they see this possibility realised through the fusion of modernity and ancestrality in an ontologically ambiguous (transmodern) fashion.¹⁵⁹ With this ontological insight we can see therefore that the 'epistemic restitution' discussed in Chapter 6 is simultaneously a form of 'epistemic reconstitution' (Mignolo, 2018a).

Of course, Pedranos' transmodern propositions aren't just hypothetical, they are already taking place in the community. Healthcare is a notable example in which Pedranos are often pragmatically required to negotiate a balance between modern and ancestral medicinal practices. The Pedrano approach is not a case of either-or, rather the two systems are seen to supplement one another in an *ad hoc* fashion, often according to economic circumstance:

I believe we have to fuse the scientific part with the ancestral part. It's not only to accept the ancestral, because it could be that you need a surgical operation, and a curandero can't do this, so the idea way is to join them together. (Antonio Pichilla)

When somebody is ill, we can't just be asking God to take care of us, medicine is good too. Equally, I consider that technological and scientific issues should not exceed us or come to undermine the issue of cosmogonic attitudes, but that they are combined. (Marta Rocche – community leader).¹⁶⁰

Above, Marta stresses that within this transmodern fusion, modernity should not undermine ancestrality. In doing so, she draws attention to another key aspect of the revindication movement - its pluriversal aspiration to horizontalize relations between different worlds.

A Pluriversal Destination

If transmodernity is the vehicle, then the pluriverse is the destination for San Pedro's revindication movement. Like Marta above, many Pedranos expressed their desire for a horizontalization of relations between worlds:

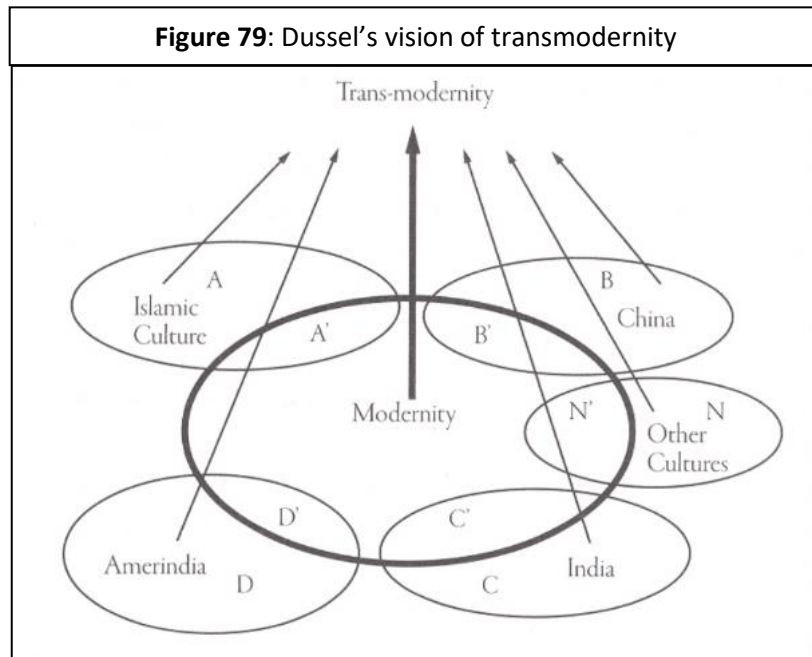
¹⁵⁹ This is what Einbinder and Morales (2020) term as 'development from within' or 'endogenous development'.

¹⁶⁰ Leader of the Pedrano women's group 'Movimiento de Mujeres Tz'utujiles Ixkeem'.

We can't think that there is a single, absolute way of thinking, no! We can't fall into dogma [...] You have your instrument, I have my instrument, we are members of the same cosmic orchestra, each person should play their instrument to live happily. (Chico Puac)

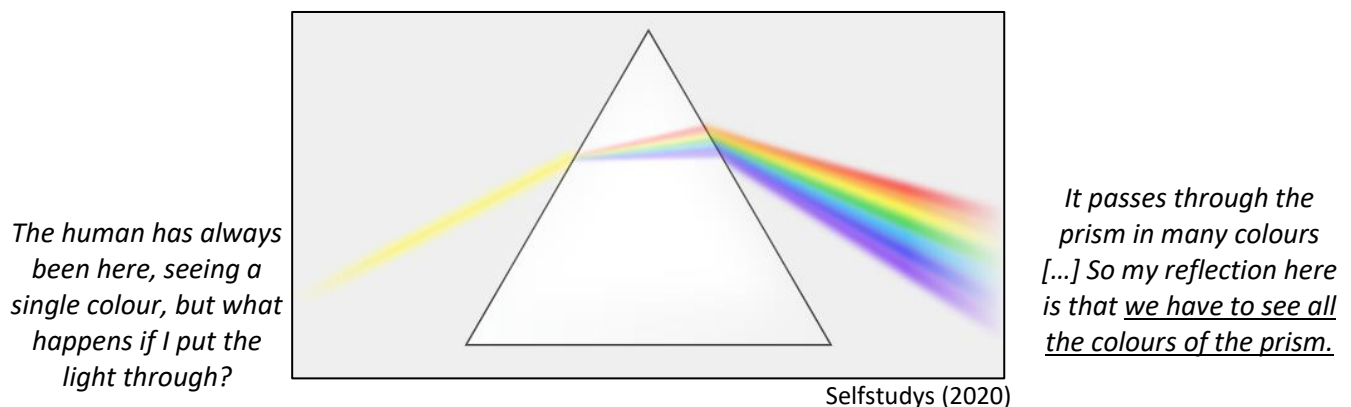
I'm not in opposition, I respect a lot all the rhythms of the world, so long as they respect us. (Tata Pedro)

With horizontal relations established, the idea is that all worlds can progress to this pluriversal destination together, as Dussel's (2012) model of transmodernity depicts below:



Dussel (2012, p.44)

A key point of the pluriverse is that it does not need to be created but *recognised*, because the pluriverse already exists. The mathematician Domingo Yocom helped me realise this during our interview through the metaphor of the prism:¹⁶¹



¹⁶¹ Although he framed his ideas in terms of 'epistemological relativism' rather than the pluriverse.

The main obstacle to making ‘all the colours of the prism’ visible is the OWW’s universalising claims (Chapter 2), which as Marta stressed earlier, tend to undermine ancestrality. The PO and MCD literatures offer no solutions to this conundrum, as I critiqued in Chapter 2, they rely on abstract notions of the pluriverse and have not sufficiently fleshed out what it means through ethnography (Oslender, 2019). However, in this section I aim to show how Pedranos are solving this problem themselves through existing initiatives and future proposals for the community. I will pay particular attention to younger Pedranos, a cohort whom ontologists are accused of neglecting (Hornborg, 2017; Revilla-Minaya, 2019).

Discussions of the pluriverse emerged in conversations with Pedranos on a variety of topics. For example, Otoniel discussed it in the context of grocery shopping, when he compared the modern practice of using plastic bags for packaging versus the ancestral practice of using *maxán* leaves:

It’s like saying, “I use a plastic bag, but I use it for a year” - that is a publicity proposal for capitalism. And for the Indigenous person to say, “I use leaves for my products to generate life”. At the same time [these different ideas] don’t clash, but only when they’re managed correctly.

As Otoniel notes, it is possible to reach the same outcome (less damage to the environment) by following either a modern or an ancestral logic. These ‘ontological disagreements’ (de la Cadena, 2015b) don’t matter as long as they are, as Otoniel stresses, ‘managed correctly’. Clues as to what this correct management involves emerged in various other interviews. Cristobal for instance suggested that the pluriverse is less about the toleration of difference, than its active embrace:

[It would mean] for foreigners to say “welcome” in your language, but also for them to make you feel welcome in your language (Cristobal Cholotio)

These opinions imply modernity’s sense of superiority as one of the main barriers to parity between worlds. As I discussed in Chapter 4, modern superiority is reproduced in many different facets of society, but especially through modern education. As such, some Pedranos suggest reforms to education as key to realising the pluriverse. For example, the community leader and former-governmental educational reformer, Chico Puac, explained that he believed the only way to counter modern universality was to put an end to the cosmetic treatment of ancestrality in school curricula. He drew out an equation which he suggested should be implemented in school planning, and also several other components of society (families, community organisations and municipalities):

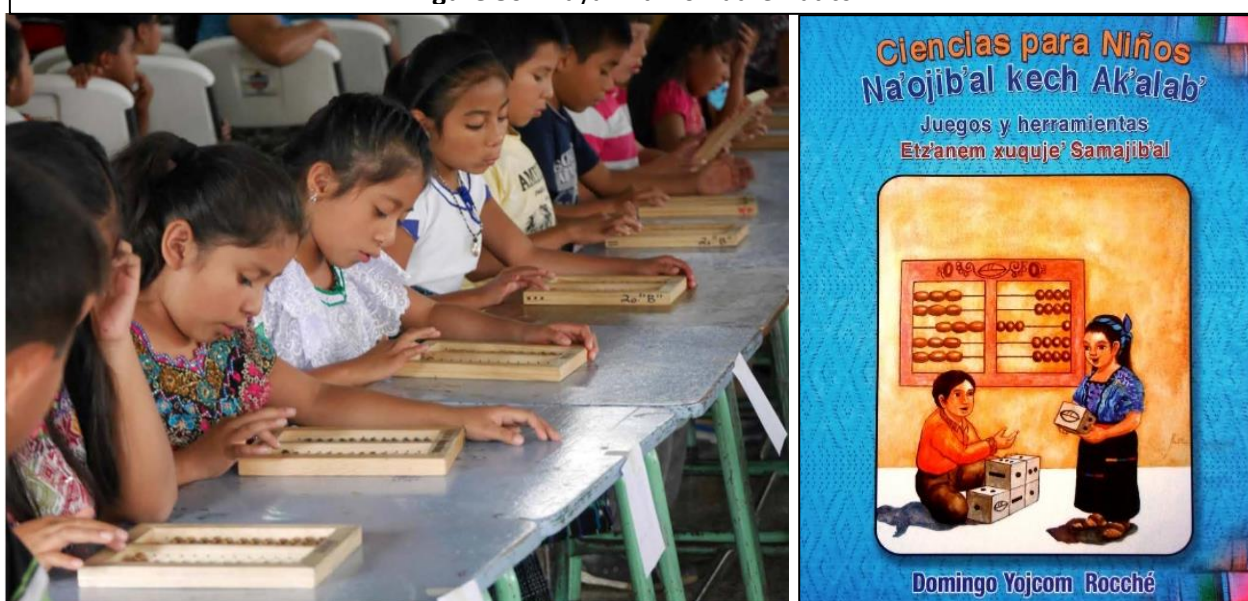
MC (Mayan culture) + IC (Indigenous culture) + NC (National culture) + WC (World culture)

Chico explained that in this shared model, there is respect for diversity, because these cultures:

do not contradict or counteract one another, they are additive not subtractive, so that they can progress together from their cosmovision. [This model would show] how to respect European culture, but also ensure that European culture lets us develop our original thinking.

While Chico's model is hypothetical, in San Pedro there have already been some initiatives directed towards this goal. Through the efforts of the mathematician Domingo Yocom, Mayan 'ethnomathematics' (mathematics from a Mayan epistemological perspective) is now being taught in Pedrano schools with learning aids such as the Mayan abacus and smart phone applications (Figure 80). Mayan ethnomathematics doesn't disavow 'Western' mathematics but recognises that affirmative action is required to decentre Western primacy (Yocom, 2021).

Figure 80: Mayan Ethnomathematics



CICC (2020)

This affirmative approach towards ancestry is to a certain degree being institutionalised in the town. I discussed this subject with Mauricio Méndez, the mayor of San Pedro, and he expressed it like so:

It's about rescuing [ancestrality], or not really rescuing, because [ancestrality] is already there, it's rather to regain an ancestral structure.

However, this 'regaining' of an ancestral structure is arguably most effective in organic and informal settings, and I realised this through encountering the youth's street culture. Appearances can be deceiving, and when I first arrived in San Pedro, I looked upon the graffitied alleyways and the male youth's gangsta fashion with prejudiced eyes. I presumed that they were only seeking to emulate modern American culture in place of their own. I was also influenced by older Pedranos, many of whom derisively associate this culture with delinquency. However, I was deeply mistaken, although this street culture appears to be a modern copy, it sometimes carries ancestral messages.

Take for instance Sanick (Figure 81), a 25-year-old rapper and principal member of the hip-hop collective Juun Ajpu. Sanick incorporates Tz'utujil and elders' voice recordings into his songs, the messages of which tend to critique modernity's destructive impacts on the community. While hip-hop is a globalised modern import, Sanick uses it as a platform to promote ancestrality and counter internalised racism (Chapter 4), and he is not the only hip-hop artist in San Pedro to do so (Barrett, 2016; 2017; Bell, 2017; Way, 2021). These circumstances are of course not unique to San Pedro. Since its origins in 1970s New York, hip-hop's subversive use and influence has spread worldwide. In recent decades Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples from Canada (Wallman, 2014) and Colombia (Pastor, 2019), to Bolivia (Swinehart, 2019), Australia (Clapham and Kelly, 2019) and New Zealand (Upper Hutt Posse, 1988) have been adapting it to their unique contexts and utilising it as an effective tool for decolonisation.

In Chapter 6, I explained that revindication is heterogenous and that not all of its different strands necessarily align. This can be seen clearly in the case of San Pedro's street culture. Some older Pedranos, even those involved in formal revindication initiatives cannot see past its modern aesthetics. Sanick for instance explained how he had approached the *Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala* (ALMG) in the hopes of carrying out a language revitalization project, but was turned down on account of being a rapper.¹⁶²



Juun Ajpu (2019)

Although there are tensions, transmodern hip-hop is not necessarily incommensurable with gerontocratic authority. Notably, Concepción Batzin, the middle-aged community leader (and one of the key figures of Pedranos' opposition to the megacolector) recognised the revindicating message of Sanick's hip-hop, and invited him to perform at the 'Semillas de Pensamiento' DOT festival in

¹⁶² Some of his material is directed against the injustice of this stigmatisation (Sanick, 2017a).

Quetzaltenango, which is where I first encountered him. It was also through older Pedranos' recognition and support that I came to understand the deeper significance of some instances of Pedrano graffiti. During my fieldwork, the town's contemporary artists organised an exhibition to showcase the work of two young graffiti artists, and this is where I met José Chavajay Gonzalez.

Figure 82 below depicts José's 'tag', which consists of his nickname 'Yoshi' and a hummingbird. Such graffiti is so ubiquitous in San Pedro as to go unnoticed, but there is more to it and the intentions of its creator than meets the eye, as José himself explains:

Before there were many hummingbirds, ten years ago there used to be many [...] so I draw them and remember them, for people to see the hummingbird and say, "Ah, yes, before there were hummingbirds, but now there aren't, what did we do? What will we do?". Through graffiti they can ask themselves a thousand things, and even evaluate themselves.¹⁶³

José and several other prolific graffiti artists have formed a collective called *At'it Ya'* (Grandmother water), and although the ancestral orientation of their work is less immediately obvious than the political murals of the older and more professional group Canal Cultural (Chapter 6), an ancestral structure can still be discerned beneath its modern veneer. It is because of this endogenous ancestral structure that José suggests his work as more than just a modern copy:

My grandfather is the best at giving you advice, if you don't pay attention to an elder here you will 100% fail, therefore we need to value our culture, and not look for labels [...] because we can do it ourselves [...] we can be our own examples, we don't need to copy it.

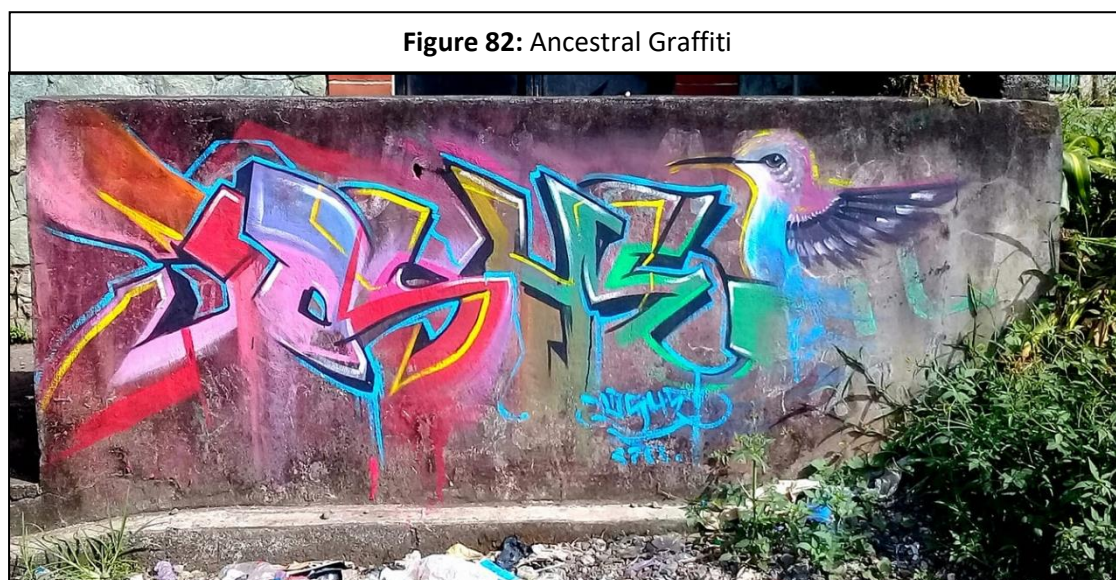


Photo courtesy of artist

The youth's street culture powerfully subverts the stigma of 'backwardness' which has become attached to ancestry as a result of modernity/coloniality (Chapter 5). These grassroots

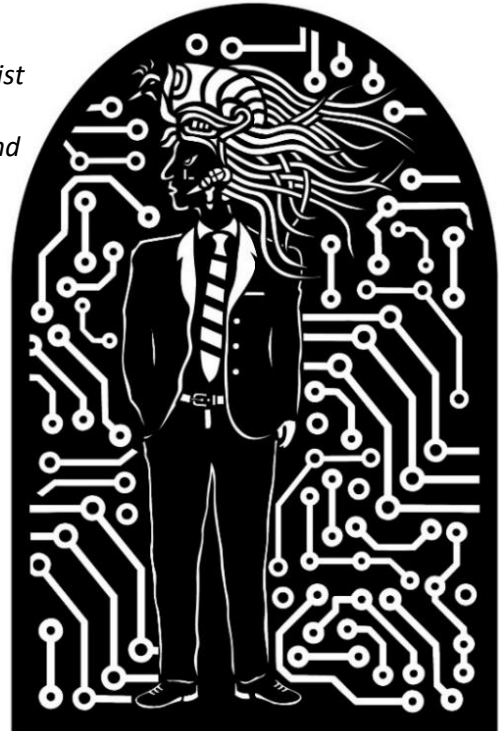
¹⁶³ José's recent tag graffiti also features the name 'Tz'unun Ya'', further implicating its coincidence with San Pedro's revindication.

ancestral/modern ch'ixi juxtapositions prove that ancestrality is not stagnant in time, but that it has a future (Xón Riquiac, 2014; Maya Hackers, 2020) (Figure 83). In this way, the border epistemologies of San Pedro's rappers and graffiti artists are redefining modernity and hijacking its narrative of progress, as Grosfoguel (2011) states:

Instead of rejecting modernity to retreat into a fundamentalist absolutism, border epistemologies subsume/redefines the emancipatory rhetoric of modernity from the cosmologies and epistemologies of the subaltern [...] for a world beyond eurocentered modernity (p.26)

Figure 83: Mayan futurism

In this artwork 'Dintel' (Lintel), Pablo Horacio Garcia Cruz playfully subverts and modernises the style of a classical Mayan lintel.



Calameo (2018)

Pedrano street culture is ontologically ambiguous, it pays homage to both modernity and ancestrality, and the same is true of San Pedro's contemporary artists. While much of their work is critical of modernity, they don't 'retreat into fundamentalist absolutism' (Grosfoguel, 2007, p.27). Many of them studied fine art in Guatemala City, and they don't deny this modern inheritance in their work. One wonderful illustration of this can be seen in Antonio Pichilla's piece 'Tribute to Grandfather' (2017) (Figure 84) which emulates Marcel Duchamp's 'Fountain' (1917).

Duchamp is considered one of the most influential artist of all time for transforming conventional notions of what constitutes art. As Akinci (2018) explains:

Duchamp "liberated" objects, mundane objects, by drawing attention to their signifying capacities [...] and dragg[ing] them [...] out of their aesthetic and anesthetized passivity.

In effect, Duchamp drew attention to the 'thing-power' (Bennett, 2004) of objects. However, Antonio also recognises that Pedranos have long understood the vitality of objects through their relational ontology. This is why he filled the urinal with coloured threads, to represent the hand-woven textiles worn by Tz'utujil people. In 'Tribute to Grandfather' Antonio thus celebrates both genealogies - modern *and* ancestral:

Figure 84: *Homenaje al Abuelo* (Tribute to Grandfather) - Antonio Pichilla (2017)



Camila Montalvo (2020b)

I recognise, using a super Western object, that Western art exists, and that we recognise that Duchamp is also a grandfather of art. [Whilst] having the capacity to recognise that we also [have our own] grandfathers that speak with the stones. We aren't fighting, the two grandfathers are there together sharing the same space.

(Antonio Pichilla)

Permaculture

Of all the different expressions of transmodernity in San Pedro's community life, permaculture captures best the pluriversal aspirations of revindication. It is also significant as one of Pedranos' main counterproposals to the megacollector (Chapter 10). Originating in the 1970s under the direction of the Australian ecologists Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, permaculture aims towards creating 'permanent culture' through sustainable agricultural practices (Mollison, 1990). Permaculture is adaptive to local contexts, and it advocates integrating different knowledges to achieve the best results (IMAP, 2013; Millner, 2017). Its emergence in San Pedro is part of a wider national trend in which the converging objectives of DOT (Defence of Territory), food sovereignty and Buen Vivir (Utzil K'alseem) are gaining significant traction (Copeland, 2018; 2019b; Einbinder and Morales, 2020; Sigüenza, 2018).

In San Pedro two different organisations involved in permaculture caught my attention. The first is Taa' P'it, the educational NGO which I introduced in Chapter 6. Besides its educational projects, Taa' Pi't (2016) recently published a comprehensive document - a 13-year plan for San Pedro called 'Plan Wi'xA', which aims to resolve many of the community's problems, including the lake's contamination. The plan is orientated by ancestrality, as its chief author, Juan Manuel explained during our interview, 'We have to use the past to correct much of the present to prevent much of the future'. But this focus is not exclusive or anti-modern, its objective is rather the 'revindication of Mayan ancestral culture *with* [my emphasis] local, international, and scientific knowledge' (Taa' Pi't, 2016), and it notably adopts the UN's Sustainable Development Goals as a guiding framework (SDGS, 2020).¹⁶⁴ The plan's pluriversal stance is reflected in many of its proposals,

¹⁶⁴ See MacNeill (2014a) for an account of the similarly transmodern orientation of the Mayan social organisation 'El Centro'.

and most notably through its emphasis on permaculture. One of its permacultural propositions for instance is the construction of vertical gardens on the roofs of San Pedro's multi-storied buildings.

While 'Plan Wi'xA' is far from being implemented, some Pedranos are already putting their permacultural proposals into practice. The permaculture collective 'Colectivo Tz'unun Ya' was founded by 12 male friends (all youngsters) in 2016. The group rents a small plot of land adjacent to the lake (Figure 85), where they cultivate crops and experiment with various permaculture methods. True to the ethos of permaculture, they have sought to combine modern innovations with ancestral practices. Conscious that many of these practices are in danger of disappearing, one of the collective's members is specifically assigned to gathering this ancestral knowledge from elders, and another is a spiritual guide who facilitates the collective's cosmogonic orientation.



Figure 85: The collective's plot



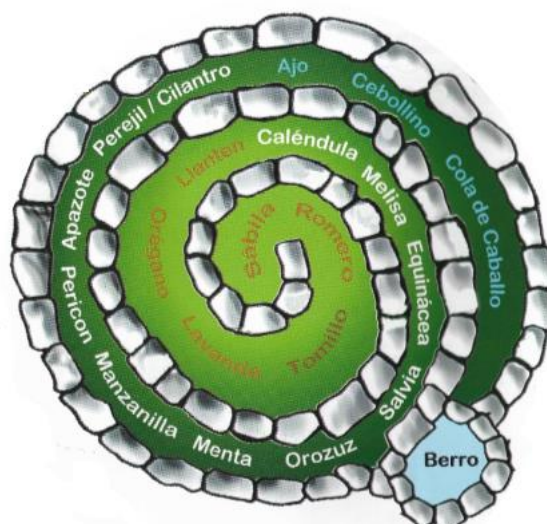
Colectivo Tz'unun Ya (2017)

One ancestral practice which the collective advocates is the *sistema caracol* (snail system) (Figure 86), in which many different plants (often medicinal) are grown together on a soil bed in the form of a cosmogonic spiral. Its curved shape creates a range of distinct microclimates, allowing for a rich biodiversity to flourish in a small area:

Figure 86: The collective building their 'snail system'



Colectivo Tz'unun Ya (2017)



Pura Vida (2015)

The 'snail system' proves the strength of diversity over monoculture, and as such, it is a perfect analogy for the pluriverse (Sigüenza, 2018). These principles of integration and cooperation over segregation and competition form the ancestral structure of the collective. Yet they are also pragmatically open to modern influences, as evidenced by their alliance with international organisations in the Global North.¹⁶⁵ As Eduardo Cortez (in charge of the collective's social media strategy) explained:

I like to use capitalism like a vehicle. They use us as objects, not as subjects, so we can also use them like objects

While selectively open to modernity, the collective seeks to undo its colonial logic through pedagogy. They want to empower Pedrano *campesinos* to transition back to using organic fertilizers, and crucially this requires breaking free from the paternalistic system of chemical fertilizer distribution (Chapter 4):

This is the difference with us, we don't want to look for people, we want people to come to us, and for them to be convinced of the change. We don't want to be like the politicians. For me, [the solution] it's not to give, but to teach (Eduardo Cortez)

Relationality with the Lake

Now that I have outlined the ontologically ambiguous nature of revindication in San Pedro's community life, in the remainder of this chapter I will focus specifically on this process as it relates to Pedranos' relationship with the lake. Understanding this context is key, given how the megacollector conflict appears also to be a conflict over the lake's ontological status. If it is to be taken as more than a 'mere resource conflict' (Coombes et al., 2012), this ontological dimension needs to be thoroughly assessed in preparation for Part 2's discussion of the megacollector.

An Ontologically Ambiguous Relationality

In Chapter 2 I noted how young people are often left out of ontological analyses (e.g. de la Cadena, 2015a; Blaser, 2009a) in favour of older traditionalists. However, ignoring the rapid cultural changes which have occurred gives an inaccurate impression of the ontological present of Indigenous communities. This is something I aim to avoid in this thesis through being upfront about how San Pedro's modernisation has affected the younger generation's relationship with the lake. As I discussed at length in Chapter 5, younger Pedranos have been greatly affected by the acceleration of modern influences in the community. This generation has little physical contact with the lake, and

¹⁶⁵ When I visited an American woman was volunteering there long-term.

they are also largely cut off from their grandparents' ancestral values. They are instead immersed in modern education and technology, and as a result, are isolated from the sources by which relationality with the lake was formerly transmitted. It is unsurprising therefore that most of the young Pedranos whom I interviewed described their relationship with the lake in modern terms:

The lake is a great resource that we have, in addition to being a natural beauty, it's a water resource that can serve us for production and many other things, it's a gold mine, we need to care of it and take advantage of it.

(Gustavo - 25-year-old beekeeper)

These days youngsters don't see [the lake] as the mother, they see it as a lake, a beautiful lake yes, to look after it, yes. But not like in previous years.

(Carlos Francisco- 18-year-old photographer and shop worker)

I will be very sincere about the lake. The lake for us is a resource to generate money [...] For me, I think of the lake as if it were a product to generate money for the town.

(Otoniel - 20s graphic artist)

I was not looking for such modern responses when I first began my investigation. As I discussed in Chapter 2, owing to my essentialist leanings I was keen to find those which instead bolstered the ontological differences of the megacollector conflict. These were easy to find, most Pedranos born before the 1990s described the lake as a mother/grandmother, referring to her as 'Qa Tee' Ya'' - 'Nuestra Madre/Abuela Lago' (Our Mother/Grandmother Lake):

The lake to me is sacred, she is a very great mother who cares for us and gives us life.
(Manuel Chavajay)

The lake is a very important element [...] she is a grandmother, she is a tender grandmother because she washes us, gives us life. (Vinicio Chavajay)

Others rejected the mother/grandmother descriptor, but nonetheless discussed the lake in non-modern terms:

I wouldn't name [the lake] 'Mother' like many do, but for me, the lake is the origin of everything. From there comes everything. (Cristobal Cholotio)

Many nowadays say 'Qa Tee' Our Mother, for me it's not Our Mother [...] it's the potential energy that exists. The lake for us, the Maya directly is a god we could say, it's our god, it's not our mother [...] it's a god that is potential energy, the lake is life. (Juan Quiacaín Navichoc)

While such comments might be assumed as expressions of a 'pure' relational ontology, Pedranos' maternal relationship with the lake is actually much more ontologically ambiguous. This can be seen in the mythic account of the lake's creation described below:

Figure 87: The Creation of Lake Atitlán - Painting by Luis Gonzalez



"The Virgin Maria had been coming down Las Cristalinas [a local beach] with a jar of water on her head, the origin of which nobody knows. She came with the intention of giving water to the apostle Pedro, when she suddenly tripped over a stone and the jar smashed. The spilt water then flowed to flatter land where it formed a pool that did not seep into the earth but remained where it was. When it rained, little by little it grew and, when they finally realized, a large pool of water had already formed"

(compiled by Lorenzo Tuy Navichoc in Petrich, 1997, p.220)

Far from a 'pure' Indigenous origin, the myth depicts the lake deity herself as an embodiment of the Virgin Mary, demonstrating just how closely Pedranos' relationality with the lake is intertwined with Christianity.¹⁶⁶ Pedranos' relationality should not be understood as something standing apart from modernity, it is a hybrid creation, produced through a long period of colonisation and interactions with modern influences (Killick, 2017; 2019).¹⁶⁷ As Paul (1950, IV) explains below:

San Pedro culture represents a union of indigenous and early Spanish influences. Both influences are discernible in most aspects of the culture but not in the form of separate elements existing side by side. Rather the two traditions have merged in the course of four hundred years to form a culture pattern.

Just as modern influences can be discerned in those Pedranos professing a 'relational' understanding of the lake, so too can relational influences be discerned in 'modern' youngsters. I encountered this ambiguity in Rudy, a 24-year-old amiable municipal trash collector. During our interview, he was quick to declare that his generation had entirely abandoned ancestral values.

¹⁶⁶ I was initially determined to find another non-Christianised creation myth to include, that was until I came to terms with my essentialist tendencies (Chapter 2).

¹⁶⁷ There are for instance numerous Catholic motifs within traditional Mayan ceremonies.

However, when I asked him whether the lake was dying (as is often reported in the media),¹⁶⁸ his answer left a different impression:

Me: *Is the lake dying?*

Rudy: *The lake grows every 50 years, so I would say no, because we cannot see life, we cannot see life of a grand power that the spirit or the energy has allowed. We cannot see the life of that lake so big, simply it's God that knows. If he wants it to grow, he makes rain [...] if he sees how we're treating it, he takes away the rain. Imagine that I am not able to see how long you will live, that maybe you will live a lot longer and I won't. Between us, we are both people, but we still can't tell.*

While Rudy may not understand the lake as a mother/grandmother, he expresses a reverence for its vitality (through the medium of Christianity) implicating it as something *more* than a modern resource. A relational understanding can be detected in his comparing of the lake's unknowability to the lifespan of a person.¹⁶⁹ In attempting to categorise Rudy's ontological perspective as either modern or relational we see the limitations of focusing on ontological difference. His more ambiguous perspective fails to fit into either ontological category neatly.

These circumstances find congruence with some recent analyses of ontological multiplicity in other parts of the world. For example, in Mészáros's (2020) research on Sakha relationality with lakes in Siberia, he describes a 'fuzzy, messy and incongruent' local ontology, a mixture between modern and traditional ontologies. As he states, 'Contemporary practices and enactments at lakes cannot be squeezed into a single ontology' (p.15). Likewise, in Timor Leste, Bovensiepen (2020) highlights how individuals would express the significance of their spiritual connection with the land in one context but doubt and scepticism in another.

Focusing on individuals like Rudy suggests ontological boundaries should not be overstated (Cepek, 2016). Owing to this variation between individuals, in reality there is no such thing as a 'Pedrano relationality' with the lake. My research thus supports Bovensiepen's (2020) claim that PO 'does not sufficiently theorise how conflicting ontological assumptions co-exist within the same context, group, or individual' (p.39). Even so, there are still recognisable trends within certain segments of the population. Younger Pedranos arguably lean more towards a *modern* ontological ambiguity and older Pedranos towards a more *relational* ambiguity. Significantly for the megacollector conflict, it is older community leaders who are leading the opposition movement, and

¹⁶⁸ Sáenz (2016), Felipe and Julajuj (2017).

¹⁶⁹ Some other Pedranos who explicitly professed their relationality with the lake explained that the lake's water cycle followed the same 52-year lifecycle of a human (the age at which a Pedrano is considered an elder).

so it is worthwhile examining more closely what their relationality with the lake actually entails. For this task, it is necessary to look beyond Pedranos' statements about the lake, to their behaviour towards it.

Worlding Relationality with the Lake

Our grandparents [...] were respectful. When they wanted to cross the lake, they had to ask for permission first, and they kissed the lake. Nowadays many say, "Our Mother Lake", but what do they do? Where they brought that term. I don't agree, it's an invention of many people to go through the motions, or just for protagonism.

(Juan Quiacaín Navichoc – ALMG employee)

Juan makes an important point above. Ontology is more than just something that is professed, it is enacted (Mol, 1999). Key to seeing past Pedranos' ontological claims about the lake is examining how this ontology is worlded into being (Blaser, 2013a). Juan highlights that while some Pedranos profess the lake as a mother, they don't act accordingly. That is, they don't *world* their professed relationality with the lake through respectful behaviour towards it. His cynicism is well justified, as I will explore in Part 2, Pedranos do strategically politicise their relationality with the lake in the megacolector conflict.¹⁷⁰ Juan is also correct to draw attention to the disappearance of those worlding practices which formerly enacted Pedranos' relationality. As I explained in Chapter 5, many of these have indeed disappeared (or are openly stigmatised). Less accurate however is his assumption that their loss necessarily implies the disappearance of Pedranos' relationality with the lake.

As Blaser (2013a) stresses, ontology is a storied performativity which is 'always in the making' (p.551). In San Pedro, relationality with the lake is still being worlded into being, but these worldings have changed as a result of modernity's accelerating influence. Reflecting my point earlier in the chapter, these worldings emerge through a more ontologically ambiguous transmodernity, which in some cases makes them less easily recognisable. The most powerful evidence of a continuing relationality with the lake occurred during the massive cyanobacterial algal bloom of 2009. In response, something truly remarkable happened. Hundreds of Pedranos gathered on the shore to cleanse the lake - physically pulling out algae with baskets, and burning *pom* – a type of incense, as Juan's anecdote relates below:

¹⁷⁰ And the ontologically ambiguous nature of Pedranos' relationality (as discussed in the previous section) opens up this possibility.



Pom is fundamental. It has existed for thousands and thousands of years. It is a medicine for nature. The elders say, "Feel it, you are speaking with deceased ancestors so that they can help you". The energy comes and you feel it.

It's like an offering. In Christianity the donation is money, but in Mayan [philosophy], it's through the medium of pom. They feel the scent, they smell the scent, that is why when there is a Mayan ceremony, they always invite ancestors who are no longer with us [...] to project themselves and have positive energies. And that happened in the cleansing of the lake. Not only us, but our departed grandparents were called - they played their part, and we played ours.

People began to put incense around the lake in boats. They started to conduct Mayan ceremonies, and the cyanobacteria disappeared. Why? Because people had faith. So the connection was due to the spiritual faith from the Mayan cosmovision that caused the change. Pom is like a natural ingredient, we can say in Western terms, it was the medicine for the lake. The lake, for the first time in a long time, sensed the scent of the connection.

It's the first time that I saw San Pedro united. The community joined together and began to use pom around the lake. Everybody, including Evangelicals.

The act of collective cleansing that Juan describes can be understood as a 'worlding event' (de la Cadena, 2015a) in which Pedranos, when confronted with the threat of the algal bloom, demonstrated a continuing relationality with the lake. In spite of the community's modernisation, they rallied to its defence and worlded ancestral respect. Bovensiepen (2020) suggests that threats of this nature don't just reveal underlying relationality, but actually produce it through a sort of 'defensive animism' as the spiritual potency of a place in crisis is accentuated. This is a distinct possibility in Pedranos' response to the threat of the algal bloom, and as I will show in Part 2, also in their opposition to the threat of the megacollector.

Another revealing aspect of Pedranos' response was how they treated the lake with *pom* as they would a person. Even Evangelicals did, and they are normally averse to such practices due to *pom*'s association with *costumbre* (traditional ancestral beliefs) and Catholicism. Their flexibility in this instance speaks both to the ontological ambiguities that characterise community life, but more significantly to the affective power of the lake to engender such a response. Cepek (2016) argues that the pragmatic functions of ontological responses must be considered in such situations, and in Lake Atitlán's case, there is an obvious pragmatic reason for Pedranos' response - the lake is their

principal source of drinking water. At a recent press conference held in defence of Lake Atitlán,¹⁷¹ this pragmatism could be detected in the response of one female participant who stated:

*women are very worried about this situation that we are living because we are the most vulnerable [...] we are the first that will be affected [...] in the moment that the lake becomes a commodity, as women we will be the first to die.*¹⁷²

On the one hand it could be argued that Pedranos' response to the algal bloom was just an act of self-preservation. Pedranos' relationality with the lake and the environment more generally is premised on survival:

The lake is life and without the lake we wouldn't exist (Olivia Toc)

The pragmatic functioning of the lake would explain Pedranos' efforts to extract the algae from the lake, but not their widespread burning of *pom*. This would be better explained by the lake's personhood which obligated Pedranos to act, not in relation to an *object*, but in relation to another *subject*.

The Lake's Personhood

[The bloom] was very sad, I was frightened. I thought that it was the end of the lake. At the same time, I thought that the lake had life, the lake was a being, it needed help. That year everyone was obliged to cure the lake. For my part, I went with a group of women to clean it. In addition, I participated in many ceremonies, calling on the positive energies to cure our lake. (Clara – middle-aged homemaker)

In the words of Clara above, we can see how a response to the algal bloom was instigated by the lake's personhood. She felt a kinship – a social obligation to act just as she would with a human member of the community. The same circumstances can also be discerned in another Pedrano's description of his dedication to beach cleaning:

I go almost every day to the beach to clean a little. Every time I clean I say, "I love you a lot my love, I love you a lot, you are my life, I want to see you clean, I want to see you look beautiful, I will help you". Not every day, but when there's a lot of trash, I have to be there. (Viento Tuy Navichoc)

The depth of emotion Pedranos conveyed when talking about the lake is also indicative of their relational attachment. Several Pedranos teared up when I raised the subject of the algal bloom, and on one occasion I had to change topic as the interviewee found it too painful to discuss. Juan's description below presents a typical response:

¹⁷¹ The main purpose of this press conference in October 2019 was to declare Lake Atitlán as a living being (see Chapter 10).

¹⁷² As the principal caregivers of the community, it is no coincidence that women are at the forefront of extractivist conflicts globally (Cirefice and Sullivan, 2019; Tzul Tzul and Castro Buzon, 2020). On this subject, Lorena Cabnal (2015) presents a pertinent concept through her notion of 'body-territory'.

I felt totally destroyed by the cyanobacteria, my father was crying, it was the first time in my life that I saw my father cry [...] we were very sad for a long time. (Juan Quiacaín Navichoc)

In the heartfelt response of Maggie Garcia, a young community leader from San Lucas, we can see that this emotional affinity is linked to the lake's maternal role:

Somebody from CACIF on one occasion said, "I don't know why Indigenous people always fight and say that the lake is alive. The water is water, it doesn't feel, it can't speak, it can't laugh, it can't heal. It's only water, and you can utilize it and that's all". Seriously, that they would say that [...] about Lake Atitlán, that hurts, because for us the water is alive, the water smiles, the water feels everything, it's like a human being. So we treat it like this, and we name her usually as a women, we call her mother, or grandmother because she gives life.

And why do we have that conception of her? Now I understand more strongly because I am pregnant, I understand better still this concept because caring for your children, giving life for them is something that nobody else is going to do, just your mother, you know what it is to have that love for your mother. So it is the same with the lake, for us it means much more than just a puddle as many say. For us it is life itself.

Reflecting this maternal bond, the lake is sometimes described as the *muxu'x* – 'el ombligo' (the navel). In fact, there are many other clues in the language which are suggestive of the lake's personhood. Notably, Pedranos would describe the lake's algal blooms as *una enfermedad* (an illness) rather than contamination. One Pedrano further explained that in Tz'utujil 'contamination' and 'violation' are the same word. Linguistically, to contaminate the lake implies the violation of a woman:

The lake to Tz'utujiles is our mother, as I always say to my companions, who of us would like to throw garbage in the face of their mother? Nobody. If she is our mother, why are we contaminating her with our own hands? (Agapito Cortez – cocode, engineer and manager of the regional organisation 'Manclaguna')

This insight requires us to reassess Pedranos' actions towards the lake. Aviña Escot (2020) identifies the algal bloom as a watershed moment which affected the mobilisation of many grassroots environmental efforts. Yet, missing from her PE analysis is a recognition of the lake's agentive role in engendering this environmental dedication. Many Pedranos are making such efforts, not through environmental concern for an *object* (the lake), but through a social obligation to a *subject* (their mother/grandmother). The Association of Fishermen for instance are often feted for their environmental dedication through their monthly trash cleanups, but as I discovered, the lake itself is also complicit in their actions. The Association's President, Nicolas Tumax explained to me that the lake personally thanked him for his efforts in a dream:

I have dreamed that the water cries, it's a lady that I have dreamed of many times. My little white lady cries, and she congratulates me, and I am blessed by God.¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Nicholas's reference to God was a target of my initial essentialist erasure (Chapter 2).

From Nicolas's description we can see that these 'environmental efforts' are also *social* efforts, and what's more, the lake exercises agency in their realisation. Nicolas requires us to take other ontologies seriously (Blaser, 2013a).

The Lake's Affective Energy

As I mentioned in Chapter 5, elders were formerly believed to possess as extra sensorial capacity, an ability to read the different messages nature communicates through various signals (sounds, scents, movements of the wind etc.). However, many Pedranos deem this ability to have been lost due to modernity's epistemic violence (Figure 88). As a result, these signals now go unnoticed. Olivia Toc, a young artist elaborates on this problem:

Nature speaks to us, warns us in a special way, just like the lake did. So we should react to help and change our actions. The problem is that we don't understand the signals of nature, but often it's trying to say something, and I think it is asking for a change.

These days Pedranos only notice the most obvious messages such as the algal bloom, which several Pedranos, like Olivia, interpreted as a signal of the lake's displeasure.



courtesy of artist

Figure 88: Sensorial Conceptual Art

Left: *K'amasaqatz'ab'ee/Conectable* – Edwin Bixcul (2016)

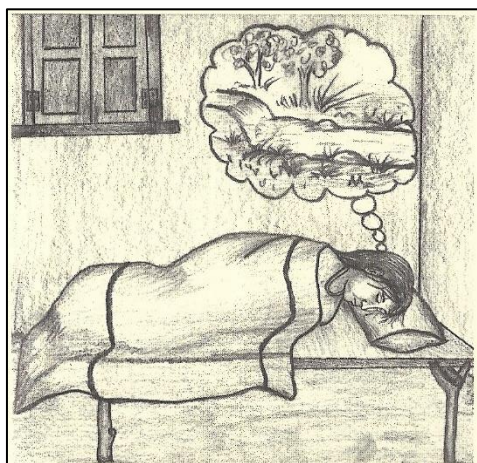
Below: *Ecocidio año 2009* - Benvenuto Chavajay (2019)



Chavajay (2019)

Given how Pedranos are now unable to read the signals that the lake sends them, dreams are one of the few remaining mediums through which the lake is able reach them. Despite modern influences, dream interpretation has remained a durable aspect of Pedrano culture (Rogoff, 2011; Pérez et al., 2020), and *ajq'ij's* are valued for their ability to read them accurately. In my interviews, Pedranos mentioned a range of portentous dreams in which the lake attempted to communicate

urgent messages.¹⁷⁴ Incredibly, in some instances the same dream was explained to be shared by more than one person. For this reason, dreams may be the lake's best chance of salvation, as Don Salvador (Quiacaín Sac, n.d, s.17) posits in his poem 'Lago Atitlán' (which is addressed directly to the lake):



Cholsamaj (2006)

17

*On eminent nights the full moon shines on you,
And the spirit of the ancestors patrols your surface,
While those who live from you snore deeply,
Hopefully in dreams they receive a demanding message*

Other than through communication through dreams, the lake is also widely understood to exercise a sort of affective energy which Pedranos described in energetic terms:

When you are [at the lake] you feel the vibration of everything that is surrounding you.
(Norberto Salvador Coche Quiacaín – young artist)

*Sometimes I arrive home so tired,
but I don't know what it is that
the lake has. When I board a
boat, it relaxes me, its sound, the
breeze, I arrive home feeling more
regenerated, especially those
days that I travel. I return around
6.30pm, I leave super tired. But
when I board the boat, [back to]
San Pedro, seriously, that sound,
so relaxing! And those breezes,
it's incredible, it gives you so
much energy, and it's such a
positive energy that fills us.*
(Brenda Sucely Garcia Peneleu –
employee of AALA)



This affective energy is the reason why so many Pedrano women continue to wash their clothes in the lake, they want to maintain contact in order to benefit from the lake's curative properties:

¹⁷⁴ Examples include dreams about the location of drowning victims, the cure for a child's illness, and an explanation as to how the 2009 algal bloom would end.

Many women, even if they have water in their house, they see the lake as something healing, that it will soothe their bones and illnesses (Marta Rocche)

This affective energy is the lake's life-force, and it is known as *ruk'u'x*:

The water, earth, fire, air has life, it has life because it has ruk'u'x, it has a soul. When something has a soul, it's alive. A stone has a soul as well, only science says that it's dead, but it's alive [...] They have feelings, it's energy, because it's part of nature. (Francisco Coche)

As Francisco explains, the Mayan cosmovision recognises a more expansive notion of aliveness than the modern ontology. However, there are notable gradations of this aliveness:

Mayan thought says that everything has life [...] only that they are different manifestations of life and different cycles and different behaviours of the particles and subparticles (Chico Puac)

Even a rock has life, because obviously it has its energy. It's not mobile, so it's very different, but it has its energy, and it has its energy because it lives. (Luis Xet Coche)

The late Kaqchikel poet, Humberto Ak'abal (1996) captures this subtlety well in his poem 'Stones':

STONES

*It is not that stones are mute;
they simply keep silent.*



Figure 89: 'Abuelos' (Grandparents) – Antonio Pichilla (2017)

Tala (2017)

Ruk'u'x bears a resemblance to what Jane Bennett (2004) refers to as 'thing-power', that is 'the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle' (p.351). As she states, 'inanimate things have a life of their own, that deep within them is an inexplicable vitality or energy, a moment of independence from and resistance to us and other things' (ibid, p.358). A demonstration of *ruk'u'x*/thing power can be seen in Benvenuto Chavajay's description below:

Even a plastic bag has life because it goes up in the air [...] this converts into a "wow!", like it is a dove.

The lake possesses much more *ruk'u'x* than a plastic bag, and so its 'thing-power' is felt on a much greater scale. It is perceptible to all residents of the lake, not just Indigenous people. For example, two Ladina women – Haydee Marroquín González (an employee of AALA) and Carolina (an employee of MARN), both described their own relationship with the lake in similarly energetic terms:

For me, the lake signifies peace, life, it signifies tranquillity, and above all it gives me energy.
(Haydee)

[the lake] is an energetic place for me [...] I do feel a connection with many things in nature here, so I have decided that this is my home. I chose my identification of love in this place. It's also a place where many people around the world converge somehow. (Carolina)

As Carolina describes, this energy has a sort of pull, and this has long lured foreign visitors. Many of the lake's New Age community for instance adhere to the idea of Lake Atitlán as one of the world's few 'energy vortexes' along with the Pyramids of Giza and Machu Pichu (Villasumaya, 2020). For this very reason, thousands of foreigners annually descend on the lake to attend the 'Cosmic Convergence' festival. Whilst I don't ascribe to the New Age beliefs, I know that I have been affected by this energy myself. It partly accounts for my decision carry out research at the lake. Don Salvador (Quiacaín Sac, n.d., s.10) describes this affective magnetism in his poem 'Lago Atitlán' below:

10
*On the other side of the sea on other continents,
they think about you, that's why they let themselves come to
see you
and returning safely saying that you are reality not a dream,
Lake Atitlán, you are high-range and unlimited magnet.*

While these examples help to counter PO's essentialist assumptions, it is also important to draw a distinction. While *anybody* can be affected by the lake's thing power, there is something qualitatively different about Pedranos' relationality with the lake. It goes much deeper, connecting them directly to their ancestrality. For many Pedranos the lake is a 'storied landscape' (Basso, 1996), and critically, this ancestral connection is something which non-Indigenous residents lack.

I have always loved the lake, to meditate on a rock and hear the sound of the waves, the song of bubbles, they are the signal of the ancestors (Clemente Peneleu)

Revindicating Relationality

[T]he core of a culture lies behind the formal acts that meet the eye, hidden in the minds and hearts of those who carry on their culture (Paul, 1950, IV).

Now that I have outlined the defining aspects of Pedranos' relationality with the lake, in this section I connect my analysis back to the main focus of this chapter - revindication. It is in the revindication of the lake's relationality that we see how issues of worlding, personhood, and

affective energy come together in new transmodern ways. As I mentioned earlier, the modern perspectives of younger Pedranos have resulted from the accelerating influence of modernity and the disruption of elders' transmission of ancestral values. However, during my fieldwork I encountered new ontologically ambiguous sources for the transmission of relational understandings to younger generations. The two examples that I will discuss in this section can be understood as revindication efforts insofar as they are motivated by the modern deterioration of the lake, and a desire to see a continued worlding of relationality (i.e. respectful behaviour towards the lake).

The first example is a children's book about the lake, 'The Goddess of Lake Atitlán' (Figure 90), written by Paulina del Carmen González Navichoc, a community leader with no prior writing experience.¹⁷⁵ She wrote the book for a regional competition, winning second place, the reward being the book's distribution in local schools. Her book tells the story of a little girl (inspired and named after her own daughter) who is cured by the lake, and its underlying moral is that the lake needs to be respected and protected from harm. Within the book, the ancestral mother/grandmother lake has been transformed from a Tz'utujil deity/Virgin Mary into a Disney princess-like character to appeal to young children's modern sensibilities. This modernisation is only superficial, since the lake's personhood as a life-giving being who obligates respectful behaviour remains intact. However, Grandmother Lake has been updated into a more relatable form for Pedrano children. The Goddess of Lake Atitlán is thus a transmodern creation, an ancestral structure with a modern Disney coating who ensures that relationality is reproduced in younger generations.

Figure 90: 'The Goddess of Lake Atitlán'



¹⁷⁵ Paulina is also a leader of the Pedrano women's group 'Movimiento de Mujeres Tz'utujiles Ixkeem'.

This transmodern evolution is nothing new in San Pedro, it fits well with Paul's (1950, V) description of how the community's 'cultural pattern' was evolving in the 1940s:

This pattern [...] undergoes continuous and imperceptible change. [It] slowly reshapes itself in response to new pressures, like the symmetrical image in a gently jostled kaleidoscope [...] the value system of the village will transform itself accordingly but without relinquishing the imprint of past experience.

The jostling of this ontological 'kaleidoscope' in San Pedro has brought ancestral relationality with the lake into contact with an unlikely bedfellow - hip-hop.

Earlier in the chapter I introduced the young rapper Sanick, who as I explained, is revindicating ancestrality through his performances. More specifically however, he is revindicating relationality with the lake. At the DOT festival where I saw him perform (Figure 91), one of his songs caught my attention, 'Ati't Ya' - 'Grandmother Water' (Table 2). The song highlights the pain experienced by the lake as a result of people's inability to notice the signs that she is trying to communicate. In effect, it is a call to action, a heartfelt plea for people to self-reflect, change their attitude, and start respecting the lake. Within it, the lake's personhood shines through, as Sanick repeatedly addresses the lake directly, subject-to-subject:

Figure 91: Sanick (right) performing at the festival



Table 2: Ati't Ya' – courtesy of Sanick (2017b)

Original	English Translation
<i>Ati't' ya', at rimil, at sital chi qa wacha, Xerwari e k'o Juun, ka'i', xi' jar a waal nkat ki k'axaj natoq' chi ke wech</i>	<i>Grandmother lake, you are prostrated before us, but nevertheless, there are a couple of your children that do not hear you crying before them</i>
<i>Así cambia esa actitud</i>	<i>So change that attitude</i>
<i>Piensa en que le vamos a dejar a la generación del futuro</i>	<i>Think about what we are going to leave to the future generation</i>
<i>Que vean está preciosa presea</i>	<i>Will they see this beautiful jewel</i>
<i>¡Lo dudo!</i>	<i>I doubt it!</i>
<i>A la magnitud de los pasos en los que vamos</i>	<i>With the direction that we're heading in</i>
<i>El lago se nos está hiendo entre las manos</i>	<i>The lake is hurting in our hands</i>
<i>Reflexiona hermano</i>	<i>Ponder brother</i>
<i>No nos hagamos sordos y cambiemos nuestro entorno</i>	<i>Let's not go deaf and let's change our environment</i>
<i>Qa sik'aqii' winaqii',</i>	<i>Let's raise people,</i>
<i>mati qab'enchikta q'ayiis,</i>	<i>Let's not make more garbage</i>
<i>Ja qa ti't' ntajini nkami</i>	<i>Our grandmother is dying</i>
<i>Mi intención es que reflexiones</i>	<i>My intention is that you reflect</i>
<i>En esta vida y valores del regalo del Ajaw</i>	<i>On this life and values of the gift of Ajaw</i>
<i>Una maravilla natural, Madre, belleza ancestral</i>	<i>A natural wonder, Mother, ancestral beauty</i>
<i>Tu completas la vida espiritual</i>	<i>You complete the spiritual life</i>
<i>En cada amanecer nos llenas de alegría</i>	<i>At each dawn you fill us with joy</i>
<i>No quiero perderte</i>	<i>I do not want to lose you</i>
<i>Me duele ver que no te respeten</i>	<i>It hurts to see that they don't respect you</i>
<i>Madre</i>	<i>Mother</i>
<i>Aún recuerdo tu color azul claro</i>	<i>I still remember your clear blue colour</i>
<i>Casi pintado por Picasso</i>	<i>Almost painted by Picasso</i>
<i>Y verme reflejado en ti.</i>	<i>And see myself reflected in you.</i>

<i>Eres una de las siete maravillas</i>	<i>You are one of the seven wonders</i>
<i>Pero lastimosamente ahora vives en agonía</i>	<i>But pitifully you now live in agony</i>
<i>Wach'alal, mach'olinemta nun b'anakan chawe,</i>	<i>Brother/sister, I don't come to scold you,</i>
<i>Xa Juun pixaab' nun ya'akan cha wacha</i>	<i>I only come to give you some advice</i>
<i>Xata jaqtak'a jar a wech</i>	<i>I hope you open your eyes</i>
<i>No intento crear controversia</i>	<i>I don't mean to create controversy</i>
<i>Si no conciencia</i>	<i>Only awareness</i>
<i>Ciertamente vengo a abrir la mente de toda esa gente que cree</i>	<i>I certainly come to open the minds of all those people who believe</i>
<i>Que el lago es eterno</i>	<i>That the lake is eternal</i>
<i>Simplemente está enfermo</i>	<i>Simply she is sick</i>
<i>Así que te invito a cuidarlo</i>	<i>So I invite you to take care of it</i>
<i>Y posiblemente recuperarlo</i>	<i>And possibly recuperate it</i>
<i>Como no te voy a hacer una rolita</i>	<i>Why wouldn't I write you a little song</i>
<i>Si tu me has dado un buen regalo</i>	<i>If you have given me a good gift</i>
<i>"Lago"</i>	<i>"Lake"</i>

Like Disney, hip-hop is a motor of processes of globalisation, but through Sanick's performances, it has become a vehicle to promulgate an ancestral message of respect, much in the same way elders' *consejos* did for previous generations. In this way, revindication in San Pedro is unfolding through the transmodern merging of modern hip-hop and ancestral relationality. From appearances alone, this new transmodern worlding might be mistaken as modern, but as Blaser (2013a) states:

Worlding [...] never takes place in a vacuum without connections to other ways of worlding. Yet the connections do not cancel their radical differences. Radically different worlds are being enacted in front of our noses, even if they now involve computers and the internet (p.558)

Matching Blaser's description, Sanick can be seen to be enacting a radically different world. However, the most radical aspect of his song is not the ancestral message contained within its lyrics, but rather the manner in which it was penned. Sanick explained this process following his performance at the festival:

The song 'Ati't Ya' arose from a dream. [...] On this occasion [in the dream] we were swimming, and it was as if something told me to pick up something in the lake, and when I picked it up [...] it was as if a woman was speaking to me, [saying] that I had to make a song to the lake because the lake had gifted me something. Yes, like I was indebted to the lake, so I knew [the lyrics] like this.

Sanick's explanation invites us to take other worlds seriously and consider the possibility that the lake is actively involved in, and perhaps responsible for San Pedro's revindication movement herself.¹⁷⁶ As I mentioned earlier, dreams are one of the few ways the lake is still able to communicate to Pedranos. She may therefore be intentionally using Sanick to communicate a message of respect. From this perspective 'Ati't Ya' is not a song *about* the lake, but *of* the lake.

Conclusion

Building upon Chapter 6, in this chapter I have explained how San Pedro's revindication movement is characterised by ontological ambiguities. This valuable insight enables a more nuanced interpretation of the ontological dimensions of the megacollector conflict and a means to considering it as more than 'a mere resource conflict' (Coombes et al., 2012a). This chapter also concludes Part 1's discussion of the revindication of Tz'unun Ya'. As I will show in Part 2, this context of revindication is critical to understanding Pedranos' articulation of their opposition to the megacollector.

¹⁷⁶ Theriault (2017) similarly commits to widening the ontological purview in his investigation of how politics in Palawan is affected by dream encounters with 'supernatural' agencies.

PART 2:

The Megacollector Conflict



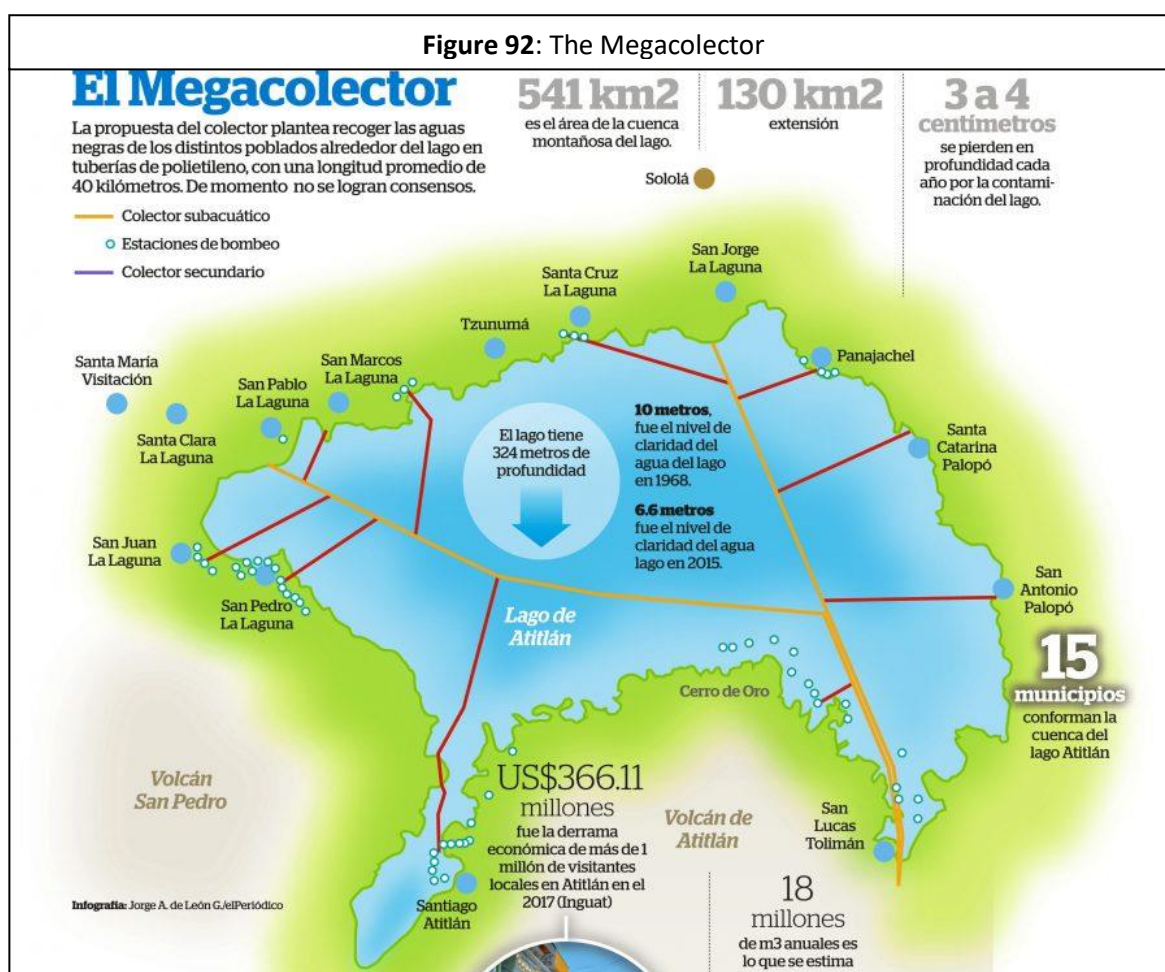
'Megacollector the future' (2019) (image courtesy of the artist, Juan Henry Méndez Chavajay)

Introducing the Megacolector Conflict

Having outlined San Pedro's revindication movement in Part 1, Part 2 will discuss how revindication has galvanised Pedranos' response to the megacolector. Before getting started however, I need to contextualise the conflict. In the following section, I will outline the logistics of the megacolector, followed by the key actors involved in the conflict, and finally a brief overview of its development over time (including a timeline of major events). It my aim that this section can be used to refer back to throughout Part 2 as required.

The Logistics of the Megacolector

The megacolector (literally 'mega collector') is a wastewater megaproject proposed as a solution to the lake's contamination problem. It aims to prevent the lakeside communities' wastewater from entering the lake by instead exporting it outside of the basin. The megacolector effectively consists of two separate projects. The first is a piped drainage system within each of the lakeside communities, and the second is a much larger pipe connecting all of these systems together (Figure 92).

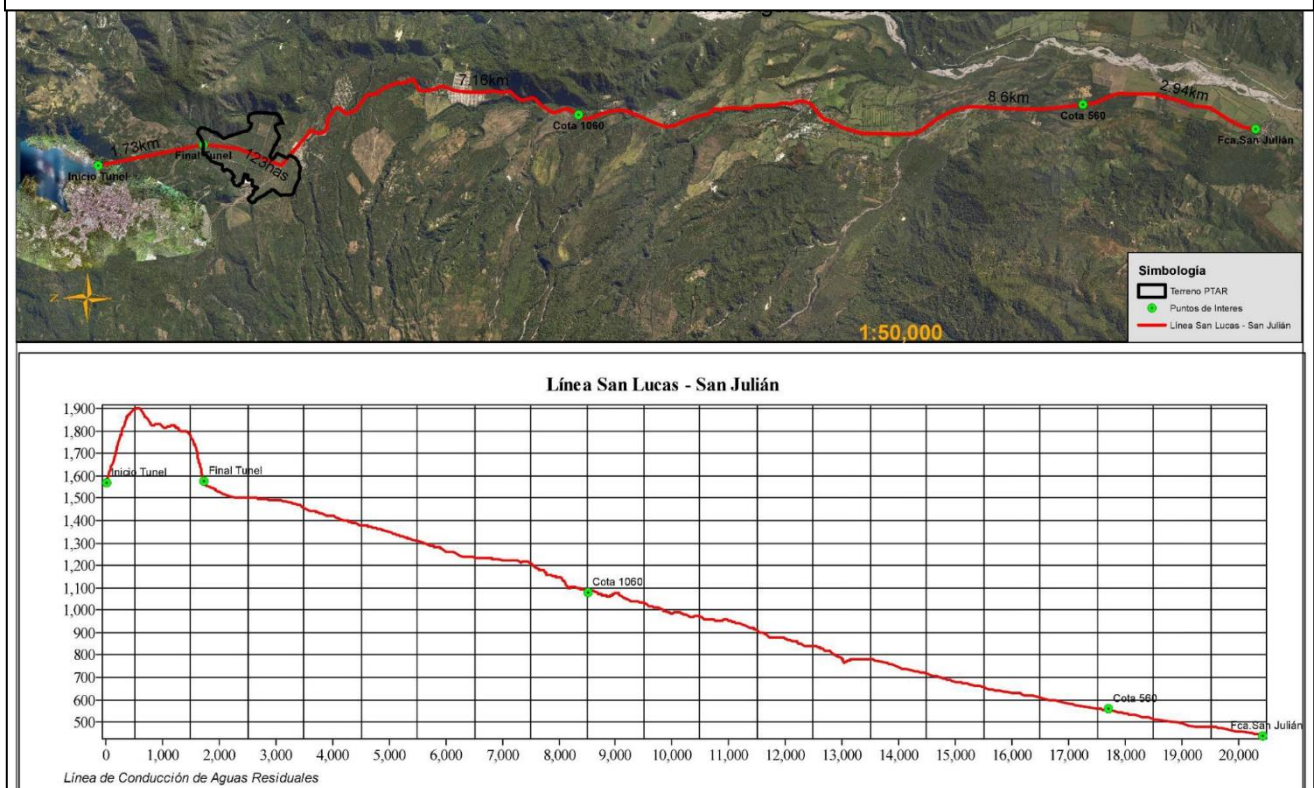


The tube is designed to exit the south east of the basin by the town of San Lucas Tolimán, where the wastewater will then be pumped to a tertiary WWTP (wastewater treatment plant) at 'finca San Julian' owned by USAC (the University of San Carlos). The system is intended to be financially self-sufficient, generating an income through three principal means.

1. The methane produced from the treatment process will be sold as biogas.
2. As the treated wastewater makes its way towards the Pacific coast, the drop in altitude (Figure 93) will allow for the construction of three small hydroelectric plants, generating saleable electricity (AALA, 2018b).
3. Nutrient rich wastewater will be sold as valuable liquid fertilizer to agroindustry on the Pacific coast, where it is estimated to be able to support the production of 5,000 hectares (Bordatto, 2019).

The cost of the megacollector's construction is estimated at US \$215 million (Escalón, 2020), and once built, it is expected to have a life span of at least 25 years. There is still considerable speculation as to how the megacollector will be funded, but the government has approved the go ahead for international bank loan applications (Ravinal Catú, 2020).

Figure 93: The Megacollector's route to the Pacific Coast



AALA (2018b)

Key Actors

In this section I will introduce the key actors involved in the megacollector conflict, integrating this with an overview of a history of the megacollector's development. To help make sense of what is a very complex situation, I have provided Table 3 listing both the key actors involved in the megacollector conflict (highlighted), as well as others which are involved to varying degrees in the lake's environmental/political management (many of whom I also interviewed). Table 4 meanwhile provides a list of the main AALA employees who will be mentioned in Part 2.

Table 3: Key Actors			
POLITICAL ACTOR	SAN PEDRO LA LAGUNA	LAKE BASIN	NATIONAL
Governmental	-The Municipality -The Environment Committee	- AMSCLAE -Gobierno de Sololá	-MARN -MAGA -MP -CONAP -INGUAT
Non-Governmental (NGO)	-Taa' Pi't -CICC -Colectivo Tz'unun Ya'	- AALA * (see Table 4 below) -Vivamos Mejor -Rotary Club -Tui'k Ruch Lew -Pura Vida -Viva Lago Atitlán	
Civil Society	- COCODES - Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' -Association of Fishermen -Comité de Campesinos -Mokaaj l'xijat -Asociación Jabel Ya' -Red de Mujeres -Radio Sembrador -Acción Católica	-Manclalaguna	-CCDA
Ancestral Governance	-Elder Council	- Ajpop Tinamit -Alcaldía Indígena de Sololá -Cabecera de Santiago Atitlán	
Academic Institution		-CEA (Centro de Estudios de Atitlán) at UVG	-ALMG -ERIS (USAC)
Business		-Mosan	-CACIF

Table 4: Key AALA Employees	
Chesley Smith/José Toriello	Former President/ Current President
Anna Apolito	Managing director
Eduardo Aguirre	Project manager of the megacollector
Haydee Marroquín González	Communications campaign coordinator
Francisco Coche	Indigenous promoter (conflict mediator)
Laura Churunel Quiacaín	Indigenous promoter

The megacollector's origins can be traced to the algal bloom of 2009, which forced authorities to better consider how to best resolve the lake's contamination. In 2013, engineers from ERIS – USAC's Regional School of Sanitary Engineering and Hydraulic Resources, alongside the civil engineer, Stuart Oakley (from the University of Chico, California) and his students developed plans for the megacollector based upon a similar project at Lake Tahoe (USA). These plans were adopted by AMSCLAE - *La Autoridad para el Manejo Sostenible de la Cuenca del Lago Atitlán y su Entorno* (the Authority for the Sustainable Management of the Atitlán Basin and its Surrounding Area).



AMSCLAE is a technical and scientific governmental institution founded in 1996 to plan, coordinate, and execute the measures and actions necessary to conserve, preserve and protect the ecosystem of the lake (AMSCLAE, 2020b). It works closely with NGOs, municipal authorities and academic institutions to carry out environmental projects. It is the main governmental body operating at the lake, and it is presided over by Guatemala's Vice President. However, private interests are also represented on its board of directors, although none of the Indigenous communities are.

AMSCLAE spearheaded the promotion of the megacollector in 2014/2015, when it was included in its so-called 'Plan Maestro' (Master Plan), and 'Plan de Rescate' (Rescue Plan) for the lake. However, this was not well received by the Indigenous communities. Several Pedranos for instance criticised the forceful manner in which Ivan Azurdia, AMSCLAE's then executive director, presented the megacollector at San Pedro's COMUDE:

This was like a nuclear bomb when [the megacollector] came [...] Ivan Azurdia came to impose it, saying that you must do it, and that you must do it! (Chepe Pop – community leader and dentist)

The forceful manner of this promotion was confirmed by others, like this Guatemalan scientist:

I think they messed up [...] because they jumped very fast into this and were very aggressive in the way they were selling the project, saying that it's the only solution is probably their biggest mistake.

Due to the Indigenous communities' hostile reaction, the megacollector was put on hold for a couple of years. It re-emerged at the close of 2017, this time under the leadership of AALA.



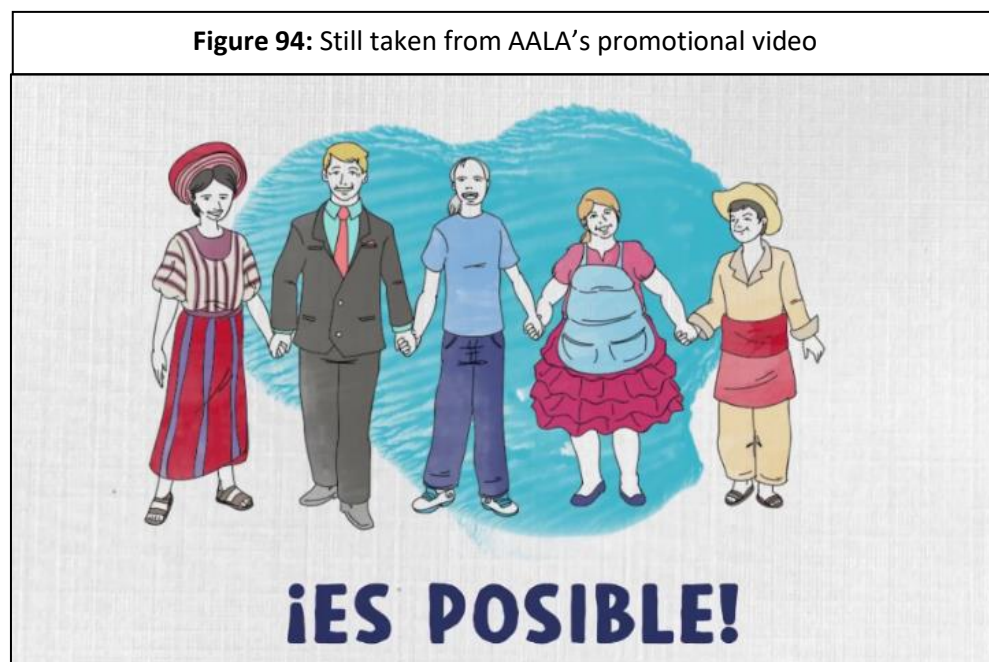
AALA - Asociación de Amigos del Lago de Atitlán (Association of Friends of Lake Atitlán) is the main environmental NGO operating in the basin. It was founded in 1990 by a group of concerned 'neighbours', mainly elite foreign and Guatemalan vacation homeowners. One long-term foreign resident explained that in its early days, AALA served as little more than a social club for sailing and cocktail parties. Over the years, AALA has orientated itself more strongly towards environmentalism and expanded its activities to environmental education, reforestation, scientific research, and

recycling. In recent years it has taken on some of AMSCLAE's roles, having greater flexibility and financial resources at its disposal.

The association is funded in part through the donations of its members, many of whom are amongst Guatemala's wealthiest businessmen. Hard facts are hard to come by, but according to one member there are 120 associates within AALA, most of whom are vacation (chalet) homeowners. For this reason, Pedranos often pejoratively refer to AALA as 'chaleteros' (chalet owners):

We have to question who AALA are, they are the owners of the chalets, they don't understand the people, they are chaleteros, they are people who have money (Felipe Chavajay - activist)

AALA is still an elite association. Despite describing itself as a 'civil partnership of friends and neighbours', (Figure 94), its annual membership fee (apparently over 200 US dollars) automatically prices out most Indigenous residents of the lake. Table 5 below provides a non-exhaustive list of some of the many powerful companies which are members or allies of the association. The links to agroindustry are highlighted.



AALA (2018d)

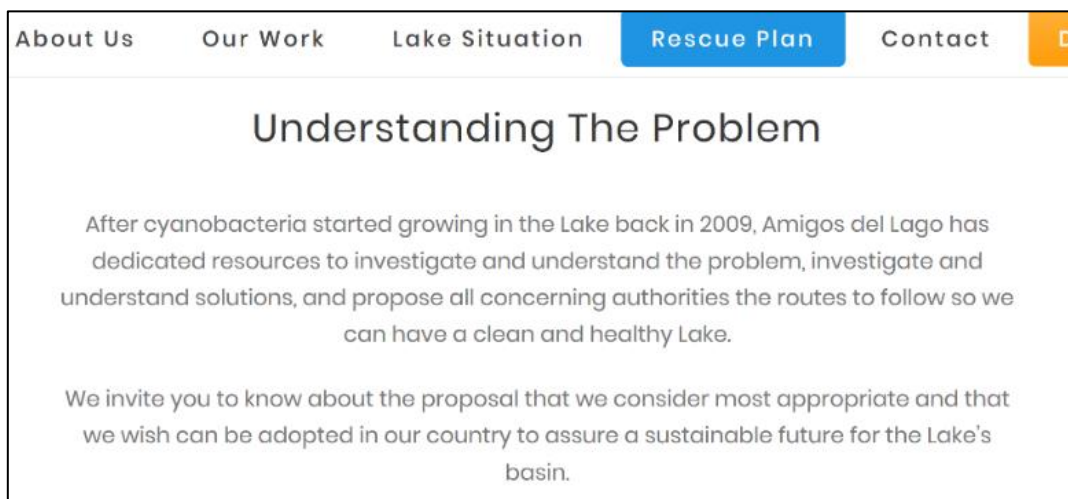
Table 5: AALA's Business Connections (Adapted from Aviña-Escot, 2020)		
BUSINESS NAME	BUSINESS TYPE	ORIGIN
Pollo Campero	Food industry	Guatemala
Cementos Progreso	Construction	Guatemala
Agua Pura Salvavidas	Food industry	Guatemala
Bebidas Gaseosas Salvavidas, S.A. (Supercola)	Construction	Guatemala
Cervecería Centroamericana S.A.	Food industry	Guatemala
The Central America Bottling Corporation (CBC)	Food industry	Multinational
DISAGRO	Agricultural supplies	Guatemalan with a presence in Central America and Colombia
Tecniseguros, Corredores de Seguros S.A.	Security	Central America
Geocon	Geotechnical engineering	Central America
Productores del Aire	Medical gases	Guatemala
Perfumería Fetiche S.a>	Commercial	Guatemala
Grupo Tecun	Industrial machinery supplies	Central America
Banco Agromercantil (Bam)	Finance	Guatemala
Joyería Papidu	Commercial	Guatemala
Tienda de ropa Distefano	Commercial	Guatemala
Tacobell	Food industry	Transnational
Porta Hotel	Hotel	Guatemala
Centroamerica Porter Novelli	Publicity	Central America, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador
Ventanas Alemanas	Door and window manufacturing	US and Latin America
MAX	Commercial	Guatemala
Pantaleón S.A.	Agroindustry (sugar cane on Guatemala's Pacific Coast)	Central America
Banco FICOHSA	Finance	Central America
Posada Don Rodrigo	Hotel	Guatemala

Rebranding the Megacolector

AALA were involved in the first promotion of the megacolector, but in 2017 they assumed full control from AMSCLAE. In light of the previous failed attempt, AALA have rebranded the megacolector, seeking to dispel its negative perception as an imposition. This rebranding has involved a notable softening of the tone used in publicly communication. For example, AALA's employees describe the megacolector as just a proposal, whilst professing an openness to alternatives:

We're not saying that it's the only proposal, there may be another two or three institutions that give their proposals (Francisco Coche)

This tonal shift is also mirrored in AALA's online output. On their website, explicit references to the megacolector as the 'only solution' have been replaced by less provocative descriptions:



AALA (2019b)

Another key aspect of the megacollector's rebranding was AALA's initiation of a social communications campaign in April 2018 to better socialise the megacollector in the lake's Indigenous communities. Haydee Marroquín González, who is in charge of its coordination explained that an earlier lack of socialisation was the reason for the megacollector's rejection in 2014/2015:

These are the errors that we have to pay for, because all projects have infrastructure, any project needs a minimum of six months of socialisation and dialogue and after that comes the infrastructure. And that was what we lacked.

As part of the megacollector's rebranding strategy, AALA hired a PR firm to help develop a new title - 'ni una gota más de agua sucia al lago' (not one more drop of dirty water in the lake). AALA's managing director, Anna Apolito explained that 'ni una gota más' (as it is often referred to in shorthand) is more than just a title, it is a concept:

'Ni una gota más' is a concept [...] that we want to foresee not even one more drop of dirty water entering lake Atitlán, and it is done through various ways [...] the concept itself is to improve the quality of life and health of the inhabitants of the basin, to reach a certain water quality



AALA (2017a)

This reconceptualisation downplays the megacollector as a distinct project, as Eduardo Aguirre, the megacollector's project manager explains:

Firstly, we are changing the focus to water, health, and life, and that the colector is only a means to achieve this objective. It's not the project. The project is water, health and life, rights, we are working to emphasise this.

The megacollector's visibility is further obscured by AALA's simultaneous operation of multiple titles. Their website for instance makes no reference to 'ni una gota más', instead, another title - 'Agua Limpia ya!' (Clean Water Already!) is presented. Frequent rebranding enables AALA to flexibility respond to the megacollector's opposition:

Actually exposing ourselves like that gives us valuable tools you know, because now we'll learn what [the opposition] are thinking, how they are thinking, and we can adapt, and that's what we're doing

(Eduardo Aguirre)



AALA (2018a)

Despite the megacolector's rebranding, the Indigenous communities still see the megacolector as an exclusionary imposition.

The Indigenous Opposition

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, San Pedro is the main Indigenous community leading opposition to the megacolector. In September 2019 Pedrano community leaders delivered an *amparo* to the Constitutional Court in an attempt to suspend it. This was the culmination of years of organising, and a detailed discussion of the community's mobilisation is provided in Chapter 10. In this section I will provide a brief overview of who exactly the Indigenous opposition are.

Some Pedrano cocodes were strongly opposed to the megacolector in 2014/2015, but there was no organised opposition movement as such. When the megacolector was revived by AALA in 2017 however, a distinct movement emerged in the form of 'Comunidad Tz'unun Ya'' ('Community



Tz'unun Ya'). This was an initiative of a group of committed cocodes who in 2019 sought to unite diverse facets of community organisation (cocodes, the Elder Council and the municipality) under one cohesive umbrella. Comunidad

Tz'unun Ya' has become the principal platform on which San Pedro's opposition to the megacolector is voiced. They publish many statements on their Facebook page, and coordinate the direction of the opposition movement.¹⁷⁷



The Indigenous opposition is also organised on a wider scale, most notably through the 'Departmental alliance of Ancestral Authorities Ajop Tinamit Oxlajuj Imox', known as 'Ajpop Tinamit'. This loose alliance of the lake's ancestral authorities officially formed in January 2018 to better coordinate efforts against urgent threats to the lake. Its leadership is spread between four *cargadores*, and monthly

¹⁷⁷ Before its creation, a wide array of different Facebook pages were used to post anti-megacolector material.

assemblies are organised to democratically rotate around the different communities. Some of Comunidad Tz'unun Ya's leadership are key members. Like Comunidad Tz'unun Ya', Ajpop Tinamit has also organised press conferences and made public declarations against the megacolector.

A Note on the Representation of Pedranos

Throughout Part 2 I refer to 'Pedranos' or 'the community', and I recognise this as problematic. As Simpson (2014) criticises, there is a tendency for scholars to romanticise the internal harmony within Indigenous communities, to flatten the important internal differences in politics, beliefs, and leadership structures. This is certainly not my intention here. I understand that Pedranos are not a homogenous group, but I refer to them in this way primarily for ease of communication. To avoid repeating myself, I will establish here just exactly what I mean when I refer to 'Pedranos' or 'the community'.

During my fieldwork, I interviewed around 100 Pedranos, yet the majority of the opinions and quotes about the megacolector are taken from a much narrower selection of community leaders closely involved in the opposition movement (i.e. Comunidad Tz'unun Ya'). While their opinions were more hardened against the megacolector than the population at large, this in part reflects how the opposition movement developed, spreading out from them into the wider community. When I conducted my interviews, most Pedranos were still unaware of the megacolector because community leaders had not yet begun their awareness campaign. Although it is incorrect to claim these opinions as representative of all Pedranos, these community leaders are mostly cocodes and thus the elected representatives of the community. Moreover, though their number is small, their opinions hardly misrepresent the community - the megacolector has few supporters in San Pedro.

I further refer to the opinions of these community leaders as 'Pedranos' or 'the community' because this is how their opposition movement self-identifies – as 'Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' - i.e. the community of San Pedro. Assuming this identity is a savvy strategy which enables these community leaders to symbolically co-opt the entire community as a platform for their opposition movement. Although in reality Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' does not represent the whole community, they do count on the community's widespread support.

While Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' presents a unified front against the megacolector, even this small group of community leaders is far from cohesive. Through attending community meetings, I was privy to some of its extant tensions and power dynamics. My main point of contact during fieldwork was Concepción Batzin, the president of the COCODE of Chuacanté, and she explained

how as a female president, she faced many difficulties as a result of her gender.¹⁷⁸ Her male subordinates were unhappy that she was president, and during meetings they would often assert their voices loudly and look for opportunities to undermine her authority. In private, they (falsely) complained that she took credit for their work, and they would try to negatively influence my opinion of her.¹⁷⁹ In bringing up this example of misogyny, I aim to highlight my awareness of the tensions within community organisations. However, I defend my use of the term ‘Pedranos’ because of the very way the community has come together as a unified front against the megacollector, *in spite* of the inherent tensions which exist (see Chapter 10).

Finally, it is worth emphasising that the ‘community’ under discussion here is not a discrete or closed entity, even if this is how it is presented.¹⁸⁰ San Pedro’s opposition movement is embedded and operates within multiple scales of social activism, solidarity, and resistance, both within the wider lake basin, and the country as a whole. As I mentioned in the previous section, it is connected to Ajpop Tinamit’s wider alliance of the lake’s ancestral authorities.¹⁸¹ But Pedrano community leaders are also enmeshed within many other networks which are similarly influential in shaping the opposition movement’s articulation. Notable examples include various *campesino* and DOT (Defence of Territory) networks, an interaction which connects community leaders to the experience of other communities in the country affected by extractivism. It was through these political networks for instance that the case of the megacollector came to be presented at the Latin American Water Tribunal held in Guadalajara, Mexico in October 2018 (TRAGUA, 2018).¹⁸²

This concludes my overview of the key actors involved in the megacollector conflict, or at least those key organisations involved. As I will discuss later on, there are also some important individuals whose involvement is independent of any formal institution. To help make sense of the development of the megacollector conflict over the past few years, I have constructed a timeline detailing some of the key events which will be referred to over the following three chapters.

¹⁷⁸ As Bastos Amigo (2020) notes, the recent horizontalizing of community hierarchies in Guatemala has created new space for the participation of women, but this has frequently provoked tensions and internal conflict. For more on the challenges faced by Indigenous women in Guatemala and of community feminism, see Chirix (1997; 2009); Velásquez Nimatuj (2011b) and Cabnal (2015).

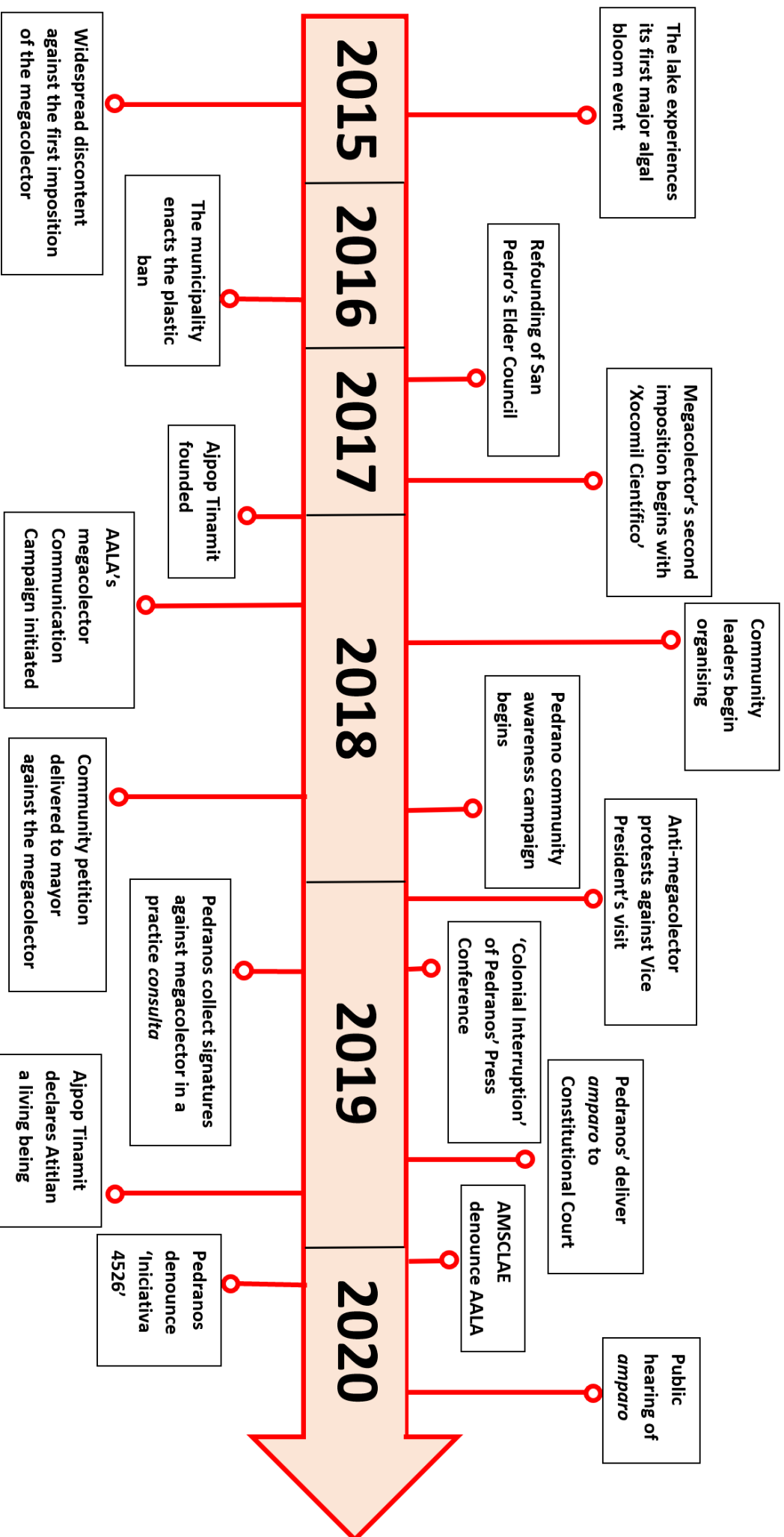
¹⁷⁹ See also Aviña Escot (2020) for a discussion of Concepción’s experience in San Pedro’s patriarchal politics

¹⁸⁰ San Pedro is for instance closely linked to the neighbouring Tz’utujil communities of Santiago Atitlán and San Juan with whom Pedranos share many familial ties.

¹⁸¹ The powerful ancestral authorities of Sololá (Alcaldía Indígena de Sololá) and Santiago Atitlán (Cabecera de Santiago Atitlán) have also protested the megacollector. However, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, it is San Pedro which is widely seen to be the centre and leader of the opposition movement.

¹⁸² The case was presented by the CCDA (Peasant Committee of the Highlands) and the deputy of the Guatemalan political party ‘Convergencia’ (TRAGUA, 2018).

TIMELINE OF THE MEGACOLECTOR CONFLICT



Chapter 8: The Megacolector is the *Only* Solution

Now that the megacolector conflict has been contextualised, I can begin to explore it in depth. To do so, I utilise an analytical lens of MCD. This explains Part 2's organisational layout, each chapter of which broadly corresponds to a concept within the MCD triad. Accordingly, this chapter begins with a focus on modernity (the megacolector's modern rhetoric), Chapter 9 on coloniality (the megacolector's colonial logic), and finally Chapter 10 on decoloniality (Pedranos' opposition movement).

There are a few reasons why I chose to organise Part 2 through the MCD triad. Firstly, it helps to illustrate the multifaceted nature of the megacolector conflict as more than a 'mere resource conflict' (Coombes et al., 2012a) by showing how the megacolector's modern/colonial imposition constrains San Pedro's political and epistemic autonomy. As such it connects Pedranos' opposition movement to decolonial processes of revindication in the community (Part 1). A more significant reason for this layout however stems from the activist researcher role that I settled on during my fieldwork (Chapter 3). In the spirit of 'walking with' Pedranos, I want to expose the megacolector's modern/colonial dynamic. It is for this reason that this chapter is primarily a discourse analysis, centred on deconstructing the modern discourses which AALA uses to naturalise the megacolector as the *only* solution to the lake's contamination. Within this analysis, I will also explore the strategies Pedranos use to counter such discourses. It is here where ontological excesses can be discerned, providing an opportunity also to interrogate PO's claims about the nature of ontological conflicts.

I begin this chapter by discussing the political economy of the megacolector conflict as a resource conflict. I then explain how the megacolector is worlded as a modern/colonial imposition, setting the scene for my discourse analysis of the megacolector's modern rhetoric in which I will outline the three main discourses (of expertise, modernity and objectivity) that AALA utilises to present the megacolector as the *only* solution to the lake's contamination.

A Resource Conflict

The megacolector conflict is certainly a resource conflict, and the intention of this thesis is not to deny this, only to prove that it also *much more* than a resource conflict. Although the political economy of the megacolector conflict is not my main concern, it is still important to establish this context, and this section attends to this need.

The main underlying contention of Pedranos' opposition is that the megacollector is an extractivist resource grab dressed up as an environmental measure. This perception is premised on two principal factors, and more specifically, the interrelation between them:

1. The interests that AALA represent.
2. The megacollector's sale of wastewater to *finqueros*.

As I outlined in the previous section, AALA is an elite association of *chaleteros* with many corporate connections, including to agroindustry. I also noted that the sale of wastewater to plantations on the Pacific Coast is claimed by AALA as a minor but necessary detail to help ensure the megacollector's economic self-sufficiency. Pedranos don't assume these two factors to be unrelated. On the contrary, they argue their coincidence as the megacollector's true motivation, and the lake's environmental deterioration as just a pretext:

They say that the lake has only a little life remaining, but these are pure stories because what they want is to take the water for their sugar and palm plantations. (Paulina del Carmen González Navichoc)

As I will demonstrate, their suspicions are only amplified by AALA's lack of transparency and attempts to deliberately obscure these connections. Although I write this chapter from a standpoint supportive of Pedranos' opposition movement, I don't set out to make claims about AALA's *intentions*, since there is no way to confirm these with any certainty. Rather, I aim to shed light on AALA's *actions*, and explain how these have engendered Pedranos' opposition movement.

Enemies of the Lake

*Every time that I pass by here
I must talk with you about our secrets...
and now that I've returned
I should tell you publicly
that the businessmen of death
'THE ENEMIES OF THE LAKE AND THE PEOPLE'
those by the surname of Gutierrez, Bosch, Castillo, Botrán,
Torrebiarte, Arzú and others...
they are threatening you
they want to install without consulting
a 'megacollector' in your veins
(Mash-Mash, 2019)*

The anti-megacollector poem above was widely shared on Facebook in 2019, and it is informative on multiple accounts. On the one hand, in addressing the lake directly as a person, the

poet Mash-Mash reveals the very ontological excesses which I argue emerge within the megacollector conflict. More pertinent for this section's argument however is how he directly conflates AALA with Guatemala's oligarchical families. He uses the antonym 'enemigos del lago' (enemies of the lake), which is how many Pedranos refer to AALA ('Friends of the Lake'). They do so because of AALA's corporate links, a connection which AALA attempts to downplay.

AALA's corporate backing is hardly unique. Corporations often seek to improve their image through corporate social responsibility (CSR) 'greenwashing' initiatives with environmental NGOs (Watson, 2016). However, given the high levels of corruption in Guatemala, such ties raise greater suspicions. The premise of greenwashing is for a company to advertise its green credentials. However, in AALA's case, the lack of transparency regarding these links suggests that their intentions are possibly more than just philanthropic. When I raised this issue with Haydee Marroquín González (an AALA employee), she insisted on AALA's transparency:

AALA of course is financed by Guatemalan businesses [...] maybe not CACIF directly, but they are businesses that give us donations so that we can work, and a lot of them of course have their houses here on the shores of the lake. It's not a lie and we have never hidden it.

Personally however, I found it very difficult to trace these connections, Table 5 (p.207) which earlier listed AALA's corporate connections was the result of Aviña Escot's (2020) hard work.

What intentions do they have behind this? This is the dark side. We've investigated who is financing AALA, [...] There is a website where some of their names appear, but not all of them. (Community leader)

Contrary to Haydee's claims, another AALA employee admitted that AALA intentionally downplays its corporate connections:

People against us had seen this, that they are big companies supporting us, but it's social responsibility [...] We try to avoid showing this because it's something of a contradiction [...] so in this sense we try to be discreet about it.

This tactic speaks to the double bind that AALA are caught in. On the one hand, they are heavily dependent upon the business elites' financial donations, but this relationship also delegitimises their work in the eyes of the Indigenous communities.¹⁸³ Highlighting their corporate connections would not benefit AALA, but neither does the alternative, their lack of transparency arouses rather than tempers suspicions.

In light of Guatemala's colonial context (Chapter 4), the megacollector would undoubtedly have come under heavy suspicion no matter which organisation was leading it. Even an NGO lacking

¹⁸³ One AALA affiliate for instance is 'Salvavidas', a company which as I discussed in Chapter 5, Pedranos are highly critical of.

AALA's corporate links would also likely have faced an uphill struggle in such politically charged terrain. However, this situation is compounded in AALA's case due to their lack of transparency. This comes across as deceptive, especially in regard to the most politically sensitive aspect of the megacolector – the sale of wastewater to *finqueros*, which is not mentioned anywhere on AALA's website (AALA, 2018a). This omission could be AALA's way of pre-emptively trying to avoid a knee-jerk rejection from the *finquero*-hostile Indigenous communities, but it only allays the Indigenous communities' suspicions that something untoward is going on. Of particular note is the fact that the elites helping to finance the megacolector are the same ones who stand to benefit from the sale of wastewater.

Despite the paucity of available information, Pedranos are aware of AALA's corporate links and of *finqueros*' involvement in the megacolector. Their distrust stems from an understanding that with the elite's close involvement, the megacolector is unlikely to be motivated by anything other than profit:

As a project of chaleteros, of people with money, will it really benefit our families? For this reason, it's very difficult to understand, because normally they only do things to benefit themselves. (Francisco Quiacaín Rodríguez – community leader and music shop owner)

Despite what all Guatemalans know about the elite's extractivist tendencies (Chapter 4), AALA expects the Indigenous communities to trust in their involvement in this particular instance without providing any guarantees of their good intentions:

[The businessmen] are not doing it for bad reasons, they're doing it because they have the money to help us today. (Anna Apolito)

Sure they also have their intentions, but they're not bad intentions, they are simply intentions (Haydee Marroquín González)

Pedranos on the other hand fear that the *finqueros* covet more than just wastewater. They contend that they would use the megacolector to also extract the lake's water, effectively privatising it for their plantations:

The big businessmen like CACIF, the capitalists, they want to take water for their benefit. This is their intention [...] How do you think that they will earn millions of quetzales to install tubes only to transport wastewater to other places? No, they have other vested interests with this project. (Antonio - fisherman)

Pedranos have analysed in detail how such a water grab could occur. Their ideas are laid out in a recent article published by San Pedro's cocodes, titled 'The Silent Project to Privatize Lake Atitlán' (COCODES, 2019) (see Figure 95). Within, it is argued that the privatisation of Lake Atitlán is likely to follow the French model of privatisation, whereby the state retains a 51% stake so as to

maintain an appearance of public-private partnership (PPP). They expect the government will fund the megacolector through external loans from banks such as BCIE - Banco Centroamericano de Integración Económica. Their fears are evidenced by meetings between BCIE and the government's Finance Minister (AGN, 2018; Gordillo, 2018).

What they are really looking for is to control all the decision making related to the water and its reserves [...]

This model seeks to take water from the lake, convert it into a good and to then sell it to whomever can buy it, damaging the lake itself and its people and townships, since the sanitation and treatment of the lake will increase the cost of water for the people that depend upon it.

(COCODES, 2019, p.12/13)

Figure 95: The Silent Project to Privatize Lake Atitlán (COCODES, 2019)



When I broached the possibility of *finqueros'* ulterior motives with AALA, my suggestion was rebuffed on the basis that they don't need the lake's water:

If you ask a finquero below the table, [...] they will say, "We don't want to steal anything, because excuse me, but we don't need it". (Haydee Marroquín González)

But just to clarify and so that you believe me, we've never talked to them about a business, we just assume that it's going to be interesting for them. There's no sugar lord or palm oil lord behind this. We've never talked to any one of them. There are some private donors that do donate to what we're doing, because they have houses here, not because they want that water. (Eduardo Aguirre)

Haydee and Eduardo's counterargument however doesn't quite respond to Pedranos' specific concerns. Pedranos don't suggest that the *finqueros'* interest in the megacolector is motivated by their *current* water needs, but their *future* needs (COCODES, 2019).

Water shortages will affect agroindustry, and for the agroindustry that we have on the south coast it's difficult to get hold of water, for this reason they need to secure water from here.
(Community leader)

Pedranos see their fears evidenced in Guatemala's long-term National Development Plan 'K'atun 2032' (CNDU, 2014). The plan outlines a national strategy to redistribute water resources to the south coast in order to promote industrialisation. Pedranos argue that the plan is orientated towards securing a water supply for the *finqueros* in the long-term (COCODES, 2019):

What they want with K'atun 2032 is to change all the territory so someday they will take all the water from the lake to the city. Now they are thinking only about wastewater, but is it true that it's only wastewater that they will take?

(Don Salvador)



Alvizures (2019)

The *finqueros*' demand for water is exacerbated by climate change and an increasing likelihood of water scarcity. The possibility of a drying climate is not just hypothetical, but already a lived reality for Pedrano *campesinos*. During my fieldwork, the fiercest blazes in living memory raged for weeks on San Pedro volcano's slopes as the usual rains failed to materialise (Figure 96).

Figure 96: Climate Change in San Pedro.

The painting below by Norberto Salvador Coche Quiacaín was motivated by San Pedro's 2018 forest fires.



Agroindustry requires vast quantities of water for water-hungry sugar, coffee, and African palm plantations. In other parts of the country, *finqueros* have already diverted rivers and extracted groundwater, leaving some unfortunate communities without any water (Alonso-Fradejas, 2018; Grandia 2012; Pomadreda Garcia, 2018). Pedranos are acutely aware of this phenomenon which often makes national headlines (Contreras, 2016), and they have exploited it to mobilise the community in their opposition campaign (Figure 97). Much closer to home, in 2016 it was discovered that a coffee *finca* had for many years been extracting water from Lake Atitlán through a tube in San Lucas Tolimán (Julajuj, 2017). This incident had significant implications for the Indigenous communities' reception of the megacollector through demonstrating how a water grab could occur in practice right under their nose:

We are not experts in megaprojects, we couldn't say that it's only wastewater that they're extracting [...] unfortunately in Guatemala they grab everything [...] A finca in San Lucas was doing this, removing water from the lake for the corrupt businesses without the community knowing. (Francisco Quiacaín Rodríguez – community leader)

For many Pedranos, the San Lucas incident adds to a long list of precedents paving the way for the megacollector's own expropriation.¹⁸⁴

Figure 97: 'Capitalist thirst wants to leave us without a lake' - Facebook opposition poster



Herederos del Lago (2019a)

¹⁸⁴ Particularly President Alvaro Arzu's (1996-2000) unsuccessful plan to supply Guatemala City with Atitlán's water, which several older Pedranos mentioned.

Gaslighting the Opposition

In the previous section I explained that Pedranos oppose the megacollector principally due to their fear that the elites will use the project as a front to privatise the lake's water. As I have shown, these fears are justified, yet AALA frames the Indigenous opposition as alarmist and irrational through what I suggest is a strategy of 'gaslighting', that is 'a form of psychological abuse with the intentions of making somebody doubt their perception of reality' (Porzucki, 2016). This strategy was revealed in conversations with AALA about the sale of wastewater to *finqueros*.

To take advantage of the wastewater as they do all over the world [...] is not something negative, people think it is something negative. (Anna Apolito)

Here Anna implies that the megacollector's detractors blindly oppose the utilisation of wastewater, but this isn't quite accurate, Pedranos are opposed to its utilisation by *finqueros*.¹⁸⁵ However, Anna's stance doesn't entertain the possibility of *finquero* malpractice.

Eduardo Aguirre was more willing to discuss the *finqueros'* illicit behaviour. However, in his attempt to defend their intentions for the megacollector, he achieved the opposite effect:

Maybe [the finqueros] won't want [the wastewater], they won't want to pay for it because they can just divert the river. So part of that effort of lobbying is to make them want that water, to make it not so easy to just divert the rivers, [...] last year you saw the scandals of how all the sugar fincas were diverting the river Madre Vieja and leaving no water. So I think they'll want this water, because they don't want bad press of diverting water when there's water available for them at a very low cost

In his attempt to reassure me of the *finqueros'* disinterest in wastewater (and their good intentions by implication), Eduardo inadvertently drew attention to their bad behaviour of diverting rivers, the very same fate that Pedranos fear for the lake. Eduardo argues that the *finqueros'* intentions *must* be good, because they don't need to buy Atitlán's wastewater since they could just steal river water for free:

Try to make sense of it, would you buy water when you can just take it from the river? Would you put \$100 million to get dirty water from the lake when you can have a very clean [source for free]. There's no logic behind this argument

He explains that for this reason, *finqueros'* involvement is a PR exercise:

Companies that want to benefit or greenwash their name [...] can tell everyone that they're buying the organic fertilizer from the wastewater of Lake Atitlán, and that's also a good option for the sugar plantations down there:

"Look, we're buying that water you know, and we're paying heavy price on that water because we want to save Lake Atitlán"

Well of course they make money, they always make money, and they're gonna analyse how they're gonna save on fertilizer and how they won't have to divert water, so the social issues

¹⁸⁵ In fact, many welcome the idea of local *campesinos* being able to utilize such wastewater instead of *finqueros*, but this possibility is deemed 'unviable' by AALA.

that they face are not so harsh because they are taking care of the river, they're gonna be good because they're taking care of the lake because they also think a lot of goodwill will come from this.

Eduardo's overall argument implies that the *finqueros* won't steal the lake's water, not because they're not capable of such behaviour (he's already admitted that they are), but because on this occasion they want to improve their image. AALA therefore requires the Indigenous communities to suspend their disbelief of how *finqueros* are known to operate, and in this particular instance gamble on their allegedly sincere intentions.

If improving their image was the *finqueros'* main objective, one might expect explicit details about their involvement to be openly available. After all, transparency is by Eduardo's own admission the best way to deal with the Indigenous communities' 'misinformation':

How to best address the myths and misinformation? You know, it's transparent information face to face, showing them that we have nothing to hide, [...] and just tell the truth, that's it, you know, tell the truth as it is, not hiding anything [...] There's nothing to hide.

However, as I demonstrated in the previous section, AALA has been far from transparent in their public communication about *finqueros'* involvement in the megacollector, a point which a Guatemalan scientist heavily criticised during our interview:

[AALA] don't give you straight answers. Like when they ask them, "Who is going to benefit from this?" And their answer is "Everybody", and that's not the type of answer people want to hear, because if you're going to export water from the watershed to the Pacific Coast and it's going to be bought by sugar cane plantations, that is a kind of issue that people have to know because they say, "We're just going to sell the water". To who? And those are the kind of things which make them lose credibility with the people, that they're incapable of giving straight answers.

AALA's unrelenting insistence of the *finqueros'* good intentions and claiming that any suggestion otherwise is misinformation, is an attempt to gaslight the Indigenous communities and wear down their perception of reality. A reality in which neither megaprojects nor *finqueros* can be trusted. This strategy was most clearly exposed in my interviews with well-informed personnel in authoritative positions.

As someone that knows a little bit about it, I cannot assure you, no. Maybe it can happen.
(MARN employee)

Now it catches my attention, I'll tell you the truth, why the insistence [of the megacollector]? That insistence produces doubts (environmental NGO president)

We don't have all the cards on the table, we don't know if there is something behind this project, or if they are really just trying to help the communities and the environmental quality of the lake (AMSCLAE employee)

Even Luisa Cifuentes the executive director of AMSCLAE admitted that the megacollector could be

utilised in the exact manner that the Indigenous opposition fears:

Water is a resource like gold, and [the Indigenous communities] think that [the finqueros] are only taking the water from the lake to steal it [...] That is a problem, and they're right. There has to be vigilance, and assurances that the water [won't be privatised] because it could happen, the collector could be taken advantage of, [...] [the opposition] will think that, as AALA, they are the elites and that they could be trying to turn a profit out of this. There also has to be vigilance that they don't do that [...] that the suppliers carry out everything with transparency.

Such admissions allowed me to see past AALA's gaslighting tactic and realise that the megacollector could be a resource-grab. Now that I have established this possibility, I can move on to explore how Pedranos' opposition is about more than just the lake's possible privatisation.

Performing the Megacollector as the *Only* Solution

For [AALA] there is never any other option [...] "That's fine and that's it, and the megacollector has to be done". But it shouldn't be like that, even the elders in our community allow themselves to be corrected.

(Community leader)

Pedranos oppose the megacollector because it may portend the lake's privatisation, but this isn't the whole story. They are also opposed to AALA's universalism - its exclusionary and unilateral imposition of the megacollector as the *only* solution to the lake's contamination. In other words, Pedranos are opposed to the megacollector's modern worlding. As I will show in the following sections, AALA's worlding of the megacollector reproduces colonial paradigms (Chapter 4) which act to constrain Pedranos' political and epistemic autonomy. Pedranos' opposition to the megacollector is thus connected to revindication's objective of breaking free of these constraints to achieve greater self-determination.

Legislative Constraints

AALA has attempted to impose the megacollector as the *only* solution through legislative means, invoking a series of *acuerdos gubernativos* (governmental decrees) to force the Indigenous communities' compliance. Decrees 'No. 236-2006' and 'No. 12-2011' set parameters for the permissible discharge of wastewater into Lake Atitlán, which the municipalities are obliged to follow under the threat of fines for non-compliance. AALA argues that the megacollector offers the only viable way to comply with these regulations:

The mayors have to guarantee that they are abiding by the law [...] Either they pump it, they build a hugely sophisticated plant, or they put it into the collector. (Eduardo Aguirre)

Eduardo claims that the only other option for compliance besides the megacolector is sophisticated WWTPs. However, AALA publicly discounts this alternative as unfeasible on their website (AALA, 2018a), leaving the megacolector as the only option.

Pedranos view these laws with suspicion, arguing that they are being invoked to ‘support and prepare the ground for the construction’ of the megacolector (COCODES, 2019, p.12). As one community leader criticised:

Gradually I understood that their mission was to guarantee water in the future, that’s why these laws come with strong sanctions for example for those [municipalities] that don’t have treatment plants. With each of these laws we start to see that they are well planned step by step, first a soft law, then a harder law, and then the harshest law that ends up privatizing the lake

In a written petition against the megacolector (COCODES and Elder Council, 2018),¹⁸⁶ Pedranos argue that these laws are evidence of the business elite’s influence over the state (Chapter 4), suggesting that the two are colluding to privatise the lake:

b) We should not ignore that many of the legislative and regulatory frameworks are part of the licenses that large corporations require for the privatization of this natural element called Atitlán. So we will have to pay necessary attention to the laws that direct the privatization and hoarding of our Grandmother Lake, which only seek to guarantee to companies a monopoly over the use of our Grandmother Lake.

Many of Guatemala’s laws are ignored in practice, and the deadlines for compliance with the wastewater laws have been repeatedly extended by the government. For this reason, Pedranos view AALA’s invocation of the wastewater laws as somewhat arbitrary. They also see it as hypocritical, given how many of AALA’s vacation home-owning members notably violate another governmental decree - ‘No.126-97’ which forbids construction within 200 metres of the lake’s shoreline (Figure 98). As one community leader criticised:

They want the megacolector, they say so. Then let’s start by de-privatizing the beaches, because [AALA] forced the privatization of the beaches even though it is unconstitutional [...] so since they’re talking about legal frameworks, let’s also invoke these legal frameworks

Arbitrary or not, through repeatedly invoking the wastewater laws, AALA is publicly pressuring the municipalities to accept the megacolector. In Chapter 6 I explained how the Ministry of Education’s legislation has limited San Pedro’s efforts to achieve epistemic autonomy. In the same way, MARN’s wastewater laws constrain San Pedro’s freedom to decide on its own wastewater solution. In both cases, it is the state which sets these limits, but AALA lobbies the state and exploits its laws to impose its own agenda – both ‘Educando Para Conservar’ and the megacolector.

¹⁸⁶ Delivered to the mayor by community leaders in August 2018.

Figure 98: ‘The *chaleteros* that privatised our beaches are the same ones who want to privatise the water of the lake’

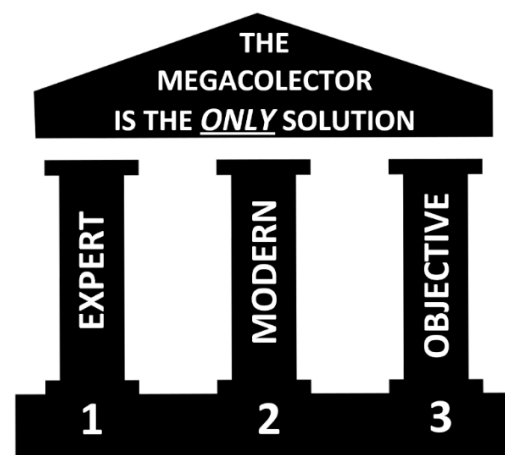


Comunidad Tz'unun Ya (2020a)

Discursive Constraints

Beyond its recourse to the wastewater laws, the megacolector's modern worlding is more significantly evidenced in AALA's public discourse and the modern rhetoric they have constructed to impose the megacolector as the *only* solution to the lake's contamination. Less about convincing the Indigenous communities (who at this point can clearly not be won over), this rhetoric appears to be principally directed towards outsiders on whose political and financial support the megacolector depends (the government, the international community, the business elites, the urban middle class). Through my analysis, I was able to identify three main overlapping discourses by which the megacolector's modern worlding emerges:

1. The megacolector is the **expert** solution
2. The megacolector is the **modern** solution
3. The megacolector is the **objective** solution



Through these discourses, AALA performs the megacolector as universe in an attempt to foreclose alternative proposals (i.e. the pluriverse). In arguing the megacolector as the expert, modern and objective solution, AALA discursively undermines the credibility of the alternative solutions favoured by the Indigenous communities. As I will demonstrate, Pedranos counter these

discourses directly by arguing that the megacolector is *not* the expert, modern or objective solution. However, Pedranos' arguments also ontologically exceed AALA's discourses, implicating their opposition as an 'ontological disobedience' (Burman, 2016) which also connects to the deeper processes of revindication occurring in the community. However, as I will show, Pedranos' opposition also involves ambivalent actors who complicate the notion of the megacolector conflict as a clash between rival ontologies. The remainder of this chapter will be divided into three parts, examining each of AALA's discourses in turn.

1. The Megacolector is the Expert Solution

AALA has consistently argued that the megacolector is the expert solution to the lake's contamination (AALA, 2019c). When they publicly revived the megacolector in October 2017, they did so at a massive scientific conference and press event in Guatemala City called 'Xocomil Científico', which Anna Apolito explained as a prime opportunity for AALA to demonstrate the megacolector's expert scientific consensus. AALA particularly plays up the international dimension of this expertise, appealing to a Eurocentric sensibility which assumes experts from more 'developed' countries as superior. This can also be seen in AALA's promotional materials of the event (Figures 99/100):

AALA [has] worked to deepen the proposal together with several local and international universities. In 2017, together with additional world experts on the subject, they celebrated Xocomil Científico that concludes in a great technical/scientific consensus (AALA, 2018a)

Figure 99: Xocomil Científico – 'The most renowned scientists on the planet with only Atitlán in mind'



AALA (2017b)

Figure 100: AALA's promotional video of Xocomil Científico



From an external perspective, the megacollector's expert consensus appears strong, and AALA expressed bewilderment at Xocomil Científico's failure to convince the Indigenous communities:

We thought that publicising that there were engineers that came from other countries [...] that we had all the universities of Guatemala, a solid consensus, that we have institutions like UNESCO saying yes, we thought it would make things easier. It didn't change a thing (Eduardo Aguirre)

Key to this failure, and something that AALA doesn't recognise is the exclusivity of their scientific conferences, both in terms of their alienating scientific language and the logistics of access. Xocomil Científico for instance took place in the four-star Hilton Hotel in Guatemala City, an expensive and time-consuming trip for the lake's Indigenous inhabitants. When I attended one of AALA's PR meetings, one of the megacollector's Indigenous promoters broached this subject directly, telling Anna and Eduardo:

I believe that maybe [Indigenous people] were confused as to why it took place in Guatemala City, people were saying, 'Why did [AALA] do it there? There must be profits behind it, and that's why they don't want to do it [at the lake]. Why didn't they do it in a public place?'

Anna responded defensively, arguing that AALA had also organised other local scientific events in Panajachel, but that few Indigenous people attended:

In 2016 a symposium was also organised here at the lake [...] 220 people arrived.¹⁸⁷ People often say 'AALA don't [do local symposiums]', but if we do it, [Indigenous people] don't attend.

The lake's scientific events are indeed characterised by low Indigenous turnouts as Anna claims, but her comment displays a lack of awareness about the barriers to Indigenous participation.

¹⁸⁷ The 'First International Symposium - Continental Water of the Americas: Present and future'.

For example, when I mentioned to some Pedrano community leaders that I was planning on attending a conference that AALA had co-organised,¹⁸⁸ they knew nothing of it because it had been promoted online through specific Facebook groups (it also required advanced online registration). After speaking to me however, they expressed interest in attending, but were concerned about practical considerations - the costs of accommodation and travel as well as the obligation to take time off work.

In public debates about solving the lake's contamination, scientific expertise is often framed as the *only* expertise that matters, not just by AALA, but other environmental institutions as well (Xón Raquiac, 2014). Take for instance the words of Luisa Cifuentes (the executive director of AMSCLAE) below, when we discussed the possibility of alternatives to the megacollector:

Sure, we are interested in that people come and tell us what other proposals they have, but with a scientific basis, and a technical basis

This view also prominently emerged in an informal Facebook exchange between an employee of MARN and a Pedrano community leader:

Community leader:	<i>You have to listen to the voice that underlies the towns, to listen to those that have protected the lake for hundreds and thousands of years [...]</i>
MARN employee:	<i>The solution is one: stop contaminating the lake. There could be several ways to achieve this, they don't have to be exclusionary, and the debate on their execution should focus on the ENVIRONMENTAL benefit of them [original emphasis]</i>
Community leader:	<i>The discourse of reducing it to scientists and sciences is exclusionary, any solution must include community knowledge. [...] P.S. Only a fool would deny that it requires science, but only a fool would exclude the knowledge of the communities</i>

As this exchange shows, the community leader's position is pluriversal, he does not discount scientific knowledge, he only wants community knowledge to be included as well. Like this, the opposition movement frequently calls for the inclusion of their community knowledge. In Pedranos' press statement below for instance, they demand:

That any scientific proposal must consider the wisdom of ancestral cultures based on prudence, sacrality and respect for nature. (Colectivo San Pedro, 2019b)

Likewise, in their *amparo* against the megacollector, Pedranos state:

¹⁸⁸ The 'Second International Symposium - Continental Water of the Americas: Integrated Management of Water Basins, Good Practices and Governance'.

*The contamination of the lake invites us to develop a new culture of water management, to **regain the logic of sustainability and governances from Indigenous peoples** [...] Therefore, it will be necessary to recover the experiences of community water management and **revitalize the ancestral knowledge** that is in disuse or dispersed in the different towns around the basin to complement the current ecological technologies.*

(Colectivo San Pedro, 2019a, p.2)

In these statements, Pedranos don't discount the importance of scientific and technical expertise, but they perform an epistemic disobedience (Chapter 6) in claiming that this modern knowledge is only valuable when combined with their own ancestral knowledge.

Pedranos admonish AALA, not just for their neglect of ancestral knowledge, but also due to their lack of expertise in the social context of San Pedro. A demonstration of this tension came about in March 2018, when the Indigenous mayors were publicly handed the blueprints of the megacollector's planned sewage systems for each town (Figure 101). Agapito, a Pedrano engineer who was present at the event criticised the highly technical presentation of the megacollector:

They did a study of each town so complex that none of the mayors understood [...] [AALA] are using such complex information that it's hard to understand [...] It's a strategy of theirs

While AALA relies upon a confusing scientific language to claim the megacollector's expertise, Pedranos draw on their own knowledge as experts of their community to counter it:

How will we construct a drain in this narrow alleyway [next to his house]? We can't, and if it goes through the main street, how will people walk up it? The topography doesn't allow it, and for the same reason below, there are only rocks, rocks, and rocks, it's not possible! AALA thinks that it's easy, but they don't know the topography of the town, they only write in their notebooks that they know this, but they don't know the reality. (Innocente Bocel, cocode and cargador of the Elder Council)

Figure 101: The mayor of San Pedro (right) receiving AALA's blueprints from Eduardo Aguirre



(Somosguate, 2018)

In the same way, Chepe Pop, the president of the COCODE of Tzanjay drew on his own lived community expertise to challenge the viability of the megacollector from a logistical and financial standpoint in his *canton*:

There isn't budget in the municipality to start building the sewage system [...] just for Tzanjay it would cost 45 million quetzales, disgracefully they send people who don't know the lake, they don't know the environment [...] it's absurd.

Reflecting my discussion of 'Educando Para Conservar' in Chapter 6, Pedranos object to how AALA's 'one-size-fits-all' approach neglects San Pedro's distinct context. That is, how AALA claims to know what is better for San Pedro than Pedranos themselves. Pedranos express this discontent clearly in their petition against the megacolector (COCODES and Elder Council, 2018, article 'd'):

the response [to the lake's contamination] should be comprehensive and consider the geographic, cultural, and economic particularities of each municipality.

In such responses, a revindicating desire for epistemic restitution (or 'cognitive justice' (Santos, 2020)) can be detected. Pedranos want to be treated as valid knowledge-holders, and for their endogenous epistemology of the lake to be recognised on a par with Western scientific knowledge (Kuokkanen, 2007).

Although Pedranos counter AALA's discourse of expert consensus by highlighting their endogenous expertise, they also leverage the same modern epistemology of environmentalism that AALA relies upon. For example, in their petition against the megacolector, they draw attention to their own environmental credentials, emphasising how their plastic ban 'has had resonance at national and international levels, placing the town in a position of prestige, even as 'Municipio Ecologico' [Ecological Municipality]' (COCODES and Elder Council, 2018, article 'e'). Still, Pedranos recognise that being taken seriously also requires the support of externally recognised modern expertise, and in the next section I will show how their utilisation of experts from outside the community unsettles the notion of the megacolector conflict as a clash of rival ontologies.

Multiple Modernities

Juan Skinner and Marvin Romero are the two scientific experts that Pedranos have most often utilised in their opposition to the megacolector. They occupy an interesting position, since both are former executive directors of AMSCLAE, and Juan Skinner was additionally managing director of AALA in the early 1990s. Both are now however independent researchers, involved in various other projects. They have both vocally opposed the megacolector (through media outlets, conferences, Facebook), and in doing so, they represent a thorn in the side to AALA's claim of expert consensus.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Juan Skinner is invariably the opposition voice that journalists seek out when reporting on the megacolector conflict (Esswein and Zernack, 2019b; Zepeda, 2014).

As I discovered through interviewing various scientists, AALA lacks the scientific consensus that it claims to possess. There are plenty of scientists opposed to the megacolector, even within institutions which nominally support AALA. Due to the fear of losing their positions however, dissenting scientists are sometimes unable to speak out, unlike Juan Skinner or Marvin Romero who are under no such obligation. Even so, when I asked one of AMSCLAE's technicians directly whether the megacolector made sense to them from a scientific perspective, they answered bluntly:

No, because there are a lot of problems with the megacolector, and it is not going to solve the problem in the lake.

This technician highlights the main point of contention against AALA's claims to scientific consensus - that the megacolector *would not* solve the lake's contamination.

The megacolector is entirely premised on mitigating wastewater pollution, but this is just one of the lake's four main contaminants (see Appendix 1). Both Juan Skinner and Marvin Romero argue that AALA neglects these other sources of contamination, treating the megacolector as a panacea for all of the lake's problems (Skinner, 2016). Marvin Romero (2014) for instance has calculated that wastewater only accounts for around 20% of the lake's contamination, a statistic which is widely circulated by the Indigenous opposition (Colectivo San Pedro, 2019b). Juan Skinner has similarly argued that wastewater is less significant than tropical storms and soil erosion. As a result, both suggest that any worthwhile intervention would need to more comprehensively address the multicausal nature of the lake's contamination. These alternative hypotheses threaten AALA by visibilising cracks in their consensus.

Such cracks are not usually visible because of AALA's media savvy publicity strategy. The prime example of this being Xocomil Científico, in which AALA compellingly advertised the megacolector's international scientific consensus. Marvin Romero however claims that this consensus was disingenuously manufactured. He told me of his conversation with a Brazilian scientist invited to Xocomil Científico, who after the event explained to Marvin that he had only been asked to speak about the importance of treating wastewater, and that he knew nothing about the megacolector:

So sometimes [AALA] are using people's images to support the megacolector, but in reality they are not lending their support [...] They are taking advantage of their image, of their experiences, of their fame to support a project that often they don't know. (Marvin Romero)

The counter narratives that experts like Marvin Romero and Juan Skinner provide are a valuable resource for Pedranos, as one community leader expressed:

We understand that we have to do a prior investigation to be able to have the tools against [AALA]. So we started our investigation and in fact it has been validated by national and international engineers.

Pedranos have utilised their opinions in their official declarations against the megacolector:

d) Renowned research institutes and scholars such as the Research and Protection Institute on Natural Environment and Society – IARNA-, Juan Skinner Alvarado and James Taylor state that the contamination of Lake Atitlán is multicausal, so the response must be comprehensive and consider the geographic, cultural and economic particularities of each municipality.

(COCODES and Elder Council, 2018, article 'd')

Experts like Juan Skinner are especially valuable to Pedranos because they share the same academic background as AALA's own technicians, and thus cannot as easily be as easily dismissed. Even so, AALA does attempt to do so through attacking Juan Skinner's academic credentials:

He lies all the time you know. He used to call himself a doctor from the University of Chico in California or Davis. It turns out [...] he never really attended (Eduardo Aguirre)

Juan Skinner is well aware of how he is discredited, and in turn he engages with the same behaviour against AALA:

I told them from the beginning, to these scientists...these professors, I don't know if I call them scientists [...] Two years ago they organised [the Aguas Continentales conference] and only 16 people showed up. It was ridiculous. And they started doing it because I belong to the largest lake organisation in the world [ILEC].

[...] I don't think [Eduardo Aguirre] ever built one sewage system in his life, because he would know [the megacolector is not viable]. I have built one and I have also an engineering degree

The vindictive tone of these insults is revealing, it suggests that the scientific disputes surrounding the megacolector are also flavoured also by ego and personal grudges.

One evident cause of tension is the Eurocentric sense of superiority that AALA draws upon in promoting their international scientific consensus. This can be seen in a lengthy denouncement which Marvin Romero (2014) posted online:

Based on scientific data, possibly not on the data that scientists and world-renowned engineers who have proposed the megacolector have generated; but in the data of quality and high reliability that national scientists with local surnames, who perhaps do not have great recognitions but who do have a solid ethic and who know the lake, its basin and its people, have generated through scientific research of many years in the area.

[...] do not think that coming from another country you are superior to our technicians, because here we have very good people with capacities even superior to yours

Here Marvin counters the expertise of international scientists in the same nativist fashion as Pedranos. That is, he claims to know what is better for the lake because he knows it better than AALA's international scientists.

Juan Skinner and Marvin Romero upset the notion of the megacolector conflict as a two-sided conflict between Pedranos and AALA, or for that matter a conflict between rival ontologies. Yet while they are implicated in Pedranos opposition to the megacolector, their battle is not the

same battle. They are contesting AALA's scientific consensus for their own reasons, and from within the same modern ontology as AALA (i.e. knowing the lake solely through Western science) thereby evidencing the existence of multiple modernities, or at least a 'more complex modernity' (Law and Lien, 2018). In this sense, their opposition runs parallel to Pedranos' opposition, whom they remain 'partially connected' in spite of their uncommonalities (de la Cadena, 2015b). As Yates (2020) posits, within M/C/D 'the '/' perhaps reflects continuous but partial interactions across M~/~C~/~D, not just the articulation of a plural otherwise in contradistinction to M/C and western universals' (p.5.). In Pedranos' alliances with scientific experts we see the practice of politics across divergence (de la Cadena, 2015b).¹⁹⁰

The 'divergence' of this alliance is readily apparent. Despite being utilised by Pedranos, Marvin and Juan don't command their full trust. Juan occupies an especially ambiguous position due to his controversial tenure as executive director of AMSCLAE. During this time, he oversaw the covert construction of a tube in Panajachel discharging wastewater directly into the lake. Since the tube was placed at a great depth, few knew about its existence until it ruptured when Hurricane Stan hit in 2005. When I raised this topic during our interview, Juan defended his actions on the grounds that the tube was only designed to funnel excess storm water. Whatever the case may be, Juan has never publicly apologised, and Pedranos haven't forgotten his involvement. Several community leaders called him out during our interviews, and when he was invited to speak about dry sanitation in San Pedro (July 2018), he also came under fire from a community leader in the audience for this reason.

Juan Skinner is not free of some of the modern/colonial tendencies that Pedranos criticise AALA of. For example, during his dry sanitation presentation, he made a confident assertion about the Pedrano lifestyle which fit well with his argument for dry sanitation.¹⁹¹ However, he was taken aback when Pedranos interjected to correct him. Juan's mistake was not malicious, it was based on outdated statistics. Even so, it embodied the same colonial dynamic that so frustrates Pedranos – a misunderstanding of their distinct context. Later in the presentation, an Indigenous woman in the audience stood up and stated:

There is a group of women here that don't speak Spanish and everything that you have spoken they have not understood it well.

Again, the exclusionary nature of Juan presentation was not malicious, but it goes to show the modern/colonial position Juan inhabits just in being non-Indigenous in this Indigenous context.

¹⁹⁰ Klein (2014) provides a parallel example of this in her account of the unlikely alliance between Native Americans and cowboys in their resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline.

¹⁹¹ That open defecation is still widely practised.

This delicate position is further compromised by the fact that Juan also belongs to the Criollo oligarchy, the highest echelon of Guatemalan society. In fact, he told me that his cousin is one of the elites most strongly pushing for the megacollector within the private sector. Juan explained that due to his own opposition to the megacollector, he has been somewhat ostracised by his own family who have attempted to silence him. In rebelling against his family in this way, Juan represents a contestation of modernity/coloniality from within, but he is still caught between two camps. For some, his elite identity is insurmountable. A few days after his presentation in San Pedro for instance, one Pedrano confided that he believed Juan's purpose was purely extractive:

What Skinner does is very simple. They invite him, he comes to give his talk, but he's very cunning. He is gathering and requesting information for himself first. He doesn't need to prevent the [megacollector], he will never have that necessity. What he is doing is taking this information [about Pedranos' opinions] [...] because it will be convenient for him to have this knowledge at another time.

Another interviewee suggested that Juan Skinner only opposes the megacollector because he opposes the current government,¹⁹² further criticising the systemic practice of nepotism which propels elites like Juan to positions of power in the first place:

Juan Skinner isn't there [on the side of the megacollector] because he is not aligned with the current administration. [...] even if you are 'Doctor Lake', if you are not aligned with the policies [of the government] then you are out. He got to where he because of his elitist position. He comes from the elite families of Guatemala, so that also carried him to power. It's always people outside of the context, outsiders [in power]. Despite good intentions and PhDs, but they don't know the reality.

Through his support of the Indigenous opposition and his critique against his own political class, Juan Skinner fractures the idea of a monolithic modernity (Bormpoudakis, 2019). Even so, he can never truly escape the modern/colonial relations in which he is embedded.¹⁹³ As a result, during my fieldwork I couldn't help but question this power disparity, whether he wasn't also imposing his own narrative onto Pedranos. However, the community leader who invited Juan to speak in San Pedro vehemently denied this, pointing out that Juan was only providing information so that they themselves could generate their *own* opinions. This invitation is key, even though Juan may still carry some modern/colonial baggage through his privileged elite identity, in this interaction, Pedranos are in the driver's seat, dictating the terms of his inclusion.

Juan Skinner proves the importance of looking past institutions to the opinions of individuals. For fear of stepping on AALA's toes, many institutions are forced to keep quiet on the

¹⁹² And thus, the current leadership of AMSCLAE.

¹⁹³ When I interviewed him in his large home in Panajachel his Indigenous maid was busying herself in the kitchen.

subject of the megacolector.¹⁹⁴ Although these institutions may not be publicly opposed to the megacolector, their members may hold a different view. The position of institutions themselves can also shift, and the most dramatic example of this can be seen with AMSCLAE. As I explained earlier, AMSCLAE was the first proponent of the megacolector in 2014/2015, however its position has cooled over time, and they now advocate WWTPs as the best solution to the lake's contamination. Most shocking of all was AMSCLAE's (2020c) sudden denouncement of AALA in a press statement on 28th January 2020. Without naming AALA explicitly, the implication was clear, as they denounced those who:

...impose projects that imply large public-private investments without taking the population into account and that desperately seek to obtain the support of AMSCLAE for their particular benefits [...] There has been a lot of investment in projects in the past by NGOS [...] that have not had an impact [...] the projects have only benefited businessmen and NGOs.

AMSCLAE's policy U-turn cautions against making ontological assumptions on the basis of identity (Blaser, 2013a). Local power politics on the ground is more important than any sort of allegiance to the modern ontology. Although AMSCLAE is part of a corrupt modern/colonial system, it does not currently support the megacolector. Its position shifted because its leadership changed. AMSCLAE has had three different executive directors from 2015-2020, a new one appointed with each successive change in government. Depending on the outcome of future elections, it is possible that AMSCLAE might once again support the megacolector.

AMSCLAE's shifting position helpfully elucidates the complexity of ontological conflicts. If we accept that the megacolector conflict does have an ontological dimension, and that Pedranos' opposition is in part an 'ontological disobedience' against the modern megacolector, it is important also to recognise that there is no single modern ontology, but multiple modern positions, some unsupportive of the megacolector (AMSCLAE), and others actively opposing it (Juan Skinner). The megacolector conflict is also a contestation within modern ontology.¹⁹⁵ Rather than a straightforward clash of ontologies, we can begin to see that the megacolector conflict as a muddle of shifting, intersecting and sometimes colliding positions. Though Blaser (2013a) 'shrinks modernity' because its 'variations are not analytically relevant' (p.553), doing so in the case of the megacolector conflict is detrimental to understanding these important nuances (Bormpoudakis, 2019). In this case, the evaluation of Santos (2014) is highly pertinent:

¹⁹⁴ And I could not name them in the thesis for this reason.

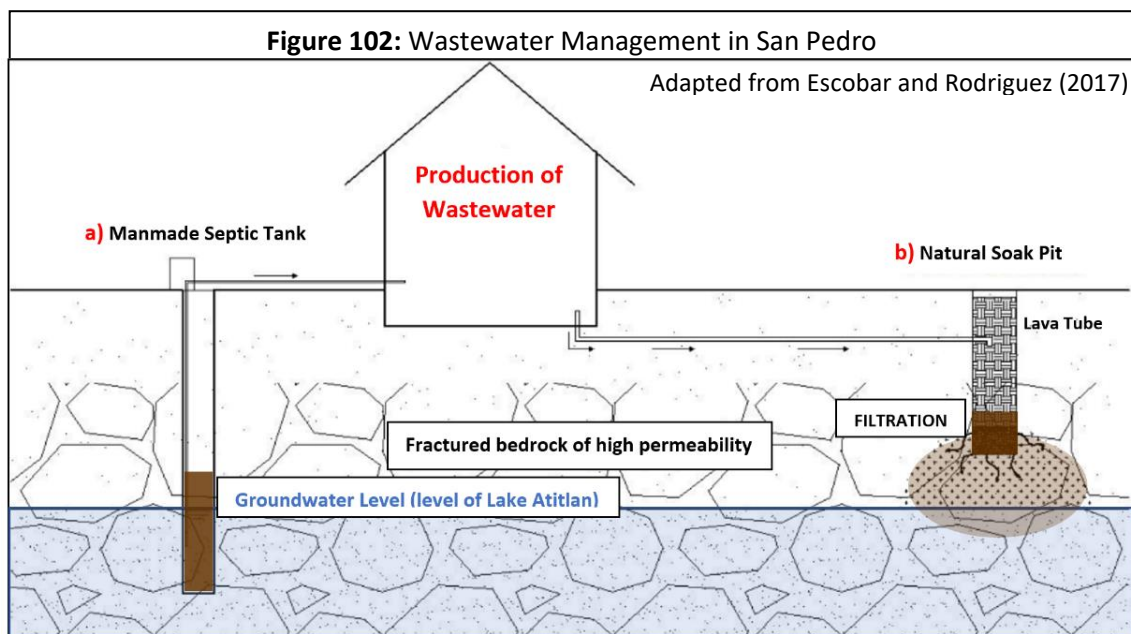
¹⁹⁵ It is notable for instance that a host of long-time expat American and European residents of the lake are also firmly opposed to the megacolector and frequently voice their opposition in public events.

Critiques of predominant Western modernity...run the risk of becoming reductionist and of being like the very conceptions of modernity they criticize, that is, mere caricatures. (p.x)

2. The Megacolector is the Modern Solution

AALA claims the megacolector as the modern solution to the lake's contamination, and this discourse largely emerges through a dialectic between wet and dry sanitation technologies. AALA paints the megacolector's wet sanitation technology as progressive, and the dry sanitation alternatives favoured by the opposition as backward. In this section, I will discuss how this binary emerges, and show how Pedranos both contest it, and ontologically exceed it.

In the lake basin, sanitation practices vary widely from town to town, although generally speaking, few households are connected to a sewage system and flush toilets are not yet the norm (Ferráns et al., 2017). For much of the 20th century, pit latrines and open defecation were prevalent in the basin. People defecated out in the open in their *milpas*, which provided natural fertilizer for crops. However, this practice diminished with increasing urbanisation, as well as changing lifestyle habits.¹⁹⁶ The toilet was also adopted as a desirable marker of progress (Chapter 5), and in most cases, newly installed toilets were not connected to sewage infrastructure, but individual purpose-built septic tanks (Figure 102a).¹⁹⁷ More common in San Pedro however were the numerous empty lava tubes underlying the town which act as natural soak pits (Figure 102b). According to Escobar and Rodriguez (2017) today 87% of Pedrano households possess toilets, and of these, 33% are connected to septic tanks, whilst 59% use natural soak pits.

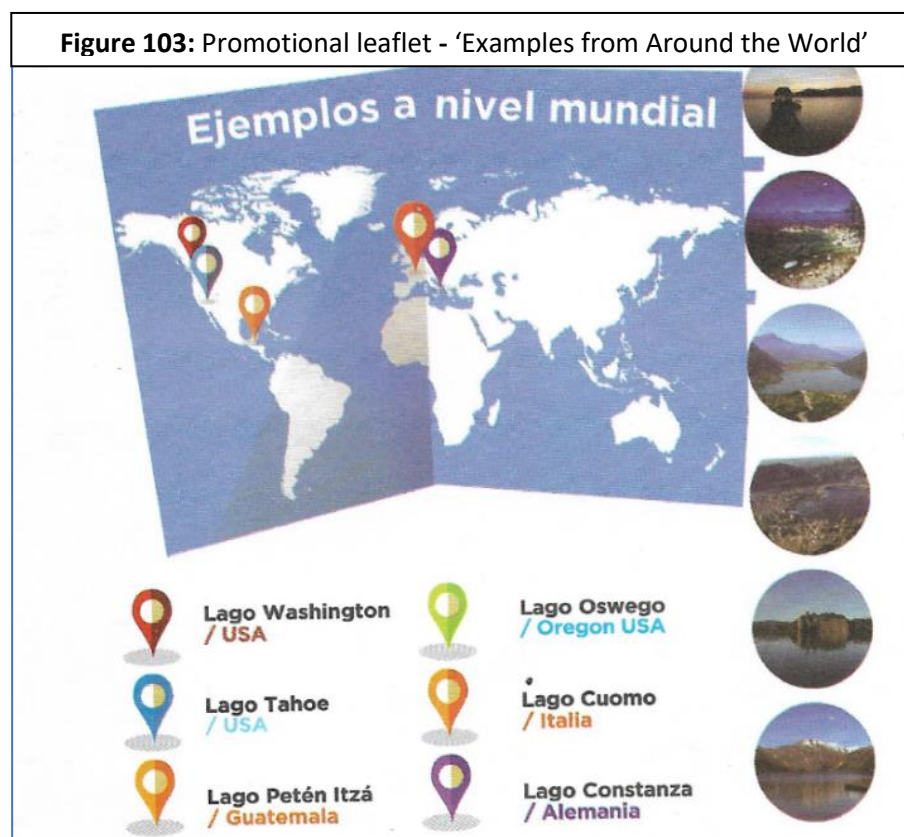


¹⁹⁶ Just 1% of Pedrano households currently estimated to continue this practice (Escobar and Rodriguez, 2017).

¹⁹⁷ AMSCLAE (2018) claims that in the basin only 54% of flush toilets are connected to a sewage system, and only 2% in San Pedro.

The megacollector is modern in multiple senses of the term. In place of the diverse and individualised sanitation strategies which currently exist, the megacollector would require the construction of a single unified sewage system in each community which *every* household would be obliged to connect to. In place of communities' existing semi-dry sanitation infrastructure,¹⁹⁸ the megacollector would also require the installation of flush-water toilets (i.e. wet sanitation). The megacollector is thus modern in its universalising requirement for *every* household to adhere to a modern water-intensive lifestyle.

The megacollector is also modern in the sense that it relies upon a modern rhetoric of progress. AALA for instance frames the megacollector as progressive because it furthers what it sees as an inevitable shift from 'backwards' dry sanitation to 'modern' wet sanitation. Its alleged desirability is rooted in its emulation of similar such projects in the United States and Europe, most notably Lake Tahoe (USA) and Lake Como (Italy). In Figure 103 below, AALA references these two projects and others which are all in the Global North (except one). This presentation reflects AALA's reification of international expertise as discussed in the previous section. Both instances depend upon the Eurocentric sense of superiority associated with Modernization Theory - that is the idea of a developing country being able to follow a linear trajectory of 'modern' development through the importation of Western science and technology (Herkenrath and Bornschier, 2003).



¹⁹⁸ Which requires only a small volume of water to function.

AALA's Eurocentric discourse may appeal to a non-Indigenous audience in Guatemala City, but with Pedranos it falls flat. Just as in the previous section's discussion of expertise, Pedranos' discontent is rooted in the question of context, and AALA's failure to sufficiently acknowledge San Pedro's. Pedranos see the megacollector's emulation of expensive European/American technologies as inappropriate given the significant socio-economic contextual differences between Europe/USA and Guatemala:

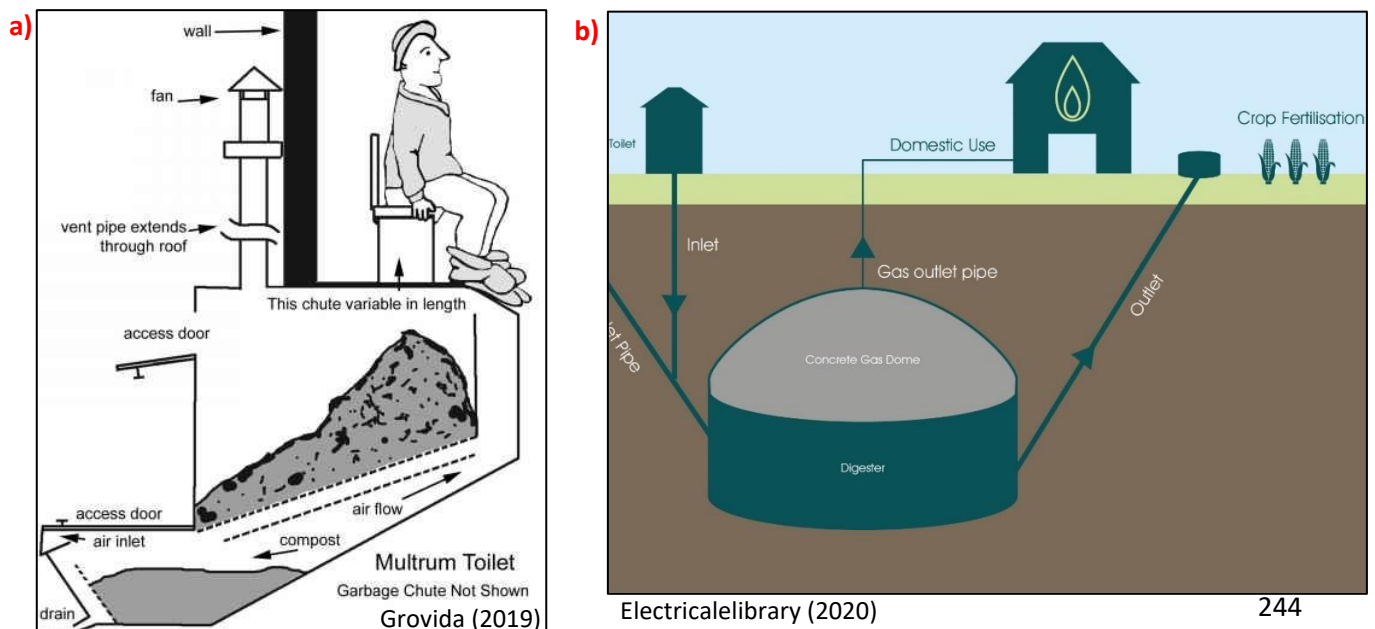
They paint a pretty picture, giving us an example, a video of a place where the project has functioned, but it's in a first world country economically! (Marta Rocche – community leader)

Rather than a Western one-size-fits-all model, they instead argued that the solution must be designed with Lake Atitlán's particular context in mind:

They show examples from the US, but when we analyse, the social and cultural conditions are different, they are two different contexts. It's like if two people are suffering a stomach-ache and they are both given the same pill, when it could be that they have two different problems (Felipe Chavajay - activist)

Pedranos' argument is also supported from a scientific standpoint. A few Guatemalan scientists I interviewed also argued that the application of technology developed specifically for temperate European and American lakes was inappropriate in light of Lake Atitlán's differing subtropical context. However, they had not been able to voice their concerns publicly due to censorship. As I mentioned earlier however, Juan Skinner faces no such constraints, and he outlines his support for a dry sanitation alternative to the megacollector on this basis. In public presentations and online material Juan argues that a smaller scale system of dry toilets and/or biodigesters (Figure 104) offers a more appropriate solution to the lake's contamination problem. This smaller-scale solution would not differ too greatly from San Pedro's past and current sanitation practices (open defecation/pit latrines/septic tanks/soak pits), and it would also provide the benefit of providing its users with agricultural fertilizers and biogas to be used as fuel.

Figure 104: The Functioning of Dry Toilets (a) and Biodigesters (b)



The public debate over the legitimacy of wet and dry sanitation technologies does not occur directly between AALA and Pedranos, but between AALA and Juan Skinner, whose expertise Pedranos' opposition to the megacollector draws upon. Within this debate, each side weaponizes statistics to make the case for their solution and argue for the impossibility of the alternative. AALA for instance presents the megacollector's technology as inevitable through stressing the already prevalent use of toilets in the basin, claiming that 80% of households already do so (although in this case no reference is provided):

Owing to the high population density in the majority of urban centres it's INCONCEIVABLE to solve the problem exclusively with latrines. More than 80% of homes in the basin ALREADY USE washable toilets [original emphasis] (AALA, 2018a)

Conversely, Juan Skinner (2016) makes the opposite claim, utilising figures from the latest census which indicate only 11% of households as connected to a sewage system via flush-water toilets. Instead, he argues that most households still rely on open defecation or pit latrines:

The last population and housing census shows that the majority of households (75%) only have latrines or milpa to deposit their human waste, and not toilets that produce sewage, so to think that the solution would be to drain them through pipes, it's a utopia.

In neither case are the statistics used reliable, but this is less significant than how these statistics are discursively deployed. Despite their differing opinions, both AALA and Juan Skinner make their case utilising the same modern rhetoric of 'progress'. AALA stresses that owing to the basin's increasing population density and rates of urbanisation, latrines are unfeasible. Dry sanitation is argued as a relic of the basin's rural past, and wet sanitation the only viable option for its urban future. This argument can be detected in Eduardo Aguirre's statement below:

You cannot just rely on what your grandfather told you, just because you're a local. I mean I respect that, but we cannot solve [the lake's contamination] with that. [...] it's simple as telling them, but you cannot do it because it's disrespectful, "Yes, a 100 year ago there were 20,000 people in all of this basin, now there's 500,000, so your old customs, simply don't work anymore".

For Juan Skinner in contrast, it is the megacollector's wet technology which is antiquated. In a direct inversion of AALA's own Eurocentric strategy, he stresses that the megacollector is out of step with progressive trends in the Global North. For example, in his presentations he cited examples of dry technology in Japan and Germany, and during our interview he argued that dry sanitation technology is superior because it is more *advanced* than the megacollector:

Why are you going to still be putting water into toilets? That's a solution from way, way back, I mean go and view the system in Singapore or in any Scandinavian city, see what they

are thinking about the frontline technology in pollution management, and nobody is thinking of doing more sewage pipes.

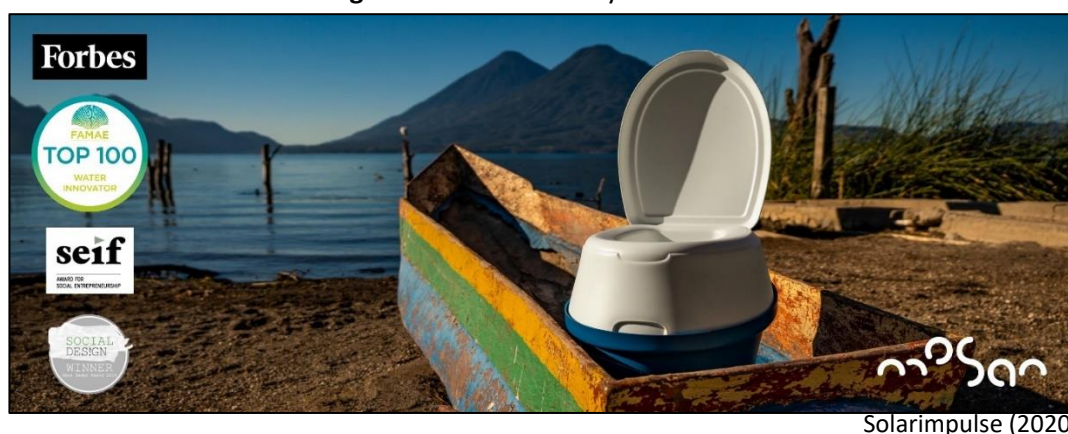
There is concrete logic behind both Eduardo and Juan's concerns with wet and dry technologies. Less certain however is AALA's claim that a dry sanitation solution is *impossible*:

We came up with the idea [of the megacollector], I think it's correct, but if there's other things, then please. Just don't come and tell us that you're going to solve it all with dry latrines, just please don't because it's not possible (Eduardo Aguirre)

A dry sanitation solution would certainly be very difficult to implement given the strength of the rhetoric of modernity in the Indigenous communities. As I explained in Chapter 5, the stigma of 'backwardness' that this rhetoric exerts on ancestral practices is extremely pervasive. Convincing Pedranos as a whole to utilise what they might deem as 'primitive' technology (dry toilets) would require a paradigm change.

While AALA claims that a dry sanitation solution is impossible, various actors around the lake are working on this very issue already. For example, the international company 'Mosan' has already made great strides in the implementation of a viable dry sanitation system. It has designed a professional dry toilet (Figure 105), and even more importantly, an integrated system of waste collection and reutilisation to transform the waste into natural fertilizer products (biochar and struvite).¹⁹⁹ Critically, Mosan only extends its integrated sanitation system as an *option* – residents are not obliged to join.²⁰⁰ Its head of R&D, Jessica Kind explained that Mosan aims to be sensitive to the particular context of each Indigenous community and their *participatory* inclusion. Accordingly, while Mosan operates from within the same modern ontology as AALA (i.e. understanding the lake as a resource), like with Juan Skinner, its operation in the basin complicates and fractures the notion of a monolithic modernity. Mosan represents a modern ontology which is not performed exclusively, but which is instead amenable to the inclusion of other worlds (i.e. the pluriverse).

Figure 105: Mosan's Dry Toilet



Solarimpulse (2020)

¹⁹⁹ Since its arrival at the lake in 2018, Mosan has already processed 82 tons of faeces and 360,000 litres of urine (Mosan, 2020).

²⁰⁰ Unlike the megacollector which will be enforced through fining the municipalities which don't comply.

Unlike the megacollector, dry sanitation technology's relationship with water is decidedly non-modern. A shift from wet to dry sanitation is fundamentally about shifting behaviour away from wasteful modern practices to a more sustainable use of water. It is notable that a notion of sustainability is used by both the megacollector's proponents and its detractors, but in different ways. AALA presents the megacollector as a sustainable solution in an *economic* sense. On its webpage for instance, it emphasises that the generation of hydroelectric energy will make the project economically sustainable. The opposition in contrast draws attention to the megacollector's profoundly unsustainable use of water, which is an issue of great concern to Pedranos:

In San Pedro many schools don't have water, they're rationing it, and it's getting worse. Much of our water necessities are wasted on flushing toilets, it doesn't make sense. (Tzutu Kan – rapper and artist)

Paradoxically, although the megacollector is premised on mitigating the lake's wastewater problem, it actually encourages wastewater production. The megacollector obliges the *entire* basin to plug into a modern water-intensive lifestyle, including those many households which still utilise sustainable dry sanitation practices. This irony was succinctly highlighted by a Guatemalan scientist:

It's wastewater that's not being produced and [AALA] want to produce it, and that's the thing that doesn't make sense to me. It's like promoting the production of sewage [...] We have to reduce instead of producing more.

In effect, AALA is advocating not just the megacollector, but the modern water-intensive lifestyle which its functioning depends upon. The megacollector therefore does not address the underlying cause of the lake's contamination – unsustainable (modern) behaviour. On the contrary, it actively encourages it.

A Techno-fix Solution

In contrast to the 'impossibility' of a shift to dry sanitation, the construction of the megacollector does not require any behavioural adjustments on the part of the lake's inhabitants. In this narrow sense at least, AALA's assumption is correct, the megacollector is the more feasible option. It would be business-as-usual, leaving the modern status quo intact. These dynamics implicate the megacollector as a classic 'techno-fix' solution, that is the use of large-scale technology to avoid implementing more uncomfortable societal changes. As Naomi Klein (2014) and others (Ruser and Machin, 2016) have noted, this option is popular in the climate change debate where increasingly fantastical geoengineering megaprojects are being proposed to ensure the continuity of a modern lifestyle.

Like other techno-fix solutions, AALA exploits fear to push through the megacollector as a high-risk solution:

According to Eduardo Aguirre, representative of [AALA], if actions aren't initiated to rescue Atitlán by next year, the lake will only have another six years of life (Espina, 2018)

Pedranos recognise this tactic as fearmongering:

*Those who publicise your end they know why,
With cunning they speak of your sudden provoked death
(Quiacaín Sac, n.d., s.20)*

By playing up the urgency of the lake's deterioration in this way, the risks of the megacollector appear lessened (Klein, 2014), but in reality, they are considerable. Of greatest concern to Pedranos is the possibility that the megacollector could rupture in the event of a landslide or seismic activity (both of which occur frequently). Below, Concepción Batzin, a prominent community leader, describes how Eduardo Aguirre was unable to satisfy her concerns about the tube breaking when she questioned him in San Pedro's COMUDE in 2015:

What if a tube underwater breaks like this, and all the filth, all the poo, it won't be able to escape? Instead of saving the lake it will make it worse. So I said to Eduardo Aguirre, "Answer the question", and he remained silent with his arms crossed. "Excuse me" I said, "But there isn't any guarantee that the tube won't break".

This same question was raised in AALA's PR event that I attended, where Eduardo Aguirre responded as follows:

If there is a leak, the amount of waste that can escape, it's manageable. The most important thing to know here is that we have had drains pumping wastewater into the lake every single day for the last 20 years. If every 10 years, 15 years, 20 years there is a leak, that can be fixed in two or three days. The damage will be ugly, but less than what would have been going on for years and years [...] the damage will happen over a very short time period.

Eduardo argues that even with the possibility of leaks, the lake is at greater risk left in its current state. However, his claim doesn't stand up to scrutiny on a number of fronts.

At present, vast volumes of wastewater are generated in the basin,²⁰¹ but as I mentioned earlier, relatively little reaches the lake by way of a sewage system. Escobar and Rodriguez (2017) for instance claim that only 1% of San Pedro's wastewater is pumped directly into the lake.²⁰² Most of the remainder reaches the lake in a relatively diffuse manner, filtering slowly out from the natural soak pits utilised by the majority of Pedranos. It is important to note that this process of absorption

²⁰¹ An estimated 45,500 m³ daily (Ferráns et al., 2018).

²⁰² Mainly from hotels and restaurants along the shore. However, this figure is likely to be an underestimate, given the clandestine nature of this drainage infrastructure.

presents much more of a risk than most Pedranos realise.²⁰³ Many Pedranos argue that San Pedro barely contributes to the lake's contamination because of this process of filtration. While filtration does to some extent mitigate the level of contamination, there is evidence that harmful bacteria are still able to escape into the town's groundwater, with severe health implications for Pedranos (Escobar and Rodriguez, 2017). This risk is only likely to be exacerbated as San Pedro's population increases, further straining the soak pits' limited capacity.

Notwithstanding this danger, if the megacolector bursts, it would subject the lake to far greater volumes of wastewater than it currently receives. In place of the current gradual inflow of wastewater,²⁰⁴ a leak would involve a sudden and catastrophic influx of concentrated wastewater. Not only does the megacolector increase the overall volume of wastewater produced, but it also more efficiently channelizes its flow, streamlining the impact of such a disaster. Notably, Eduardo Aguirre discusses leaks not in terms of 'if', but 'when' they occur. Although no environmental impact survey has yet been provided, reassurances are made that such a leak could be fixed with ease, as Eduardo claims, 'in two or three days'. Although he insists that a leak would be 'manageable', a foreign expert presented a different perspective:

You actually need divers going round every day to see if there are leaks, because once you have an inflow of human excreta that huge[...] for 80,000 people, just imagine if you have one or two tubes that are leaking, and you have the wastewater flowing 500 cubic metres per second going to the lake untreated, unfiltered!

Pedranos are not convinced that a leak could be fixed as rapidly as AALA claims, there is too much evidence to suggest otherwise. Most conspicuously, none of the basin's WWTPs are currently working correctly (Ferráns et al., 2017). The expensive 'Los Cebollales' WWTP in Panajachel for example was built in 2002 utilising the latest European technology, but it ceased functioning soon afterwards (Ratner and Rivera, 2004):

Big projects in Guatemala don't function, there aren't long term maintenance plans. [...] [The megacolector] could function in the first few years, but afterwards [...] The treatment plant in Panajachel is a good example, they inaugurated it, but two months later, they couldn't pay for the electricity that it needed. (Pedro Navichoc)

A Modern Solution to a Modern Problem

Borrowing Boaventura de Sousa Santos's (2002, p.13) phrasing, it could be said that Pedranos fundamentally oppose the megacolector because it is a 'modern solution to a modern problem'. That is, the megacolector originates from the same modern mindset as the contamination

²⁰³ Some Pedranos don't suspect that their natural soak pits may connect to the lake, as in many cases, they have been using them for decades and they have never filled up.

²⁰⁴ Through the combined effects of absorption and direct but haphazard wastewater inflow.

problem itself. Ironically, what makes the megacollector an appealing option to AALA - that it doesn't require a paradigm shift - is exactly what repels Pedranos:

[The megacollector] will make it easier to collect waste, but it will create a more comfortable attitude to producing waste right? It's a project that will make it easy to create more, and so the problem multiples [...] It's like giving more alcohol to an alcoholic or making it easier for lazy people to be lazy. I believe that it's a project that will promote more contamination. (Leonel)

Leonel understands that further separating Pedranos (both spatially and cognitively) from their waste will encourage a more comfortable attitude towards wastewater production. This process of separation is a distinctively modern undertaking (Yates et al., 2017). As Gay Hawkins (2007) notes, 'Secreting waste away, rendering it invisible, has become fundamental to the maintenance of distinctly modern classifications and boundaries and distinctly modern ways of being' (p.348). Pedranos have already witnessed this process in relation to water. As I mentioned in Chapter 5, Pedranos' respectful (relational) water practices diminished greatly as a result of the arrival of piped water. Pedranos make a similar connection to the megacollector, as can be seen in their press statement below:

The connection of a large pipe far from trying to solve the problem of wastewater will grant permission to throw the raw sewage to the pipe and will not change the culture of consumption that is most responsible for the contamination, and will mean our natural disconnection with the lake. (Colectivo San Pedro, 2019b)

Through further disconnecting people from the lake, Pedranos identify the megacollector as part of the problem, not the solution. It is deemed to be yet another form of modern 'contamination' (Chapter 5), with the potential to contaminate the lake and negatively impact Pedranos' relationality with the lake. At best, the megacollector is what Yates et al., (2017) describe as an 'end-of-pipe approach'. Pedranos however desire measures which more comprehensively deal with the *sources* of contamination, and as I will show in Chapter 10, with this objective in mind, they are striving for the creation of legal protections for the lake.

Unlike Juan Skinner, who opposes the megacollector on modern terms (i.e. claiming that dry sanitation is more modern), Pedranos ontologically exceed AALA's discourse by rejecting modernity as a legitimate criterion altogether. As one community leader stated:

We can't allow [AALA] to say the solution is this, because their solution will have the same logic of profit.

Pedranos recognise that a modern problem cannot be solved by a modern solution, for which reason they instead propose a more radical paradigm shift:

The lake's contamination and ecological deterioration is a good opportunity for unlearning, to abandon irresponsible habits and to return to those cosmogonic principles that placed nature on us. It is necessary to get to the roots of pollution, it is necessary to understand the responsibility of capitalism and companies in the destruction of the environment (TV Tz'unun Ya', 2019b)

This statement's emphasis on returning to 'cosmogonic principles' demonstrates how Pedranos' opposition to the megacolector is connected to a deeper desire to revindicate ancestral respect and reciprocity (Part 1). The megacolector conflict isn't just about the lake, it's about the very future that Pedranos want for their community.

1. The Megacolector is the Objective Solution

So far, I have discussed how AALA discursively argues the megacolector as the expert and modern solution. As I have shown, these two discourses make a strong case for the megacolector as the *only* solution to the lake's contamination. However, a vocal Indigenous opposition to the megacolector problematically unsettles this claim. It raises a question - since the megacolector is the modern and expert solution, why are people resisting it? The third and final discourse – that the megacolector is objective solution, is orientated towards resolving this very problem. It provides a means for AALA to explain away the Indigenous opposition. While the first two discourses emerged mainly in the megacolector's promotion, this third discourse surfaced in AALA's defence of the megacolector in light of the Indigenous opposition.

As I explained earlier, Pedranos' concern that megacolector could be used to privatise the lake is well-founded. AALA however explains their opposition as stemming primarily from a lack of information or misinformation, which they suggest would naturally disappear when they access the 'correct' information:

But we have seen when we have sat down with some of [the Indigenous opposition] for example, it's not that they oppose, they simply don't understand well. In the moment that [the megacolector is] explained, they support it. So I believe it's a question of this, the lack of information. (Anna Apolito)

Anna downplays the resistance to the megacolector, putting it down to a mere lack of information. However, she is not referring to just any information, but AALA's, which is universalised as the *only* objective information on the matter. Through monopolising the truth in this way, AALA performs 'the god trick', enacting 'a conquering gaze from nowhere' (Haraway, 1988, p.581). This enables them to confidently construe support of the megacolector as an inevitable consequence of accessing the truth, which they assume themselves as being in exclusive possession of:

Maybe [the Indigenous opposition] just don't want to learn the truth, that's why they won't sit with me, because then maybe they'll say, "Hey, maybe they're not so wrong", and they don't want that. (Eduardo Aguirre)

Concurrent with AALA's strategy of gaslighting mentioned in the introduction to Part 2, AALA argues information running contrary to its 'truth' as 'bad information' or 'misinformation'. As a remedy, AALA suggests improved access to their own information, and this is provided by the Indigenous promoters employed in the megacollector's communications campaign. They are instructed to spread AALA's 'truth' in an almost evangelical fashion, as Laura Churunel Quiacaín, their Pedrana promoter describes:

AALA tells us, "Explain the truth, you have to do everything possible to make them see reality"

AALA assumes the Indigenous promoters' task of truth telling as straightforward, given that the megacollector is, from their perspective, the objective solution to the lake's contamination:

The misinformation has to be countered with information, and that's what we are trying to do [...] But when one has a stereotype or a prejudice, it's really difficult to make them change their idea of something, even when the information is clear. (Anna Apolito)

Accordingly, the main obstacle to the megacollector's acceptance is seen to lie with the opposition's prejudices. For those lacking direct contact with these Indigenous critics (i.e. the majority of Guatemalans), the certainty with which AALA asserts the megacollector as the objective solution makes for a compelling argument. Indeed, I might have been convinced myself, had I not already been familiar with Pedranos' concerns. Having seen through AALA's strategy of gaslighting, I knew that Pedranos' opposition was in fact based on concrete evidence.

With its network of powerful contacts, AALA has greater access to the media than Pedranos and is therefore better able to promote their version of events. Even so, Pedranos have also attempted to publicly communicate their own narrative, most notably through the organisation of press conferences. At one of these in Guatemala City (March 14th, 2019), Pedrano community leaders concisely listed their reasons for opposing the megacollector (Aguilar, 2019b). Afterwards, journalists approached Chesley Smith (the president of AALA) for comment, and he patronisingly responded:

Sadly, I understand their point of view, I believe, unfortunately, that there is a lot of bad information (Guatelevision, 2019).

Rather than addressing Pedranos' specific concerns, Chesley Smith, like the rest of AALA's leadership favoured the 'bad information' narrative. There is a clear logic behind this strategy of non-engagement. Having to justify the megacollector undermines AALA's hegemonic status and the megacollector's supposed objectivity.

It is important to note that AALA is more than just its leadership. In this chapter I have already discussed some of the tensions and power politics that characterise the lake's institutions. AALA is no different, their official viewpoint *is* internally contested. I discovered this when interviewing one of their lower-ranked Pedrana employees, who offered a much more sympathetic outlook on the reasons for the Indigenous opposition. She suggested that AALA should make a public apology for its past behaviour, stating that:

I consider that we should lower ourselves [...] listen, participate in the COMUDES and communal assemblies, because only in this way will resolve things

She further explained that she had voiced these ideas with her superiors, recommendations that have evidently been ignored. Anna and Eduardo's conviction of the megacollector's objectivity is so strong that they suggested the Indigenous communities will eventually demand the megacollector themselves:

What we're hoping for is that we do this communication and socialisation work in such a good way, that people are going to demand this project (Eduardo Aguirre)

To prove the megacollector's objectivity, AALA must defend their own as the objective 'Friends of the Lake'. This explains their efforts to rebrand the megacollector as just a proposal (Introduction to Part 2), and also their emphasis on AALA's altruistic role as a neutral facilitator rather than a political actor. For example, at their PR event I attended, before the megacollector was presented to the invited press and Indigenous promoters, Haydee stated:

We want you to know that this project is from the population. AALA is only facilitating a process, it is helping, it is donating its time to propose a solution to save the lake. So know that the intentions are good, we have more than 30 years working in the basin, always with transparency.

Despite these efforts, there is as I have shown, plenty of evidence which unsettles AALA's claim to objectivity. This difficulty might explain another one of their strategies - to claim opposition to the megacollector as opposition to the lake's wellbeing.

'If you are against the megacollector, you are against saving the lake'

We are trying to demonstrate the support that we have to construct this infrastructure, so that afterwards we can silence the people who oppose us [...] Incredible no? That there are people who want to oppose efforts to prevent contamination from entering the lake. (Álvarez, 2018)

These are the words of José Toriello, who replaced Chesley Smith as president of AALA in 2018. In the podcast where this extract is taken from, José broadcasts to the public one of the principal narratives underpinning the megacollector's discursive objectivity – that those opposing the

megacolector are necessarily against saving the lake. A narrative which was also reiterated in interviews:

What [the Indigenous opposition] want is to kill the project, but they don't understand that in killing the project they are killing the lake. (Anna Apolito)

Not everyone is going to be convinced, that's impossible. We will never have 100%, but the majority will walk this path of harmony and well-being for this lake. (Eduardo Aguirre)

In this way, AALA claims to objectively speak *for* the lake, implying the megacolector and the lake's well-being as mutually exclusive. As with the megacolector's conceptual rebranding as 'ni una gota más', which as I mentioned in the Introduction to Part 2, purports only to 'improve the quality of life and health of the inhabitants of the basin', this strategy enables AALA to evade criticism by inferring those in opposition as indifferent to the health of the lake and its inhabitants. That is, they paint the opposition as enemies of the lake, and themselves as the true 'Friends of the Lake'.

In place of a nuanced Indigenous opposition with specific concerns, AALA renders the situation in absolute terms - 'you're either with us, or against the lake'. As one community leader put it:

They say that they're right and we're wrong, and that in opposing the megacolector we are in favour of malnutrition and the lake's contamination.

Like this, AALA attempts to push the megacolector outside of the messy world of politics into the realm of ethics. Playing on a simplistic binary of 'good' versus 'bad', AALA is able to deny the megacolector as a politically situated solution, instead claiming it as a moral objective, because who could be against improving the health of the lake and its people?

While the megacolector *could* improve the health of the lake and its inhabitants as AALA claims, through this strategy, AALA denies that alternatives solutions could do the same. Acutely aware of this strategy, the Indigenous opposition contest AALA's supposition of the moral high ground. Table 6 below displays extracts of declarations Indigenous authorities have made against the megacolector. In each case, they attempt to counter AALA's narrative, and the wording of their declarations carefully emphasises that despite being opposed to the megacolector, they too are in favour of improving the lake's well-being (underlined):

Table 6: Indigenous authorities' proof of good intent

DATE	BODY	STATEMENT
08/08/2018	COCODES and Elder Council (2018)	As Tz'utujil citizens <u>we are clear and committed to contributing to the recuperation of our grandmother Lake Atitlán</u> , but not from a project that doesn't take into consideration cultural belonging and the socioeconomic capacity of the Indigenous towns.
17/01/2019	Alcaldía Indígena de Sololá (2019a)	Our voice as Indigenous peoples of Sololá in relation to the construction of the megacollector project in lake Atitlán, clarify that <u>we are not against development and actions in favour of Lake Atitlán</u> , provided that we are consulted as people and if the project really benefits the people.
22/03/2019	Las Autoridades Indígenas de Atitlán (2019)	<u>We are the people who have always safeguarded the well-being of the lake</u> , and we advocate alternative options to the contamination that our lake is suffering.
14/03/2019	Colectivo San Pedro (2019b)	<u>We are conscious of the recuperation of health of our lake</u> , However...
02/04/2019	Alcaldía Indígena de Sololá (2019b)	<u>We do not deny the contamination of the lake</u> , therefore we demand that the state of Guatemala create serious proposals and policy that combat the causes of the contamination and do not just mask its effects. <u>We, Indigenous people have been and will continue to be the solid rock for the management, protection, and recovery of the lake and its basin.</u>
06/02/2020	Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' (2020b)	<u>We are aware that the revitalization of Lake Atitlán is urgent and necessary</u> , especially if we take into consideration that this ecosystem is under increasingly intense pressure for widely known reasons.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have begun to reveal how the megacollector conflict is more than a 'mere resource conflict' (Coombes et al., 2012a). I have explained how the lake's privatisation is what's at stake in this conflict. However, I have also shown that Pedranos' opposition movement is motivated by AALA's modern worlding of the megacollector and the resulting constraints on San Pedro's autonomy. Anchoring my discussion principally around the megacollector's modern discourses, I have highlighted the ontological excesses of Pedranos' opposition movement and how this connects to processes of revindication. Whilst introducing the ontological dimensions of the conflict, I have also drawn attention to the political complexities on the ground, the ambiguous actors and multiple modernities that unsettle assumptions of a straightforward clash of ontologies. This chapter thus provides the foundation for Chapter 9's discussion, where I will extend my analysis to explore how the megacollector's modern rhetoric is underwritten by a colonial logic.

Chapter 9: Coloniality and the Megacollector

In this chapter I extend my analysis to the next stage of the MCD triad - coloniality. While Chapter 8 focused on the megacollector's modern rhetoric, this chapter will centre on its less visible colonial logic. I will open the chapter by outlining how the megacollector's imposition echoes historical colonial violence, and then revisit the colonial paradigms of paternalism, extractivism, and racism as discussed in Part 1. In particular I will explore how AALA mobilises indigeneity and ontology through the tool of cosmetic multiculturalism. I will explain how this tool masks colonial manipulations and disciplinary actions aimed at neutralising the Indigenous opposition. As in Chapter 8, I take note of the ontological ambiguities which complicate a straightforward ontological analysis of the conflict. I conclude the chapter by discussing Pedranos' attempt to counteract coloniality through organising a *consulta*.

Violent Spectres

[T]here is no moment in the history of Guatemala in which racism has not provoked violence against Indigenous peoples (Chirix García and Sajbin Velásquez, 2019, p.17)

Helicopters carry sinister connotations for Lake Atitlán's Indigenous communities. During *La Violencia* of Guatemala's protracted armed conflict, they signified a military presence responsible for countless forced disappearances and brutal acts of intimidation. Their reign of terror was especially severe in Santiago Atitlán, where a military base was located. It was here on the 2nd December 1990, that the army open fired on an unarmed crowd, killing 14 and wounding 21 others (Loucky and Carlsen, 1991). Atitecos' subsequent protests pressured the military's first withdrawal of the armed conflict, precipitating its eventual conclusion six years later.

On January 17th, 2019, the Vice President's helicopter attempted to land on the outskirts of Santiago, just near the site of the 1990 massacre for what many locals assumed was the inauguration of the megacollector (Chapter 1). The symbolism was lost on nobody, an Atiteco Facebook page made a post declaring 'The Guatemalan army enters the town of Santiago Atitlán once again' (Figure 106). Following this incident, the Indigenous communities became increasingly concerned by the sight of the military around the lake, which they believed signalled the megacollector's imminent installation. These fears were articulated in an alert against this perceived militarization (Figure 107) which was widely shared in local Facebook groups at the time.

Figure 106: 'The Guatemalan army enters the town of Santiago Atitlán once again'



Voz Ciudadano Tzutujil Atitlán (2019)

Figure 107: Alert in San Pablo 27th January (Sororidad Sololteca, 2019)



ALERT: Each time the presence of elements of the army increases in different towns around the lake, now they are in San Pablo La Laguna armed in the middle of the patron saint's fair.

Don't lie to us, they say they're for safety.

Due to the political and social reality in the country it may be a strategy to initiate militarization again in the towns and with the intentions of the government to install the millionaire project of the megacolector around the lake, surely they are testing how strong community organization is.

#NoToMilitarization

#YesToPeace

#NoMoreGuns

#NoToTheMegacolector

The megacolector is haunted by violent spectres of the past. Although the armed conflict is long since over, in Guatemala the threat of state endorsed violence is always lurking just below the surface. Occasionally it bubbles over, typically when Indigenous communities are seen to be standing in the way of extractivism (Batz, 2017). One such incident was brought to national attention in 2014. Several Kaqchikel communities from the municipality of San Juan Sacatepéquez (east of Lake Atitlán) had attempted to block a road leading to one of the largest cement plants in Latin America, owned by the powerful corporation 'Cementos Progreso'. They were protesting the

negative environmental effects of a cement quarry mine in their territory, but they were met with indiscriminate violence. Eight community members were killed by armed men allegedly under the auspices of Cementos Progreso (Quiñonez et al., 2014).

This is the harsh reality of extractivism Guatemala today, and it is a reality that some of the megacollector's Indigenous opposition also fear, especially in light of their understanding of the megacollector's extractivist intentions. It was this fear that inspired the Facebook posts above, but even if the megacollector is a resource grab, it is difficult to imagine a massacre being committed against its Indigenous opposition. Lake Atitlán is not San Juan Sacatepéquez, unlike the latter, it is a major international tourist destination, with a large expat population and many NGOs operating in the area. As such, any violence would be subject to a higher level of public scrutiny. Such circumstances for instance shielded Atitecos from the military following their protests in 1990.²⁰⁵ Nonetheless, violence against the megacollector's Indigenous opposition is not unthinkable. Some activists claimed to have faced threats and intimidation by figures assumed to be connected to the megacollector's proponents. It also doesn't escape the opposition's notice that Cementos Progreso's head of security (under whose duty the San Juan Sacatepéquez massacre occurred) is none other than the father of Eduardo Aguirre (the megacollector's project manager) – Eduardo Aguirre Snr.²⁰⁶

Bloody violence represents the hard face of coloniality in Guatemala, but in Lake Atitlán's case, it is likely to be a last resort. As I discussed in Chapter 4, coloniality is also expressed in more subtle ways, most notably through leveraging the colonial 'Authorized' and 'Insurrectionary Indian' subject positions. As Richards (2013) states, 'communities [...] who do not adhere to the 'authorised' model are marginalized at best or subjected to state violence at worst' (p.102). In the following section I will discuss how the Indigenous opposition to the megacollector is marginalised by AALA's multicultural strategies.

Cosmetic Multiculturalism and the Megacollector

In the international arena, multiculturalism has come to be associated with modernity itself, a growing bloc of the 'modernizing' Guatemalan elite has followed this cue (Hale, 2006a, p.36).

In Chapter 8 I explored how AALA discursively presents the megacollector as the modern solution to the lake contamination, and to this, 'multicultural' could be affixed as a subcategory (Povinelli, 1995). As with the megacollector's 'advanced' technology, a sub-discourse of

²⁰⁵ The army's withdrawal was influenced by the intense international condemnation following the massacre (Loucky and Carlsen, 1991).

²⁰⁶ Cementos Progreso is also an affiliate of AALA.

multiculturalism helps AALA to position the megacollector as a modern solution. Yet AALA communicates its multicultural respect for the Indigenous communities' cultural differences through what appears to be a superficial engagement with Indigenous spirituality, what Bastos (2012) terms as 'cosmetic multiculturalism' (Chapter 4). As with the other discourses explored in Chapter 8, it seems that the intended audience here is not the Indigenous communities themselves (since they can see straight through its superficial nature), but rather outsiders (the international community, the urban middle class, etc). In this section I will explore the various expressions of this strategy in public events as well as through the online promotion of the megacollector. To open this discussion, I will begin with two contrasting vignettes that I constructed using notes from my field diary.

'Sticky Palms and Boardroom Spirituality'



SERJUS (2015)

Personal Vignettes

- **21st June 2018**

It's still the cool early morning and thin layers of mist shroud the surrounding forest, but the heat from the fire leaves my palms sticky with sweat and grains of sugar. As our sweet offerings crackle in its flames, we're motioned to link hands with our comrades. The middle-aged woman to my right clenches mine tightly as more than 30 of us join together into one organic being, men and women, young and old, mothers with their toddlers. Facing the fire, like a serpent we weave in and out of the wooden pillars of the small ceremonial structure. It's a disorder, we're too many for such a small space, and as the pace quickens, we become tangled, making it difficult to discern where our formation begins and where it ends. The chaotic energy of our dance breaks the serious tone of the ceremony, the younger children giggle and adults' faces break into open smiles.

The fire is petering out, and after two hours, we all thank one another and shake hands, concluding the Mayan ceremony. We make our way along a mud path through the trees to the large concrete hanger which serves as the aldea's community building. Ajpop Tinamit's assembly meeting can now begin.

- 17th July 2018

I'm in a brightly lit boardroom in one of Panajachel's largest hotels. Sat across the table from me are smartly dressed employees of AALA, members of the press and several Indigenous community leaders from all over the department. Today these community leaders are here to be instructed about the many benefits of the megacolector, which they are then to communicate back to their communities. One of them, a small cheery man from Nahualá gets up to pour himself a coffee from the side table. The projector is already set up for the PowerPoint presentation, formal introductions have been made, and we've been given the outline for today's agenda. Suddenly we are told to stand as one of AALA's employees, Laura Churunel Quiacaín, a traditionally dressed Pedrana leads an invocation of thanks to the creator Ajaw, mother nature, and most importantly, AALA and the megacolector. Everybody bows their heads, except, I notice Eduardo Aguirre. After a few brief minutes, Laura's job is done, we sit back down and turn our attention to the projector screen, the day's proceeding can now begin in earnest.

These vignettes provide a springboard to examining how Indigenous spirituality has been politicised in the megacolector conflict. The first one describes my participation in a Mayan ceremony before one of Ajpop Tinamit's assemblies.²⁰⁷ The second, my participation at AALA's PR event for the megacolector. In both cases, Mayan spirituality was being strategically enacted, but for widely dissimilar purposes. Ajpop Tinamit's ceremony was premised on defending the lake from the megacolector, whereas Laura's invocation was carried out to ensure the megacolector's success.

Beyond their obviously opposing aims, the contrasting setup of these events was also revealing. Laura was allotted just a five-minute window for her invocation, it seemed *marginal* - something to get out of the way before the day's proceeding could begin. Afterwards, she barely participated in the meeting, and her opinion was not sought out during the ensuing discussions. In contrast, the Mayan ceremony lasted for hours, it was only slightly shorter than the assembly itself. The ceremony was *vital* to the assembly, they were inter-connected and treated with equal importance. Furthermore, the *ajq'ij* who conducted it is one of Ajpop Tinamit's four *cargadores*, and he directed and greatly contributed to the discussions which followed.

Although the PR meeting I attended was a one-off event, it is emblematic of how AALA treats Indigenous spirituality. A month later, I attended a scientific conference co-organized by AALA on the subject of water management.²⁰⁸ A range of NGOs and academic experts were invited to speak, but the penultimate speaker, Felipe Gomez - the Maya K'iche coordinator of 'Oxlaju Ajpop',²⁰⁹ broke the scientific tone which had hitherto characterised the event. Speaking on behalf of the ICCA consortium,²¹⁰ his presentation significantly challenged the modern notion of water

²⁰⁷ In June 2018 in the small community of Panimatlam, an *aldea* of San Andrés Semetabaj.

²⁰⁸ The 'Second International Symposium - Continental Water of the Americas: Integrated Management of Water Basins, Good Practices and Governance'.

²⁰⁹ The National Council for Mayan Spiritual Leaders.

²¹⁰ An association of territories and areas conserved by Indigenous peoples and local communities.

endorsed by the other conference speakers. In the extract below he critiqued the way water had been discussed during the conference:

The Maya believe that water is alive, the water speaks, but in the other world they say, “No, it doesn’t speak, I drink it, but it doesn’t speak”. But yes, it does! Water is a living being, it is! Water for us is a living being, this lake is a living being, this lake speaks, this lake hears, this lake claims.

Felipe’s frustration was palpable. In insisting that ‘water is a living being’, he attempted to highlight that the debate over water is about more than different cultures, it’s about different realities (Blaser, 2013a). Felipe provocatively invited the audience to consider the reality of water as a sentient political actor, rather than a mere modern resource. In doing so it could be said that his presentation performed an ontological opening/disobedience in the OWW (de la Cadena, 2015a; Burman, 2016).

In the panel discussion which followed, I was excited to hear how the other speakers would respond. But they only continued to emphasise the need to ‘respect and consider other cultures’. A month or so later I asked one of the symposium organisers why Felipe had been invited to speak at the symposium, and they replied as follows:

We had this scientific committee that made up the programme, so we wanted to have a bit of variety and show all the perspectives and point of views, because there is a lot of traditional knowledge here in the lake, and it is difficult to find somebody who is willing to talk about it for some reason. But [Felipe Gomez] has a lot of experience on that [subject] and he has done a lot of work on that [...] so I think it was a very nice addition to the programme.

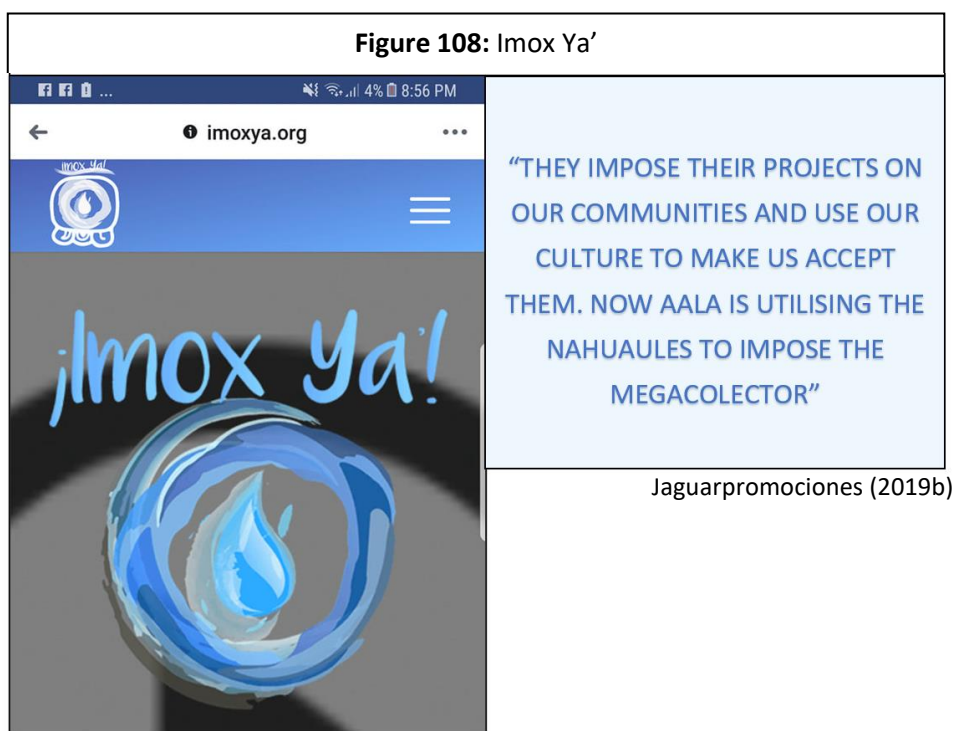
Despite the organizers’ best intentions, Felipe’s principal role appeared as an effort to illustrate inclusion of the Mayan cosmovision rather than to consider it on its own terms (see Povinelli, 1995). In truth, he offered an *alternative* rather than an *addition* to the other speakers.²¹¹ However, this distinction was not addressed in the conference since Felipe was not meaningfully engaged in dialogue. Still, these circumstances were hardly surprising to Felipe, he critiqued them in his final statement of the panel discussion:

We have made this famous word of ‘interculturality’, but we, the Indigenous communities have done it more, but the Other still hasn’t, it hasn’t had that interaction.

While AALA’s cosmetic utilisation of Felipe went unnoticed, similar tactics in the megacollector’s communication campaign have garnered public controversy. In the introduction to Part 2 I listed some of the various slogans which have accompanied the megacollector’s promotion, including the most recent iteration of ‘Agua Limpia Ya’ (‘Clean Water Already’). However, what I

²¹¹ That is to say, the relational perspective of water as a sentient being cannot simply be ‘added on’ to the modern perspective of water as a resource.

didn't mention was that this slogan was a hasty replacement for a previously existing one - 'Imox Ya'. The word, 'Imox' is the sacred Mayan *nahual* (energy/astrological sign) for water, the folkloric utilisation of which the Indigenous communities deemed an unacceptable appropriation of their spirituality. Figure 108 below is taken from a Pedrano's Facebook denouncement of AALA's adoption of this slogan:



Perhaps due to condemnations like this, after a few months, AALA substituted 'Imox' for 'Agua'. However, their cosmetic utilisation of Indigenous spirituality continued in different areas, such as their promotional videos. Figure 109 below is a series of stills taken from a recent promotional video, which depicts a traditionally attired Indigenous girl kneeling before the sun and speaking in Tz'utujil about the sacredness of the lake. She states:

A friend never leaves you alone, and cares about you. The grandparents say that the earth is sacred, and the lake too. I am his friend, and he is my friend. (AALA, 2018e)

We learn nothing of the girl herself, but this is not the point. She is utilised as a tool to communicate an agreeable image of Indigenous spirituality for promotional purposes, a tokenistic strategy which one of my interviewees described as 'pop-spirituality'.

Figure 109: AALA's 'Pop Spirituality'



AALA (2018e)

AALA's promotional material is an example of 'cultural extractivism' (Xinico Batz, 2019), it draws upon on a vague notion of the lake's sacredness to Indigenous people without engaging with them or explaining what this sacredness entails in practice. Their portrayal of the lake's sacredness is detached from its political context in a folkloric fashion, focusing only on superficial signifiers of culture (Hale, 2002). However, Felipe Gomez communicated this political context very clearly at AALA's conference, pointing out that the lake is a political actor in its own right - 'this lake speaks, this lake hears, this lake claims'. Arguably, AALA's marketing strategy doesn't just promote the megacollector, it also acts to depoliticise the Indigenous communities' relationality with the lake.

Colonial Manipulation

Actors from the outside will attempt to evoke local frameworks and reference-points for purposes of political or commercial infiltration. An abstract cause masqueraded in local language deserves to be more closely examined. (Hornborg, 1994, p.260).

AALA is not only concerned with demonstrating the megacollector's spiritual consensus, they have also expended significant efforts into proving their possession of the political consensus of the lake's ancestral authorities. These authorities carry great weight in the Indigenous communities, but AALA has been unable to convince any to speak out in open support for the megacollector. This has not however prevented them from giving the impression that they enjoy their support. AALA have produced promotional videos which feature clips of prominent Indigenous authority figures providing brief generic statements about the importance of caring for the lake (AALA, 2018d). Their inclusion in videos explicitly promoting the megacollector implies that they too are in favour of its installation. However, as with the megacollector's alleged international scientific experts (Chapter 8), there is more to this 'endorsement' than meets the eye.

I first realised something was amiss when I watched a prominent Pedrano community leader speaking in one of these promotional videos, despite knowing his stance to be firmly against the megacollector. When I raised this subject with him in person, he told me that AALA had manipulatively taken his words out of context. Later I discovered that he was not alone in this situation, other Indigenous authority figures had been treated in the same way and similarly objected to the deceptive appropriation of their image. In fact, the two most powerful ancestral authorities in the basin, the *Alcaldía indígena de Sololá* and the *Cabecera de Santiago Atitlán* have both challenged AALA and AMSCLAE on these grounds.²¹²

These promotional videos are not isolated incidents. AALA's manipulation runs deep, and they have gone to great lengths to prove the megacollector's political consensus. For example, one Pedrana community leader explained to me an incident in which Eduardo Aguirre attempted to compel her women's organisation into providing signatures in favour of the megacollector:²¹³

He told me that there is a project to save the lake, but that this project needed a group of women to provide signatures requesting that this project is started. He asked me to gather the women to sign as an organization.

²¹² In a meeting, the *Alcaldía indígena de Sololá* forced AMSCLAE to remove a promotional video from its website. Likewise, the *Cabecera de Santiago Atitlán* publicly denounced AALA for its inclusion in a promotional video which it did not consent to. This video was shown at the megacollector PR event I attended, but it has never been uploaded to their website for this reason. Both ancestral authorities have also publicly denounced the megacollector.

²¹³ And she was not the only community leader to describe such circumstances.

Most disconcerting for the community leader was Eduardo's alleged refusal to provide any further information about the megacolector. The extract below shows how the community leader claimed their conversation went:

- Community leader: *"What project is this?"*
- Eduardo Aguirre: *"It's a really wonderful project which will benefit a lot of people and that will also save the lake"*
- Community leader *"But how will it be exactly?"*
- Eduardo Aguirre: *"Ah, but I can't explain that to you right now, afterwards I will explain everything"*

Disturbingly, AALA's strategy here mirrors the behaviour of extractivist corporations (Chapter 4). Mining companies for instance regularly attempt to undermine Indigenous communities' right to prior consultation through duplicitous signature gathering.²¹⁴

Resorting to such underhand tactics also runs contrary to the principles which AALA itself espouses:

The key [to an effective communication campaign] is to inform with the truth and do everything with love, [...] and above all I believe that you have to trust in the people. Trust is key for communication. (Haydee Marroquín González)

Haydee coordinates the megacolector's social communication campaign, yet Laura Churunel Quiacaín, one of the campaign's Indigenous promoters explained that she had been explicitly instructed *not* to mention the megacolector in her promotional activities:

So in the communication activities we still don't mention the colector, because if we mention it, we won't have an open space like this, we would close ourselves off.

Another clandestine tactic which AALA has been accused of is the co-optation of the community through buying off influential community leaders. Again, attempting to neutralise the Indigenous communities in this way is reminiscent of mining companies' behaviour and the military during the armed conflict (Caxaj et al., 2012). One Pedrano community leader explained to me how they had been approached by AALA but rebuffed their advances. However, clearly others were less reluctant since several Indigenous community leaders are currently employed by AALA as Indigenous promoters in the megacolector's communications campaign. It is to these individuals that I now turn.

²¹⁴ Most recently Pan American Silver was accused of using the COVID-19 crisis as a means to collect signatures from community leaders who signed up for crisis donations (Earthworks, 2020).

The Megacollector's 'Authorized Indians'

The Indigenous individuals employed by AALA have been carefully chosen on the basis of their social capital as spiritual leaders in the communities. Through their identification as 'authentic' carriers of Indigenous spirituality, they effectively function as 'Authorized Indians' (Hale, 2004), helping AALA to project the megacollector as a multicultural solution. With such spiritual leaders seemingly on their side, AALA is able to demonstrate to the public that they have taken the cultural values of the Indigenous communities into consideration. This can be seen in the words of Anna Apolito below:

*For us [the Mayan cosmovision] is essential and you can see that by the fact that for the [megacollector] there is a person who sees to that subject, this is [Francisco Coche]. Also we have the support of a Mayan priest, Narciso [...] We can't only see the social theme [of the megacollector] in a Western way, one has to see the social issue is different from where we are operating. We are in a department that is multicultural, multilingual and where the subject of the concepts of ancestral values related to nature are fundamental [...] **so that component is fundamental and it shows that we are working on that.***

These figures appear to be valued by AALA, less for the work that they do, than the *appearance* of the work that they do. This appearance proves the megacollector's multicultural credentials to outsiders.

Of the three spiritual leaders that AALA employs, two have been mentioned already, Laura Churunel Quiacaín from San Pedro, and Francisco Coche from Santiago Atitlán (more on him shortly). The third, Narciso Cotjí is not local, but was chosen for his high standing as an important spiritual figure nationally. This can be clearly seen in the words of Eduardo Aguirre below:

[Narciso] is very well-respected all-over Guatemala, he's one of those guys, I don't know how to put it to you, the Catholic church has the pope, and here in Guatemala, some of the religious leaders from the cosmovision point of view are like popes, and there's very few of them, Narciso is one of them, so he comes here, and they will respect whatever he says.

Narciso is valued for his spiritual expertise and is utilised by AALA in much the same way as the international scientists. In Eduardo's eyes, he affords AALA spiritual consensus in addition to the scientific consensus which they also claim (Chapter 8). Despite Eduardo's confidence in Narciso's social capital, his promotional work has been publicly denounced by the Indigenous opposition. The text below (Bocel Quisquina, 2018) is a widely shared Facebook denouncement which was accompanied with Narciso's photo:

People of Sololá be careful with this man named Narciso Cojtí who pretends to be a Mayan priest but in reality he is a CHARLATAN. This man is now being paid by AALA to convince the people of Sololá so that AALA can install a megacollector around the lake. [...] The saddest thing is that people like this man lend themselves to manipulate and convince our people

As with the megacollector's promotional material, the Indigenous communities can see through AALA's manipulative strategy. Yet AALA's continued persistence in the face of such hostility is an indication that this strategy may not be intended for an Indigenous audience anyway.

An Ontological Outlier: Francisco Coche

For us Indigenous people, when the Western world tells us of a life of development, what type of development are we talking? The type of life nowadays is a life of consumption, what we value is money, economic resources...

Reading the extract above and the powerful critique of modernity it contains, you might be forgiven in assuming the speaker as one of the megacollector's Indigenous opponents. However, it is in fact Francisco Coche, the megacollector's most prominent Indigenous proponent and AALA's 'Authorized Indian' par excellence. During my fieldwork he was consistently present at AALA's public engagements, and his behaviour would always follow the same pattern. He would stand up after AALA's presentations and identify himself only as a Tz'utujil Mayan from Santiago, and never as a paid employee of AALA. Following this, rather than asking a question, he would make a bland statement about the importance of the Mayan cosmovision, which one interviewee referred to as 'Francisco's spiel'. In this way, he appeared to be planted by AALA to draw attention to an Indigenous presence at their public events.²¹⁵ He acted almost as a multicultural mascot, ensuring that the Mayan cosmovision was *always* mentioned, but never in a way which conflicted with the megacollector.

Although Francisco parrots the megacollector's modern discourses in public, as my interview revealed, his personal views are very much against the modern ontology that the megacollector embodies. Furthermore, around the lake he is respected as an activist and a defender of territory, that is, he is recognised for *opposing* modern incursions. For example, he has been prominently involved in resistance to the privatisation of Santiago's shoreline and also a recent attempt by the telecommunications company 'Torrecom' to install an antenna in Santiago.²¹⁶ The ambiguity of Francisco's status thus upsets the notion of the megacollector conflict as a clash between two neatly defined ontological positions. As one interviewee stated:

Everybody's kind of ambiguous about Francisco Coche, they don't know where he stands.

²¹⁵ A presence which as I mentioned in Chapter 8, is critically lacking.

²¹⁶ The same can be said of Narciso Cotjé, who played a pivotal role in the Mayan Movement following the Peace Accords (Bastos and Cumes, 2005).

In this sense, Francisco resembles Juan Skinner, whom as I discussed in the previous chapter, fractures the notion of a monolithic modernity through his opposition to the megacollector from a modern standpoint. Francisco Coche is Juan Skinner's antithesis, he supports the modern megacollector but from his relational (non-modern) position. There is however one key difference between these two ontological 'outliers'. Francisco is an AALA employee and *paid* for his support of the megacollector. As such, it is tempting to assume him as a co-opted extension of AALA itself, just a manipulated pawn. Indeed, this is how I considered him for a long time. However, after a while I came to the realisation that I was letting my romanticised biases get the best of me. In victimising Francisco, I was also disempowering him and obscuring his own agency in the matter. It hadn't crossed my mind that Francisco could be using AALA to further his own ambitions.

One problem with Hale's notion of the 'Authorised Indian' is that he does not explain how Indigenous actors inhabit 'permitted' spaces (Copeland, 2011, p.489/490). As Richards (2013) states, 'these positions do not capture the full range of behaviours and attitudes of indigenous peoples' (p.102), and Hale arguably underestimates Indigenous agency and its potential to subvert 'permitted spaces' to their own ends. As Hornborg (1994, p.260) notes, ambitious local actors can appropriate abstract modes of discourse in order to gain access to external funding and other forms of recognition. Indeed, this is the case in MacNeill's (2014a) analysis of the Mayan social organisation 'The Pluricultural Centre for Democracy'. The organisation receives donor funding from the EU which must be in line with EU trade policy, but As MacNeill explains, it engages in more radical political action than their funding agreement with the EU may condone, particularly anti-mining activity. They do so by facilitating and advising Indigenous communities through workshops and meetings, without directly participating in such activism themselves. Granovsky-Larsen (2017) makes a similar point in the case of the CCDA's (Peasant Committee of the Highlands) harnessing of resources from the World Bank for its anti-hegemonic activities.²¹⁷

Francisco Coche's circumstances obviously differ greatly from these examples, but that is not to say he is simply being used by AALA. He may himself be using AALA and flexing the limited space of the 'Authorized Indian', perhaps not to subvert modernity, but more pragmatically for personal gain. One interviewee alluded to this possibility, claiming Francisco as nothing more than an opportunist, what he termed as a '*proyectista*', that is somebody who indiscriminately seeks to work on NGO projects, irrespective of the project's purpose.²¹⁸ Although it is impossible to know what Francisco's motives are, as in Juan Skinner's case, personal ambitions cannot be discounted. It is

²¹⁷ See also McNeish (2008).

²¹⁸ The *proyectista* phenomenon emerged followed the Peace Accords and the flood of NGOs which arrived with donor money to aid Guatemala's reconstruction (Newton and Early, 2015).

notable for instance that Francisco made a bid as candidate for the mayoral elections of Santiago Atitlán in 2019, which may have been advantaged through AALA's support.

Francisco embodies some of the key contradictions and complexities of the megacolector conflict. Even though he is currently aligned with the modern/colonial megacolector, his allegiance is not clear-cut, he still remains 'partially connected' (de la Cadena, 2015b) to other decolonial causes. These partial connections explain why he is not totally written off by some Pedrano community leaders, who noticeably continue to like his Facebook posts and support him in other matters. It was through Francisco's personal connections for instance that Felipe Gomez was invited to speak at AALA's symposium in 2018 (as mentioned earlier). One interviewee suggested that as with Francisco's employment, Felipe's participation at this event signalled his co-optation by AALA. But this interpretation is too simplistic. As I explained earlier, Felipe's presentation actually communicated a decisively non-modern message, quite at odds with the conference's modern tone. In this way, contradictory figures like Francisco and Felipe have the *potential* to contest modern assumptions from within. Whether they do so is another question.

The Megacolector's 'Insurrectionary Indians'

While AALA's Indigenous employees function as 'Authorized Indians', at the same time, the Indigenous opposition are positioned as their antithesis - 'Insurrectionary Indians'. This colonial subject position can be read in AALA's framing of the megacolector's Indigenous opposition as both irrational and combative, an accusation which is often directed towards Indigenous opposition to extractivist development in Guatemala (Mash-Mash and Gómez, 2014). Key to this stereotype is their characterisation as prejudiced, which is juxtaposed against AALA's own supposed objectivity (Chapter 8). Take for instance Eduardo and Anna's comments about the Indigenous opposition below:

And I understood finally that it wasn't really an objective criticism, it was, I don't know, activism or ideologically provoked. There was no way to sit down with those people, it was just impossible. (Eduardo Aguirre)

Making people understand the truth is, I don't know if it's to do with the manner that we communicate things, with the prejudices that often close [people's minds], positions that they don't want to change (Anna Apolito)

They were also argued to be politically biased, and motivated by small-minded political *revanchismo* (revenge politics):

I think there are very personal issues, for example if my promoter is a community leader, but I don't get on well with them and because I don't like them, they have to do the impossible because they are in a political party (Haydee Marroquín González)

On the one hand, as Haydee suggests, *revanchismo* is a central feature of Pedrano society. However, in the case of the megacollector, my research suggests that Pedranos' opposition exists not because of this phenomenon, but in spite of it. As I will explore in Chapter 10, the megacollector conflict has united San Pedro's political divides. My interviews further revealed that Pedranos' opposition is mostly driven by pragmatism; it centres less squarely on the megacollector than the modern/colonial context in which it is embedded:

If we look at it like this as nothing more than a project to stop contaminating the lake, perfect. Like this at first glance, it seems really good. But we have to think, in what kind of country are we living in to just be able to accept it, what type of country, with all that has happened with our government to be able to say, "Very well, let's do it" (Francisco Quiacaín Rodríguez – community leader)

To evidence the Indigenous opposition's prejudice, AALA cited their reluctance to engage in dialogue, portraying them as obstinate and uncompromising:

***Those who oppose [us] do not want a dialogue, they don't want to sit down to talk [...]** it's much easier to attack without dialogue (Anna Apolito)*

*It's not reciprocal, **the good faith that we're trying to express is not well-received by some actors**. And let me tell you, we have spoken to many people, we have been all over the place talking to everyone who wants to talk, because some people just don't. (Eduardo Aguirre)*

*I believe that [the opposition] have taken a position of refusing to learn about [the megacollector], **they don't want to know, they don't want to listen**. But they are really taking a position that isn't very good, because in not listening to a proposal, we fall into what I would call **a very radical position**. (Francisco Coche)*

These claims about the opposition are in some cases accurate insofar as certain community leaders told me that they had refused to sit down with AALA. Yet their reluctance stems not from 'radicalism' as AALA imply, but rational concerns. They fear that they may be manipulated or co-opted as they know others have been.

In October 2020 I attended a community meeting via Zoom focused on the next steps for the San Pedro following the *amparo*'s public hearing. One of the main concerns to emerge was that even if the megacollector were to be suspended by the Constitutional Court in 2021, the community would have to remain vigilant for years to come, perhaps even decades. Given the significant economic and political resources at AALA's disposal, community leaders feared that over a longer time scale they might be able co-opt and infiltrate the community through benevolent projects. The speakers in the meeting stressed that in other parts of the country, extractivist corporations had eventually succeeded in infiltrating communities, even though they had been initially rebuffed.

Lending credibility to Pedranos' fear is AALA's recent attempt to draw the lake's Indigenous youth into supporting the megacollector through 'Agua Limpia Ya'. As I mentioned earlier, this slogan is used to refer to the megacollector, yet AALA also define it as a 'social movement'. AALA's website

for the megacolector (agualimpiaya.org) now provides a means to ‘Be part of this movement and show your support’ by signing your name and DPI (national identification number) to a declaration, part of which states:

Today, I declare that I am committed to the population of Sololá, to the improvement of their quality of life, the conservation and preservation of our environment.

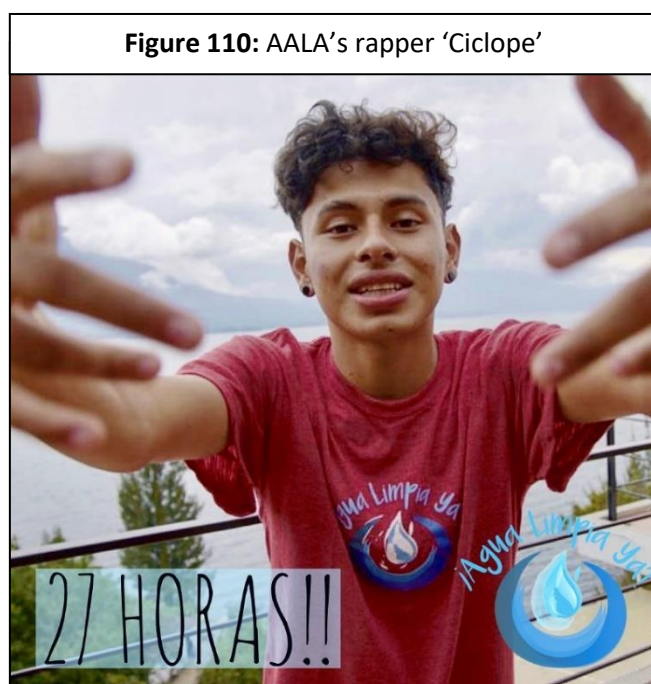
The declaration doesn’t mention the megacolector at all, only a vague commitment to the lake’s wellbeing. Yet these signatures could be duplicity used by AALA as evidence of the megacolector’s public support.²¹⁹

AALA are also using street culture to advertise ‘Agua Limpia Ya’ to the youth. For example, they recently organised for a young rapper and volunteer of the movement to improvise a rap marathon, which was livestreamed on their Facebook page (Figure 110). However, this strategy has been denounced by Indigenous authorities in an open letter to AALA, an extract of which reads:

AALA is creating a dangerous and confrontational environment using the youth of the basin against their own legitimate ancestral authorities. In this way young people are manipulated and alienated from their own culture so that they are unable to see reality in its context.

(Comisión Ciudadana por la Transparencia de Santiago Atitlán, 2019, p.2)

The denouncement also argued that AALA’s other environmental projects in reforestation, tul planting, recycling, and environmental education, while of merit, are ‘blatantly used to consolidate the “social capital” around AALA and the megacolector’ (ibid).



Agua Limpia Ya (2020)

²¹⁹ Similar to Eduardo Aguirre’s attempt to gather the signatures of women’s groups, or AALA’s utilisation of Indigenous authority figures in their promotional videos.

Community leaders' wariness to engage also stems from AALA's modern worlding of the megacollector and the exclusionary nature of their interactions with the Indigenous communities. Although AALA presents these interactions as 'dialogues', Pedranos argue that AALA have only ever performed monologues, one-sided attempts to impose the megacollector as a *fait accompli*. As I mentioned in the Introduction to Part 2, the first attempt to promote the megacollector in 2014/2015 was perceived as an imposition by Pedranos:

*In Guatemala racism is very strong, and when Ivan Azurdia [the executive director AMSCLAE at the time] came, almost to impose, he told it like this, "Does San Pedro want this project? Does it want it or not? If it doesn't want it, it will go to another municipality!". **So people felt threatened because a Ladino came to order us around like this in our own town** (Wendy Navichoc – project director of the community development association 'Jabel Ya')*

As Wendy highlights, the megacollector was badly received by Pedranos due to underlying colonial relations and Ivan Azurida's superior attitude. Yet little has changed in the intervening years, despite the megacollector's rebranding as just a 'proposal':

People think that we're blindly defending the idea [of the megacollector], but it's not like this. What we are doing is presenting the options [...] For the moment it's [the megacollector] it could be that there is something better (Haydee Marroquín González)

Haydee and other employees of AALA draw upon a rhetoric of inclusivity, but their performance of the megacollector continues to be exclusionary, and this colonial dynamic precludes a meaningful dialogue. As one Pedrano community leader asserted:

[AALA] don't believe in what we do, but they want us to believe in what they do. So there can't be a dialogue, there can't be trust [...] They have to listen to us, and It's necessary to sit together in mutual respect, but principally them, because they are from outside, they are not from here.

AALA's unilateralism is also well known to those working in other institutions at the lake, as one Guatemalan scientist confided:

It's an ego thing. AALA really needs to create a dialogue, but the problem with them is that they're like, "Ok let's talk" but when you talk to them and say this it's like, "No!", so they're not really open to other opinions, which is a big mistake. So if they are interested in pushing this forward they really have to open a dialogue that is balanced, that is fair, that is objective, in which they are willing to listen to other opinions.

If Pedranos are unwilling to listen to AALA now, this is only because of their previous experience of the megacollector's imposition. They have concluded that AALA have no intention of listening to them or of facilitating a genuine dialogue in which the megacollector could be critically debated. It is for this reason that in Pedranos' *amparo* against the megacollector, they specifically condemn their exclusion from decision-making and demand genuine participation:

3) Our *amparo* condemns the exclusion of the people of San Pedro from the fundamental right to participation [...] **We have been excluded from the discussion since the genesis of the project**, so we demand the state to take responsibility for developing, with the participation of Indigenous peoples, a coordinated and systematic action with a view to protecting Lake Atitlán. (Colectivo San Pedro, 2019a, p.2)

Arbiter of Authenticity

Individuals and communities who seek inclusion while also making ancestral claims walk a fine line between acceptance and marginalization (Richards, 2010, p.72).

AALA leverages the colonial subject positions of the 'Authorized' and 'Insurrectionary Indian' primarily as a means to controlling the public narrative of the megacollector's Indigenous opposition. Their efforts however are significantly hampered by two of the lake's main ancestral authorities, the *Alcaldía indígena de Sololá* and Ajpop Tinamit, which have both publicly spoken out against it. It is not tenable for AALA to dismiss entire formal institutions as 'Insurrectionary Indians', and I noticed AALA's tendency to instead assume the role of 'arbiter of authenticity' (Hale, 2018) by turning to questions of authenticity to delegitimise them. This can be seen clearly in Eduardo Aguirre's response to my mention of Ajpop Tinamit's opposition to the megacollector:

*The problem was that when the Ajpop Tinamit formed this year, the four representing members, not all of them are Indigenous authorities, I mean, **authentic**, and that was the big problem.*

The target of Eduardo's derision here is Maggie Garcia, a young Indigenous activist from San Lucas Tolimán. She is one of the most visible individual faces of the opposition movement because she has spoken out against the megacollector in several articles reporting on the conflict (Duprat, 2020; Esswein and Zernack, 2019b).²²⁰ To undermine her, Eduardo implies that as a result of her youth and gender she is not an 'authentic' representative of Ajpop Tinamit, and in the statement below he even shockingly questions her sanity:

*And well, we really had problems with this girl Maggie. I don't know who she represents, and she didn't want to sit with me, but now **she's in a more stable mood**, she actually did the translation for one of those videos.*

Interestingly, the question of who Maggie 'represents' was raised by other members of AALA. As Gere and MacNeill (2008) state, there is a prominent public narrative in Guatemala which assumes Indigenous activists as mobilised by 'outside agitators'.²²¹ This view was directly expressed by one Ladino interviewee who suggested that European development agencies were likely stirring up the megacollector's Indigenous opposition and even paying them to protest.

At the end of Eduardo's statement above, he also claims that Maggie translated a video for AALA, something which she herself denies. In our interview, he also made similarly false claims

²²⁰ She has faced death threats as a result.

²²¹ Cementos Progreso (2014) for instance made a statement against the ILO-169 convention, arguing that multinational groups are prone to manipulating Indigenous communities due to their ambitions to block investments and promote institutional instability.

about San Pedro's Elder Council and Ajpop Tinamit.²²² For example, he incredulously implied that AALA was responsible for Ajpop Tinamit's formation:

*You know we were very pleased when Ajpop Tinamit formed, because it was a product of the conversations that we had last year with the working group we tabled.*²²³

These false claims appear to be aimed towards verbally co-opting the Indigenous opposition. In emphasising the opposition's collaboration with AALA, Eduardo casts doubt on both their integrity and the strength of their commitment. He also further downplays the threat of Ajpop Tinamit by suggesting that it is no longer active:

So, what we did is ok, that was a very good intention, [Ajpop Tinamit] formed, but it's not going anywhere, so we are still talking to each of [the ancestral authorities], because [Ajpop Tinamit], I don't think they have gathered anymore, I haven't heard of them getting together and deciding things.

It is of course possible that Eduardo is simply unaware of Ajpop Tinamit's current activities, but I think it is more likely that he made these (false) claims with the expectation that they carried little risk of being questioned. This strategy would convince most people, except those like myself, who are in direct conversation with the opposition.

The colonial logic of AALA's strategy is exposed in their attempt to authenticate indigeneity. For example, in reference to the megacolector's Indigenous communicators, Eduardo stated:

*We have all these guys who came here today [...] and those are the **real** people that matter, the ones who have a genuine interest in fixing the problem, not the ones who have an agenda, ideologically, or just to be cool.*

The criterion for being considered 'real' in this instance is support for the megacolector. In contrast, the legitimacy of those Indigenous people/ancestral authorities which don't support the megacolector is called into question. This can be seen in Anna Apolito's discussion of AALA's organisation of a roundtable for the lake's ancestral authorities:

*That is another question as well, really how to identify the legitimate authorities. So this happened to us in the first workshop, 15 [ancestral authorities] were invited that in theory had to be legitimate, and afterwards in the second workshop **people arrived that we don't think were [legitimate]**. [...] There are legitimate Indigenous authorities that we know, we know the Cabecera de Santiago, and others that have been created the last few years.*

As I mentioned in Chapter 6, many ancestral authorities have recently been re-established, including San Pedro's Elder Council in 2017. These new authorities are an inconvenience for AALA because they make imposing the megacolector that much harder.²²⁴ However, they are not illegitimate as

²²² He claimed that AALA has good relations with the Elder Council and implied that they are in favour of the megacolector.

²²³ The so-called 'Table for Decision Making of Authorities'.

²²⁴ One governmental authority figure for instance complained that decision-making processes had been problematically slowed down by the creation of what they perceived as too many opinionated ancestral authorities.

Anna implies. In extractivist conflicts in Guatemala, the legitimacy of ancestral authorities is often called into question (Abbott, 2020), and it appears that AALA is using the same tactic to neutralise the megacollector's Indigenous opposition.

Colonial Interruptions

As much as AALA strives to control the public narrative of the Indigenous opposition through the tool of authenticity, sometimes their colonial logic is unmasked. In this section I will discuss two such incidents, or as I term them - 'colonial interruptions'. The first occurred during the Xocomil Científico conference in 2017. Four ancestral authority representatives were invited to the event, with each one allotted a few minutes to speak on behalf of their communities. When Diego Petzey (the representative from Panajachel) was speaking, he was abruptly told to stop and brushed aside by the organizers because the Vice President had just arrived in the building (Figure 111). When he was permitted to return to the podium a few moments later, he maintained his dignified composure, but the humiliation was written on his face.²²⁵



El Periodico (2017)

By including the ancestral authorities in the event, AALA had clearly intended to draw attention to the fact that they were taking multiculturalism seriously. However, because of the Vice President's interruption, their ambitions backfired spectacularly. Instead of illustrating the high regard in which they hold the ancestral authorities, Diego Petzey's dismissal achieved the opposite effect. The incident was a huge embarrassment to AALA and has also proved difficult for them to

²²⁵ Video clips of which spread rapidly across social media.

shake off, despite their attempts to erase it from the record.²²⁶ In her interview, Anna Apolito mentioned the incident unprompted so that she could set the record straight, describing it as follows:

You know the bad information came about because of a bad timing when the Vice President arrived [...] while [the Indigenous authorities] were speaking, Francisco Coche or somebody, I don't remember which of the authorities was speaking, and in this moment the Vice President arrived and everybody made accusations of this nature. Without thinking, they gave the floor to him. That was taken as a lack of respect, and I agree, but people have to see as well that the people who were managing the event, they felt like 'Oh my goodness, I have to give the floor to [the Vice President]', so things like that don't have anything malicious behind them, it was just a spur of the moment decision.

Anna attempts to shrug off the incident as mere 'bad timing', an unfortunate but innocent blunder. This may indeed be the case, but its occurrence spoke volumes to the Indigenous communities. Anna attributes the incident as a major source of 'bad information' about the megacollector, and it's true that the incident added fuel to the fire of the Indigenous opposition. Their perception of it as a colonial interruption however wasn't 'bad information', but confirmation of something that they already knew to be true – Guatemala is a colonial society.

Anna then went on to defend the incident by insisting that it could just have easily happened to somebody else:

Because [the Indigenous opposition] are already there with stereotypes, with prejudices, when something happens like what happened [...] If it had happened to somebody else it wouldn't have had the same impact, but that fact that it happened in that moment developed a series of oppositions and unjust misinformation

As Anna suggests, if a foreign scientist was treated like Diego Petzey was, it wouldn't have had an impact. But to attribute the Indigenous communities' volatility to prejudice neglects the colonial contexts in which the incident occurred. Preceding the incident, the Indigenous communities already knew AALA to be an elite institution of *chaleteros*, and they had also experienced the megacollector's attempted imposition in 2014/2015. Their volatile reaction was framed by these concrete experiences of coloniality.

Unlike the first colonial interruption, the second was irrefutably malicious. It took place in March 2019, when a group of Pedranos travelled to the capital for a press conference organised to publicly broadcast their rejection of the megacollector. As the community leaders calmly and clearly listed their objections, they were suddenly interrupted by a businessman and member of AALA. The man spoke down to the Pedranos in a loud and patronising tone, arguing that they were wrong to object to the megacollector because it would only extract the equivalent of fifteen swimming pools

²²⁶ Videos of the event on AALA's website have been edited to specifically erase the interruption.

of water from the lake. His rude interjection elicited discontented murmurs from the crowd of Pedranos, and to this he reacted furiously, pointing his finger and shouting arrogantly (Figure 112). Pedranos refused to permit his interruption, and they collectively called for his departure with cries of ‘afuera!’ (outside!), whilst a prominent voice in the crowd called for him to ‘buzz off back to his finca’. Realising that he couldn’t get his way, the intruder retreated with his tail between his legs, to which the crowd applauded and whistled triumphantly as he left the building.



Figure 112: AALA’s Colonial Interruption (Fundebase, 2019)

Both of these colonial interruptions exposed AALA’s dependence on colonial subject positions to impose the megacollector. The first interruption occurred because Diego Petzey’s opinions were not deemed to be important. He was invited to Xocomil Cientifico only as a cosmetic ‘Authorized Indian’ to prove AALA’s commitment to multiculturalism. In the second interruption, Pedrano community leaders were ‘Insurrectionary Indians’ whose unruly voices had to be disciplined and silenced. However, Pedranos’ outraged response to both interruptions indicates a desire to break free of coloniality.

Enforced Ignorance

It is a deceitful project [...] because it has been difficult to find evidence or information [...] as the proponents have reserved the right to disclose that information, and their work is done hidden from public view and away from the communities (COCODES, 2019, p.11/12)

In Chapter 4 I discussed paternalism in Guatemala and how Pedranos perceive the state to be purposely underfunding education to keep the Indigenous communities in a state of ignorance. They believe that this is a strategy intended to maintain a compliant Indigenous population, which can be easily manipulated and exploited. Pedranos see the same colonial pattern replicated in the communications campaign of the megacollector. While AALA frequently described this campaign as

an effective tool to empowering the Indigenous communities, Pedranos see it in a different light. They often complained that AALA failed to deliver basic practical information about the megacollector:

Who will finance it? The people? And how much will we have to pay? This they don't say, they only say that it has to be constructed, but who will be in charge of caring for that afterwards? (Clemente Peneleu)

Pedranos believed this paucity of information as a deliberate strategy to keep the Indigenous communities in the dark, as one community leader expressed:

*I think [AALA] fears the people, that they have more information. Remember Michel Foucault would say 'knowledge is power', if [the Indigenous communities] have more information as AALA does, the megacollector won't happen [...] **For this reason they prefer [the Indigenous communities] not to have the information.***

On the one hand, the vagueness of the information relayed by AALA's communications campaign can be explained by the ad hoc fashion in which the megacollector was developed. It was never a fully formed project from the outset, but has rather been developed in phases, with many of the specific technical aspects only now being evaluated and decided upon. While these circumstances may excuse AALA's failure to provide some of the finer details about the megacollector in their communications campaign, it doesn't explain why core information (even the existence of the megacollector itself) have been deliberately omitted (as discussed earlier).

Like the state, AALA has taken on a paternalistic role, selecting which information is or is not necessary for the Indigenous communities to access. The Indigenous communities are in a sense doubly burdened by these paternalistic constraints. Not only does AALA provide scant information about the megacollector, but state education has also left them ill-equipped to think and argue critically. This 'enforced ignorance' leaves the Indigenous communities susceptible to AALA's manipulation, as the Pedrano activist Felipe Chavajay explains below:

AALA has done campaigns in the towns, but a campaign of manipulation. They go from group to group, trying to look for leaders of certain organizations, and they sell these ideas, and unfortunately, many people aren't critical, when they are given this offer, they are excited.

Felipe was also concerned by how easily Pedranos' were convinced of the megacollector's promotional videos. For this reason, he started up his own amateur weekly TV show, 'Despertando Conciencia' ('Awakening Consciousness') aimed at helping Pedranos' to analyse more critically.

'Enforced ignorance' leaves the Indigenous communities disadvantaged, since they are less able to develop effective counter arguments. This in turn makes it easier for the elites to act with impunity, as one community leader explained:

All planning in this country has always required Indigenous peoples' cheap labour. It has required the destruction of the Other, in order to impose their idea over the Other. Because [they believe] that the Other doesn't think, and I feel that every time when they see that the Other's arguments are empty, they are able to impose each time.

A strategy of 'enforced ignorance' thus works greatly to AALA's advantage. Moreover, as one Pedrana community leader pointed out, it also produces the 'Insurrectionary Indian' subject position as a self-fulfilling prophesy:

*The [Indigenous communities] won't agree because they don't know anything [about the megacollector], and this will paralyze the project due to conflict with the communities that "never understand anything ever". **So we are the savages always in this situation, we are the bad guys of the movie.** But if they never explain to you, if they speak in a scientific language, how do you expect them to pay attention to you? But if you want [the Indigenous communities] to see it in a good light, you give them the information properly, you have to form public opinion [...] because if they were better informed [the Indigenous communities] would doubt [the megacollector] less. (Wendy Navichoc)*

Wendy is understandably confused by AALA's strategy. As she suggests, if more detailed information about the megacollector was provided, the Indigenous communities might doubt its intentions less. Withholding information only raises their suspicions. However, from AALA's standpoint, there are distinct advantages to this approach. Not only does it allow the Indigenous opposition to be framed as 'Insurrectionary Indians', opposing because of ignorance rather than valid concerns about the megacollector, but the lack of concrete information about the megacollector makes it more difficult for the opposition to construct counterproposals.

Pedranos want to dispel this ignorant 'Insurrectionary Indian' stereotype, and I saw this desire expressed in a COCODE meeting focused on outlining their reasons for rejecting the megacollector. During the meeting, a table was compiled to list the main problems that the Cocodes believed were responsible for the lake's contamination.²²⁷ 'Environmental ignorance' had been initially identified as one of these problems, yet some Pedranos took issue with the word 'ignorance'. Curious about this objection, I raised the issue in a later interview with one of the objecting community leaders, who explained his position as follows:

I questioned the table because it says 'environmental ignorance'. But what we lack is access to information, and this is all a process of colonisation that was imposed. [...] So we can't blame the people that they're ignorant, no! There is a system that did this, and that has interests in it continuing like this. [...] we have been programmed to be ignorant, not to question. So when we realise this, we cannot blame it on the people.

As a result of these objections, the final draft of the table was rephrased as 'access to environmental education' to indicate that the problem was not of Pedranos' own making, but a result of coloniality.

²²⁷ This table is displayed in Chapter 10 (Table 7, p.285).

Contesting Coloniality: The *Consulta*

My mother still doesn't know anything about the megacollector [...] this is an indication of exclusion, she is excluded of information. [...] That's why we have to inform ourselves.
(Community leader)

As a result of 'enforced ignorance', Pedrano community leaders have focused efforts on informing the wider community about the threat of the megacollector through an impressive awareness campaign that will be explored in depth in Chapter 10. Community leaders have also expended considerable effort on informing themselves, for example, organising visits to various Guatemalan universities to learn about wastewater technology. They have also sought out the opinions of national and international experts, sometimes through video conferences during weekly COCODE meetings.

The main priority of community leaders is learning how to carry out a *consulta comunitaria* (community referendum) in accordance with the ILO-169 convention. As I discussed in Chapter 4, this is the primary mechanism by which the Indigenous communities are able to legally challenge extractivist projects in their territories, and Pedranos hope to use it as a means to rejecting the megacollector. However, whilst Guatemala is a signatory to the ILO-169 convention, the government provides no specific guidelines about how to carry out a *consulta* in practice. As a result, the Indigenous communities are left to fill in the blanks themselves (Romero et al., 2018).

The absence of a *consulta* protocol leaves the process open to abuse. Often if an Indigenous community votes to reject a project, the offending party will claim the *consulta* was not carried out correctly, using this as a reason to disregard it (Mash-Mash and Gómez, 2014; Cementos Progreso, 2014). Similarly, without the involvement of the government (or a higher authority like the UN), the outcome is often ignored. This leaves the Indigenous communities in a precarious position. They require official validation, but the government itself is reluctant to provide it, and they may lack the resources to organise a *consulta* themselves. In the case of the megacollector, Ajpop Tinamit (2018) criticised the government's hands-off approach directly in their report to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous peoples:

6) *The government doesn't have interest or the will to carry out consultas comunitarias directly in the territories of the Indigenous people where the megaproject [megacollector] will be built.*

To avoid their own *consulta* being discredited or ignored, Pedranos are planning to conduct it as professionally as possible. They are not entirely inexperienced in the process since a similar mechanism already exists in the form of the *cabildo abierto* (open town council) in which community

members are called to the *cancha* to vote on important issues affecting the town. However, a *cabildo abierto* is only very rarely called, and attendance is usually poor. In contrast, *consultas comunitarias* are required to have at least a 50% rate of participation of registered residents to be considered valid (Congreso de Guatemala, 2002). For this reason, community leaders have sought out the advice of other communities which have already carried out the consulta process. It was with this objective in mind that a group of them travelled to the ‘Semillas de Pensamiento’ Defence of Territory festival in August 2018 (Figure 113). Following these information gathering efforts, community leaders organised a *consulta* test run of sorts. In March 2019 over four consecutive evenings they collected people’s signatures against the megacollector, and a total of 2,500 signatures were gathered (TV Tz’unun Ya’, 2019e), a good turnout, but still less than the 50% threshold.

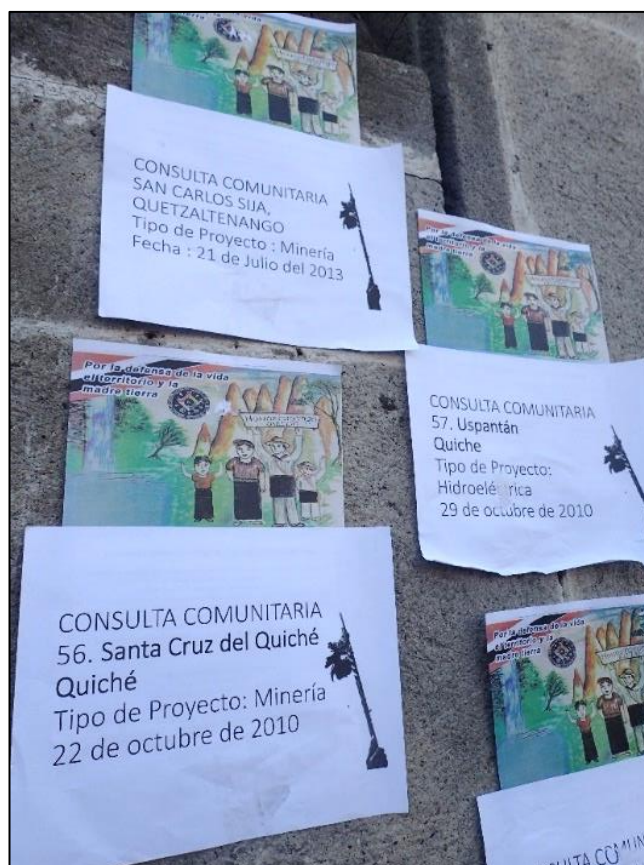


Figure 113: A wall at the festival plastered with the records of previously held *consultas*



Figure 114: ‘We have the right to give our consent through free, prior and informed consultation’.
Comunidad Tz’unun Ya’
Facebook publication (13th November 2019)

As an interested party, AALA cannot conduct the *consulta* itself. However, it *does* have a responsibility to inform the Indigenous communities about the megacollector, something which its strategy of ‘enforced ignorance’ precludes. If AALA was truly concerned with the Indigenous communities’ right to consultation, it could also lobby the government or an impartial organisation to carry out the *consulta*. This doesn’t however appear to be high on their agenda, despite claims to be ‘providing all the foundations so that it can be done’ (Anna Apolito). In fact, I found the question of the *consulta* strangely absent from conversations with AALA employees. They never raised the subject directly, and when I did, my question would often be deflected:

Yes a consulta has to be done of course it has to be done [...] So the problem here isn't if they want or don't want [the megacollector], the problem is what we will do with the lake's problems... (Haydee Marroquín González)

AALA’s neglect of the *consulta* isn’t unusual in Guatemala’s context, it is just a reflection of the political reality where the right to prior consultation is routinely violated (Mash-Mash and Gómez, 2014). This reality was tacitly acknowledged by Anna Apolito herself when I asked her:

Me: *Will a consulta be carried out soon?*

Anna Apolito: *[...] So I would hope, not hope, I'm sure that [a consulta] will be done, it has to be done Tim, there's no choice.*

Before correcting herself, Anna’s initial choice of words tellingly revealed the possibility of the megacollector being realised *without* prior consultation.²²⁸

It is this very doubt which vindicates Pedranos’ *amparo* against the megacollector (delivered to the Constitutional Court in September 2019). Their *amparo* argues that their right to consultation is being violated, and it evidences this violation as a means to suspending the megacollector and forcing their right to prior consultation as a matter of priority. However, the megacollector conflict is more than ‘a mere resource conflict’ (Coombes et al., 2012a), and so are Pedranos’ efforts for a *consulta*. As Costanza (2015) states, in exercising the right to prior consultation Indigenous communities:

challenge not just discrete development projects but more so the longstanding state and elite dominance over their local governance, development goals and strategies, and cultural values. Arguably, they seek greater local autonomy. (p.261).

Such desires for autonomy can also be discerned in Pedranos’ opposition movement, which as I have argued throughout this thesis, connects to processes of revindication. Their *amparo* is a decolonial response which meets the modernity/coloniality of the megacollector head-on, but San Pedro’s revindication movement is bigger than the megacollector. As I will address in the next chapter, it seeks to overcome the modern/colonial status quo which enabled such a project to be imposed on

²²⁸ This possibility was also shockingly revealed in the off the record statements of Jose Toriello and Eduardo Aguirre in Aburawa’s (2021) recent investigative article about the megacollector conflict.

Pedranos the first place.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have lifted the modern veil obscuring the megacollector's colonial logic and shown how Guatemala's predominant colonial paradigms are reproduced in the megacollector conflict. In particular, I have demonstrated how AALA mobilises Indigeneity and Indigenous relationality in a strategy of cosmetic multiculturalism, and I have further explained how colonial subject positions are utilised in the co-optation, manipulation and disciplining of the Indigenous communities. Above all, I have proven that Pedranos' opposition movement is engendered by coloniality and their exclusionary treatment at the hands of AALA. This chapter thus provides the context to Pedranos' decolonial response, which as I will discuss in the next chapter, goes far beyond the *amparo's* opposition to the megacollector. It aims towards something greater - the revindication of the community's autonomy.

Chapter 10: The Opposition *for*...

In the final chapter of this thesis, I also turn to the final stage of the MCD triad – decoloniality. So far my discussion of the megacollector conflict has centred mostly on AALA's actions and Pedranos' opposition directly *against* this. However, in this chapter I shall go further, exploring what Pedranos' opposition is actually *for*. In doing so I will reveal how Pedranos' opposition is characterised by ontological excesses and desires for autonomy. This chapter ties Parts 1 and 2 together, demonstrating that Pedranos' opposition connects to deeper processes of revindication in the community, and implicating the megacollector conflict as more than 'a mere resource conflict' (Coombes et al., 2012a).

I will start off by outlining the distinction between the opposition *against* and the opposition *for*, explaining why AALA fails to recognise the latter. I will then show how this opposition *for* is about lake/life/community and use this insight to elucidate how community leaders were able to successfully mobilise the whole community of San Pedro against the megacollector (whilst also noting the movement's extant tensions). Finally, I will discuss attempts to create a law for the lake, using this as an opportunity to examine the issue of strategic essentialism, and to judge the extent to which the megacollector conflict can be considered an ontological conflict. I will conclude the thesis with my final thoughts on the risk of overstating the ontological dimensions of the megacollector conflict.

Opposition *Against* / Opposition *For*

Chapters 8 and 9 focused on the modern/colonial enactment of the megacollector. Within this discussion I revealed particular ways Pedranos have sought to counteract this enactment head-on and disprove the megacollector as the expert, modern and objective solution to the lake's contamination. A prime example of this is Pedranos' utilisation of scientific experts to unsettle AALA's claims. This is what I term as the opposition *against* the megacollector, that is opposition which is *reactive*, and within the same modern terms set by AALA itself. The culmination of such efforts was realised in Pedranos' *amparo* which aimed to block the megacollector through the Constitutional Court.

However, this opposition *against* is only half the story, Pedranos' opposition is *creative* as well as reactive, and they are developing their own solutions to the lake's contamination (and to modernity/coloniality more generally). In other words, their opposition is *for* something as well as

against the megacolector. As such, it is fairly typical of resistance movements across Latin America, as Catherine Walsh (2018) describes below:

Since the Spanish invasion of the ‘Americas’ [...] the struggles, movements, and actions of peoples native to these lands [...] have been and still are against [...] the colonial yoke [...] However, they have also importantly been – and continue to be – for the creation, and cultivation of modes of life, existence, being, and thought otherwise [...] It is the for that takes us beyond an anti-stance. (p.18)

Table 7: Community leaders’ proposals for the lake (COCODES and Elder Council, 2018)
[some elements have been removed for practical purposes]

	Topic	Problem	Proposal of solution
1	Environmental ignorance	- Lack of access to environmental education	- Environmental education
2	Lack of community participation	- Community disorganisation	- To promote community participation and organization
3	Wastewater	- Lack of treatment - <u>Imposition and installation of the megacolector</u>	- Installation of biodigestors - Grease trappers - Dry toilets - Biofilters - Use of biodegradable cleaning products - <u>Reject the megacolector</u>
4	Privatisation of beaches, the lake, and the extraction of sand	- Lack of municipal decrees that integrally protect the beaches, the lake and its ecosystem - Buildings constructed on the shore or within the lake	- Create a municipal decree that integrates the protection of beaches, the lake and its ecosystem (10 metres, cleaning, de-privatization of beaches, etc.)
5	Agricultural contamination	- Bad agricultural practices - Use of agrochemicals - Presence of herbicides - Lack of protection of Pedrano agriculture	- Implementation of ancestral ecological practices (agroecology, permaculture, biodynamics) - Implement agricultural programmes - Creation of an agricultural finance bank - Technical assistance - Creation of an agricultural biofactory - Subsidise the transition to organic agriculture - Agricultural security - A market for organic products
6	Trash	- Low adherence to the municipal decree No.111-2016 [plastic ban] - Lack of socialization and application of the solid waste rules - Clandestine waste dumps - Street vendors - Lack of sanitation regulation - Burning of trash	- Ratification of the municipal decree No.111- 2016 [the plastic ban] - Socialize the municipal decree of solid waste - Close clandestine waste dumps - Relocate the street vendors - Make an integrated plan for cleaning the town.

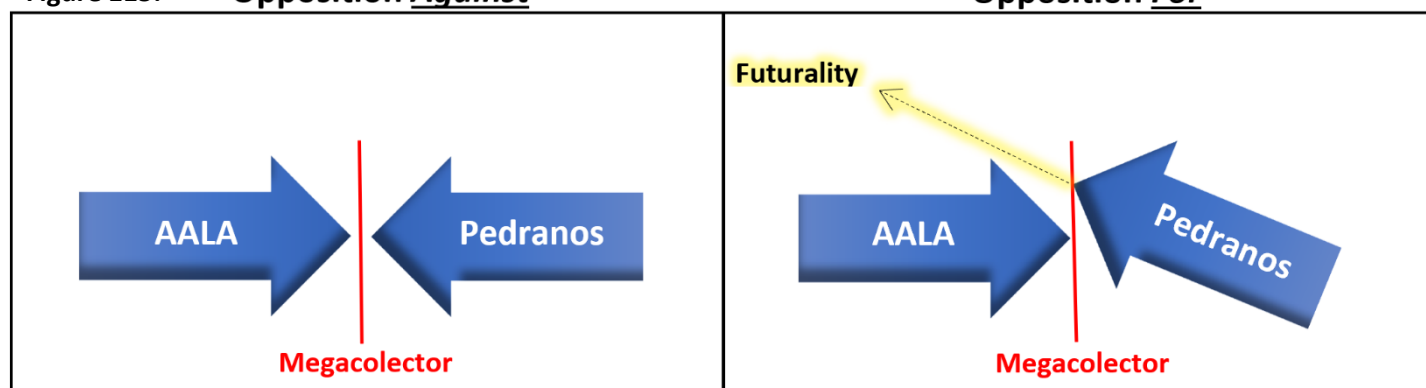
Through paying attention to Pedranos’ opposition *for* we can see how their opposition is actually about much more than the megacolector. This can be seen clearly in Table 7 above, which is adapted from the table community leaders included in their petition to the mayor to air their grievances about the megacolector (COCODES and Elder Council, 2018). On inspection, we can see

that the megacolector is just one of many problems they identify, and rejecting it (highlighted in Topic 3) is likewise just one of their many proposed solutions for the lake. Pedranos rather more holistically aim to redress the wider context of modernity/coloniality, i.e. the community's modern 'contamination' (Chapter 5). Besides the megacolector, they also target other modern/colonial problems such the privatisation of the shoreline (Topic 4), and a loss in sense of community (Topic 2). Table 7 reveals that the megacolector is not Pedranos' main concern, modernity/coloniality is.

Pedranos constructed their table through accumulating recommendations from several different reports written by community leaders in the years 2015-2018.²²⁹ These proposals can be said to *exceed* AALA's imposition of the megacolector, both because they are *not* directed explicitly at AALA, and because some of their ideas predate the megacolector. One of the main contributing reports is Plan Wi'xA (Taa' Pi't, 2016) which I introduced in Chapter 7. Its influence can be discerned in Topic 5, which proposes the 'Implementation of ancestral ecological practices' as a solution to the contamination of chemical fertilizers. As I discussed in Chapter 7, permaculture is a transmodern solution (Dussel, 2012), which seeks to merge the positive aspects of ancestral and modern agricultural practices.

Like this, some of Pedranos' solutions transcend AALA's modern sensibilities and appeal instead to their own endogenous epistemology. As I will discuss later in the chapter, this is especially pertinent in Pedranos' proposal for a law for the protection of the lake (Topic 4). Above all, Pedranos' opposition *for* aims to ensure their community's 'futurity' (Escobar, 2018). Consequently, although Table 7's proposals do act to counter the megacolector, unlike their opposition *against*, this is not their explicit purpose. Rather, applying de la Cadena's (2015b) framework, they could be said to meet, but ontologically *exceed* AALA's modern discourses. Figure 115 below visualises this distinction.

Figure 115: **Opposition Against**



²²⁹ Including Plan Wi'xA (Taa' Pi't, 2016), 'Jun Qa B'ana' (Taa' P'it, 2017), COCODES (2018), and 'Operation Plans 2015, 2016 and 2017' (Comisión de medio ambiente, 2015; 2016; 2017).

Can the Hegemonic Ear Hear (Does it Want to)?

Pedranos' creative opposition *for* is not recognised by AALA. Instead, they lean on the 'Insurrectionary Indian' subject position, framing the opposition to the megacollector only as combative opposition *against*:

*It can't be, "Ahh I don't want that". [...] What are you going to propose to save yourself from this cancer? [...] **And the truth is that what we see is that they are in opposition, but they are not proactive**, they don't come with a portfolio of projects with a good attitude, saying, "Look, let's do this better project" (Haydee Marroquín González)*

In San Pedro it is very difficult, because there is a group of people that always say, "Not this! Not this!" (Ines Méndez)

Ines is a coordinator of AALA's environmental education programme, and she is a Pedrana herself. She is not wrong to point out that San Pedro possesses a rather combative group of male community leaders, I witnessed their bombastic nature on a regular basis at community meetings.²³⁰ However, what she perhaps doesn't realise is that whilst this vocal group is important to the opposition movement, they don't lead it, other less hot-headed community leaders do. Indeed, as I will go on to explore in the next section, what is remarkable about San Pedro's opposition movement is just how it has managed to unite diverse and often conflicting segments of the population behind it.

In contrast to the 'empty-handed' Indigenous opposition, AALA paints itself as uniquely concerned with solving the lake's contamination issues:

*We are doing [the megacollector] because we believe that it is the solution, and because we also believe that **if we do not do it, nobody will do it**. This is the bottom line. So we would also like to hear more proposals on the subject of wastewater, but really none have been concretized. (Anna Apolito)*

Whether AALA is wilfully neglecting the Indigenous opposition's proposals, or if they are simply ignorant is uncertain. Anna Apolito at least seemed to evidence the latter. When I asked her whether AALA was open to listening to the Indigenous communities' solutions, she claimed that they were:

Me: *If there were alternatives suggested by the communities, would you listen?*
Anna Apolito: *Of course, it's that there haven't been any.*

When I subsequently told her that Pedranos had actually outlined their solutions in a written petition, she seemed to react with genuine surprise. Yet this ignorance in itself points to a deeper underlying problem - AALA's failure to communicate with the Indigenous communities.

²³⁰ The group is comprised of around half-a-dozen male friends in their thirties/forties, most of whom I interviewed.

As I explained in Chapter 9, AALA's 'dialogues' present no such opportunity for the Indigenous communities to be heard. The problem here is less AALA's ignorance of Pedranos' solutions (since this can be easily rectified), but rather their *unwillingness* to get to know them. Applying a Spivakian lens to this situation, it could be said that the subaltern is speaking, the problem is AALA's deafness to Pedranos' proposals. In this sense, it is useful to rephrase Spivak's (1988) provocation to 'whether the hegemonic ear can hear anything' (Barrett, 2004), or better yet, whether it *wants* to hear anything.

One possible reason for AALA's reluctance to listen may be that they simply don't consider the Indigenous communities as capable of generating worthwhile solutions themselves (Xón Riquiac, 2014). As I mentioned in Chapter 4, there is a colonial tendency in Guatemala to discount Indigenous people as critical thinkers (Telesur, 2016). For example, when I discussed the subject of alternative solutions with Haydee, she didn't consider the Indigenous communities in her response:

So it would be ideal for another NGO or another country to come to present a counterproposal, not against [the megacollector], but as another option. (Haydee Marroquín González)

Pedranos themselves suggest this neglect carries racist undertones (Colectivo San Pedro, 2019a, p.1):

*This imposition carries a racist stance, because the businessmen promoting this project claim that only they have the technological and scientific capacity to manage the megacollector project [...]. **They assert that Indigenous Peoples lack the technology and science necessary to address environmental problems.***

Something which must also be accounted for is the Indigenous communities' capacity to develop an alternative proposal. In terms of technical know-how and financial backing, they *are* less well-equipped than AALA, and AALA uses this against them:

*We have no power to make [the megacollector] go through, we are trying to make it go through of course because we believe in it, but there's no exclusivity here. I mean of course if you come up with an idea and you can build the trust and **get the resources to push it forward then let's do it.** We welcome that because what we want is to fix the problem. (Eduardo Aguirre)*

While vocalising his openness to alternatives, Eduardo simultaneously sets strict limits on their acceptability – they must be backed by adequate resources, resources which he knows the Indigenous communities lack. By holding the Indigenous communities to these unrealistic standards, AALA forecloses the viability of their proposals from the outset. This contradiction hasn't gone unnoticed, Marvin Romero (the former executive director of AMSCLAE) emphasised it during our interview:

It's bad to demand proposals from people that can't make a proposal. For example, in the rural communities how many sanitation engineers are there? [...] it's impossible for them to develop themselves a counterproposal of the same level as the megacolector.

Marvin attributed this tactic of deflection to the wider political context of Guatemala:

This type of response isn't unique to AALA, but rather the Guatemalan political system. So, when a politician wants to do something which isn't transparent, what he does is say to the people, "Well if not this, what is your proposal? If you don't present anything then let me do it", but that is a defensive attitude right.

This situation once again speaks to the disjuncture between AALA's rhetoric of inclusion and their exclusionary (modern) worlding of the megacolector as the only solution. There are ways that AALA could follow through on its rhetoric and world the megacolector more inclusively through the consideration of other proposals. For example, they could have carried out what is known as a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) before imposing the megacolector.²³¹ An SEA requires the development and assessment of alternatives to a proposed project. Moreover, it involves processes of 'screening' and 'scoping', exposing a project like the megacolector to scrutiny through public participation (UNECE, 2020). However, both Eduardo and Anna claimed that any sort of environmental impact survey would only be carried out 'later'.

Opposition *for*: Lake/Life/Community

The defence of community is a fecund source of alternatives to the dominant mode of development. (Coombes, 2007, p.62)

Having outlined the distinction between the opposition *against* and the opposition *for*, the next step is examining what is driving the latter forward. In this section I argue that Pedranos' opposition *for* is primarily about protecting the lake, life and the community. This motivation is rooted in Pedranos' relationality with the lake, which as I explained in Chapter 7, is premised on understanding the lake as a vital, life-giving grandmother. For those Pedranos with this relational understanding, defending the lake necessarily implies defending the wider community and thus life itself. This can be seen in a section of an anti-megacolector poem below:

*I can't demand those who rule now
Because they are capable of selling their mother
But to children, young people, adults and the elderly
That love life: Let's organize and take care of what our ancestors
have inherited for thousands of years
Here, lives Ati'T [grandmother], here lives life...
(Mash-Mash, 2019)*

²³¹ SEAs are standard procedure for projects of the megacolector's scale, although Guatemala lags behind other countries in Latin America (Rodrigo-Illarri et al., 2020).

The poet Mash-Mash suggests that only those who ‘love life’ (highlighted) are capable of defending the life of Grandmother Lake Atitlán. This stands in contrast to ‘those who rule’, who he terms in another verse as ‘businessmen of death’ (see p.221). They are viewed as such because they are pushing a project deemed to pose a threat to lake/life/community (i.e. a ‘project of death’). As Mash-Mash’s poem insinuates, Pedranos’ opposition to the megacolector is often articulated through expressions of devotion to the lake.

This particular conceptualisation of life and death is significant on multiple levels. On the one hand, from an ontological perspective, the megacolector could signify the death of the lake herself by necessarily transforming her from Grandmother Lake into a commodified object. The megacolector could also cause the ‘death’ of Pedranos’ relationality by disconnecting them from the lake. As I showed in Chapter 8, Pedranos have articulated their opposition on these grounds, and through further arguing that such a disconnection would encourage wasteful modern consumption.²³² However, it is worth bearing in mind that such relationality-orientated fears are only pertinent to *some* Pedranos - those who still uphold a relational understanding of the lake. The ‘death’ that the majority fear is more likely to pertain to pragmatic concerns (Cepek, 2016) – access to drinking water. Either through the rupturing of the megacolector, or the *finqueros’* resource grab, restricted access to San Pedro’s principal source of potable water is something which affects *all* Pedranos, including those who understand the lake in wholly modern terms.

Pedranos do not live in a vacuum, and their framing of their opposition as being for lake/life/community is also likely influenced by wider public discourses on development:

‘Development’ is only economic development. It is not natural development, it is not development of life itself, of people. (Don Salvador)

In Chapter 6 I mentioned how the national organisation Waqib’ Kej has advanced their demands for a plurinational state. They have also advanced Buen Vivir (Utzilaj K’aslemal) ‘as a paradigm that promotes and defends life’ and which is ‘an alternative model to capitalism, to mercantilist modernity, to development and extractivism’ (Waqib’ Kej, 2015, p.25-26). Since the mid-2000s, the Defence of Territory (DOT) movement has also exerted a powerful national influence on public imaginaries of development. As Copeland (2018) states, ‘The DOT advances a decolonizing historical narrative that reframes the history of modern “progress” as a series of violent despojos (dispossessions) and affirms indigenous values and futurity’ (p.10).

I saw for myself how megaprojects were portrayed as ‘projects of death’ at the ‘Semillas de Pensamiento’ DOT festival in Quetzaltenango (Figure 116). The DOT’s narrative is built on the deadly

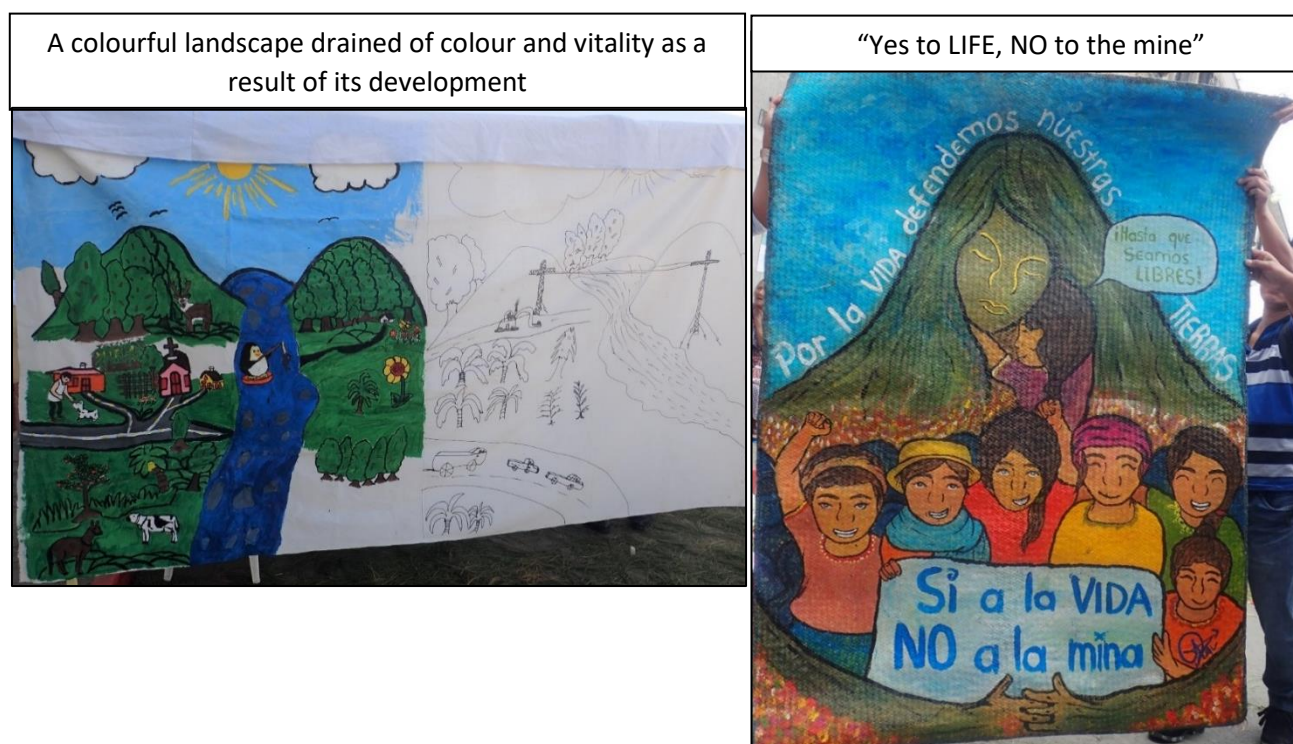
²³² Which one interviewee termed as ‘a culture of death’ (Chapter 5, p.139).

experience of neoliberal development, a model which as Chirix García and Sajbin Velásquez (2019) state:

has not been characterised by putting the human creature and other beings at the centre of “development”, but rather, by prioritising the demands of the country’s corporate groups [...] which has meant greater dispossession and plunder for Indigenous peoples (p.34)

Guatemala’s necropolitics and the coincidence between death and extractivist development is no secret to Guatemalans (Tzul Tzul, 2019). Take for instance the Chixoy hydroelectric dam, Guatemala’s largest. Its construction during *La Violencia* of the 1980s saw 5,000 Maya Achi murdered for resisting their forced relocation (Dearden, 2012). Today, this region has one of the lowest rates of electricity coverage in the country, even though the dam generates one-third of all electrical power consumed in the country (Isaac and Schwarz, 2013). This is just one of many deadly megaprojects which shape Pedranos’ perception of the megacollector as a ‘project of death’ (Way, 2016).

Figure 116: Paintings at the ‘Semillas de Pensamiento’ DOT festival (August, 2018)



Besides being a source of life, the lake is also key to Pedranos’ history and their sense of cultural identity (Chapter 5). It was this factor above all that one community leader predicted would guarantee widespread opposition to the megacollector. To support his point, he cited Pedranos’ opposition to the so-called ‘Monsanto Law’, which would have required farmers to purchase genetically modified seeds from the transnational corporation ‘Monsanto’ (Grandia, 2017). In 2014, thousands of protestors (including many Pedranos) demonstrated in front of Congress and forced a

government U-turn before the law was passed (Cultural Survival, 2014). This response, the community leader argued, was due to corn's *vital* role in everyday life (Figure 117). Not only is it eaten with every meal in the form of tortillas,²³³ but it is central to identity formation - the Maya often identify as 'people of corn' (Ak'abal, 2000; Huff, 2006). The community leader argued that similar circumstances apply to the megacollector's threat to the lake:

It had to do with life, the seed, and the product that generated identity [...] I think the same thing is going to happen here for people [with the megacollector]. [The lake] is how our identity is created [...] There is a saying around here that states 'you are touching the balls of the bull' and I feel that this will happen in this case.

Figure 117: Monsanto painted as a harbinger of death by Canal Cultural



Community leaders are keenly aware of the lake's vital role in Pedrano identity-formation, and they recognise that the success of their opposition movement depends on leveraging this connection to their advantage. On this subject, the aforementioned community leader brought up the example of San Pedro's plastic ban, which after being enacted in 2016, was briefly suspended by the Constitutional Court as a result of the *amparo* of the business association - *Comisión Guatemalteca del Plástico* (Chapter 5) (Escobar Anleu, 2017). At the time, rather than rallying together as a community behind the mayor, many Pedranos actually celebrated its suspension. This lack of solidarity was partly due to *revanchismo* and people's political biases against the mayor. However, the community leader also argued that on a deeper level, the mayor had failed to connect

²³³ Benjamin Paul (1950) claimed that corn comprised over three quarters of Pedranos' total diet in the 1940s, and today the pitter patter of *torteando* (the making of tortillas) and the mechanical grinding of corn is still a constant background noise in San Pedro. The word Tz'utujil itself roughly translates as 'people of the corn plant' (Carrasco, 2021).

the plastic ban to San Pedro's cultural fibres. As a result, Pedranos failed to recognise the elite-orchestrated suspension as an assault on the community's interests.

Where the plastic ban failed, community leaders have sought to explicitly articulate their opposition against the megacolector as defence of the community. In effect, they have reversed one of AALA's principal discourses, that 'if you are against the megacolector, you are against saving the lake' (Chapter 8). Instead, they have articulated rejection of the megacolector and defence of the lake/life/community as *mutually exclusive*. Indeed, their awareness campaign often uses the slogan 'Por el Lago: No Al Megacolector' (For the lake: No to the megacolector). This counter discourse did not just spontaneously appear, it was carefully crafted by community leaders and strategically inserted into community life over time. When I began interviewing Pedranos in early 2018, few even knew of the megacolector's existence. A year later, opposition to the megacolector had seeped into almost every aspect of San Pedro's public life. From being a niche issue of only the most politically engaged community leaders, now the vast majority of Pedranos don't just know about the megacolector, they perceive it as a serious threat to lake/life/community. In the next section I will trace just how this process unfolded.

Mobilising and Unifying the Community

[T]he analysis of community formation in response to the extra-local remains central to an understanding of social mobilization (Coombes, 2007, p.62)

As I discussed in Chapter 8, AALA presents Pedrano opposition to the megacolector as motivated by *revanchismo* and small-minded political prejudices. While *revanchismo* is a defining characteristic of Pedrano society, evidence suggests that it is not an important motivating factor in Pedranos' opposition to the megacolector. On the contrary, in this section I will show how in opposing the megacolector, the community of San Pedro has united *in spite* of political divides. That is not to say the community's mobilisation has been smooth sailing. Bastos Amigo (2020) points out that the Guatemalan Indigenous community 'has been the product of exclusion and resistance, while also producing resistance and exclusion itself' (p.7), and these inherent tensions will also be discussed later in the chapter. Overall however, the megacolector conflict is a story of how Pedranos have come together to face off a threat to the community.²³⁴

As I explained in Chapter 5, many Pedranos deem the loss in sense of community as the most destructive effect of accelerating modernity/coloniality.²³⁵ However, this process has been

²³⁴ A threat which has engendered a networked process of 'relational place-making' (Pierce et al., 2011). As Bastos Amigo (2020) notes, this process of community re-engagement in response to top-down institutional threats is currently being replicated across Guatemala.

²³⁵ Indeed, it was identified as such in Topic 2 of Table 7 (p.285).

somewhat reversed during the megacollector conflict. The community has consolidated (and rearticulated) itself in order to defend the lake from the external threat of the megacollector. As with the algal bloom event of 2009 (Chapter 7), the threat of the megacollector may have accentuated the spiritual potency of the lake through a sort of 'defensive animism' (Bovensiepen, 2020). That is to say, the megacollector conflict hasn't just revealed Pedranos' relationality with the lake, it has created it. Just as the community came together to cleanse the lake during the bloom, their active participation in the opposition movement can also be understood as a form of collective worlding insofar as it is also articulated largely as an act of devotion to the lake.

The megacollector's imposition and Pedranos' resulting efforts to assert their right to consultation have also provided an opportunity to realise processes of revindication, much in the way Constanza (2015) describes below:

indigenous activists leading this struggle [for the right to consultation] aim not just to overcome their adversaries—the state and private corporations—but also to transform the subjectivities and practices of their own people. They use the consultations to convince indigenous people to value their indigenous identity and culture and to recover so-called traditional forms of local governance. (p.262)

Pedranos' struggle for consultation has provided an opportunity to recover San Pedro's political autonomy, as evidenced by the Elder Council's new-founded prominence, and also through the emergence of a new platform for community participation – Comunidad Tz'unun Ya'. The opposition movement has also merged with efforts towards the self-valorisation of Pedrano ancestry. Similar to Hornborg's (1994) analysis of the Mi'kmaq's struggle to defend their land from a quarry mine, the megacollector conflict has provided Pedranos with an opportunity for 'active processes of reflective self-identity' (p.250), to publicly define Pedrano culture in opposition to modern values. In short, defending the lake from the megacollector has become an expression of Pedrano identity. For these reasons, we can see the anti-megacollector and revindication 'movements' as one and the same, sharing the same objective of ensuring the community's futurity against the threat of modernity/coloniality.

Strategic Insertion

The mobilisation of the community against the megacollector did not occur of its own accord, it was a direct result of community leaders' efforts to unify the community. In early 2018, opposition events were highly selective, with only 'important' members of the community invited. The idea was that information would filter out from them into the wider community, but since turnout was low, community leaders decided to change tactic. They began casting a wider net in mid-2018 with an awareness campaign. This was followed by further events in September, aimed to coincide with Guatemala's Independence Day celebrations. This is a national holiday when most

Pedranos are off work, and also a period historically reserved for political protest, making it the perfect opportunity to develop opposition to the megacolector (Figure 118).

Figure 118: Young Pedranos protesting the megacolector (September 2018)



Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' (2020c)

The highpoint of the September awareness campaign was an assembly held in the *cancha*. Many prominent members of the community were in attendance (including the mayor), and a large crowd gathered to participate (Figure 119). Here, as with other public events, the local television station broadcast the assembly so that Pedranos could watch at home.

Figure 119: Assembly against the megacolector September 2018



Herederos del Lago (2018)

Following the awareness campaign's initial success, more assemblies and public events were arranged the following year. Throughout this period community leaders also exercised a heavy online presence to maintain public interest, primarily through regular Facebook publications about the megacolector. These have taken the form of attractive posters (many of which have been displayed throughout this thesis) with brief but powerful soundbites about the megacolector. As in Figure 120 below, these posters are usually accompanied with an emphatic '¡No Al Megacolector!' ('No to the Megacolector!'). In this way, social media provides a valuable tool for community leaders to mobilise the community, and to publicly project their own counternarrative about the megacolector (Cupples and Glynn, 2019).

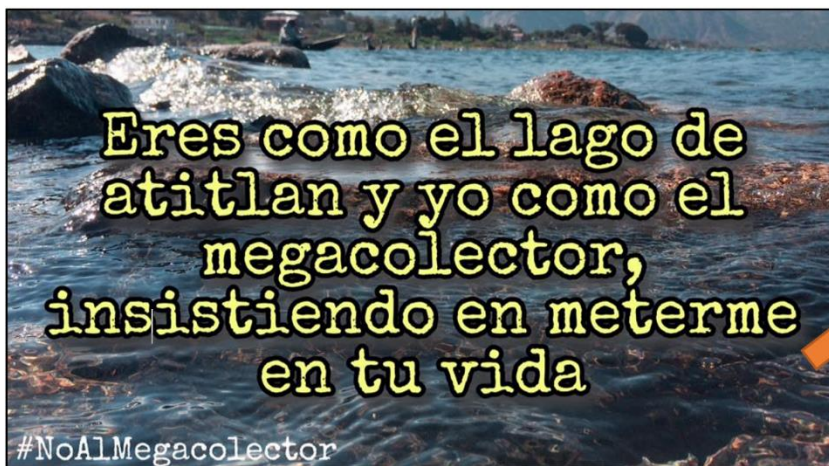


TV Tz'unun Ya' (2019c)

By late 2019, the opposition movement had taken on a life of its own, with spontaneous expressions of support emerging independently of top-down direction. There are numerous examples of this, from public graffiti to humorous memes against the megacolector (Figure 121).²³⁶ These grassroots occurrences signalled community leaders' successful mobilisation of the community, but this success was not a result of their awareness campaign alone. As I will explore in the following two sections, community leaders also sought to carefully attach their cause to markers of Pedrano identity, the cultural fibres which both divide and unite the community.

²³⁶ Created by the Facebook group 'Memes of San Pedro'.

Figure 121: Everyday expressions of opposition to the megacolector



Memes San Pedro (2019)

“You are like Lake Atitlan and I the megacolector, insisting on inserting myself into your life”



Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' (2020d)



TV Tz'unun Ya' (2019f)

Bridging Community Divides

Religion is a cornerstone of Pedrano identity, but it is also the cause of much division and internal conflict. Reflecting a national trend, Catholicism no longer reigns supreme in San Pedro. during the late 20th century Evangelical Christianity spread rapidly, and there are now over 20 evangelical churches in San Pedro (Tally and Chavajay, 2007). This growth has greatly polarised the community, and tensions exist not just between Evangelicals and Catholics, but also amongst the various Evangelicals sects themselves. In turn, both religions are also at odds to varying degrees with *costumbre* (traditional beliefs).

Community leaders have sought to utilise the powerful influence of religion in San Pedro to further the opposition movement, for instance harnessing religious discourse through including religious citations in their Facebook posts (Figure 122). Although the community's religious divide is strong, there have been occasions in San Pedro's past where such divisions have melted away in the name of something greater. As I mentioned in Chapter 7, both Catholics and Evangelicals united when the lake was threatened by the algal bloom, burning *pom* along its shore. Community leaders

have attempted to harness the same sentiment to bridge the religious divide in defence of the lake against the megacolector. Most significantly, they supported the organisation of large and well-publicised Catholic and Evangelical religious services ‘to give thanks for the life, health and protection of the lake’ in September 2019 (Figure 123). Both of these services were livestreamed on Facebook and local television channels.



TV Tz'unun Ya' (2019g)



Canal 2 (2019)

Following these displays of religiosity, in October 2019 an alliance of Catholic Action and the Association of Evangelical Churches (along with the cocodes, the municipality and the Elder Council) convened a massive beach clean, an act which further helped to concretize community solidarity. While beach cleans are a regular activity in San Pedro, they are usually orchestrated by a single

association (typically women's groups). What was unusual in this case was the breadth of Pedrano society involved. It is rare for the town to come together in such a way, and that it did so in this instance is likely a reflection of the power of religious devotion to unify the town behind a single cause.

While these religious services and the beach clean were orchestrated by Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' in a top-down fashion, there are signs that their awareness campaign has taken root. Opposition to the megacolector has notably been expressed at the grassroots level in a religious context. For example, in April 2019 during *Semana Santa* (Holy Week), an *alfombra* (a traditional carpet made from coloured sawdust) was made to protest the megacolector (Figure 124). *Alfombras* are laid out to line the routes of the town's religious processions, and I have had the pleasure of seeing many over the years in San Pedro. Their designs are beautiful but typically apolitical. In this case however, a leading community leader sent me the photos below, he was shocked, because the anti-megacolector *alfombra* was made spontaneously and independently of Comunidad Tz'unun Ya'.

Figure 124: Opposition to the megacolector during Holy Week



Herederos del Lago (2019b)

Almost as strong as San Pedro's religious fractures are its divisions along political lines, and numerous Pedranos identified this as one of the principal impediments to improving the town's wellbeing. As I have already discussed, San Pedro's politics, like that of many Guatemalan towns, is characterised by petty *revanchismo* (revenge politics). Such resentment often emerges in COMUDES,

where heated squabbling tends to take over from productive discussions.²³⁷ Political factions typically hold vendettas against rival administrations in power, refusing to adhere to their policies. For example, some Pedranos refuse to classify and separate their trash for recycling simply because it was an initiative of the current mayor who belongs to a different political party to their own. These political rivalries are also replicated within individual families, with some separated as a result of their opposing political affiliations.

Remarkably, San Pedro's opposition movement has managed to overcome this political disunity and unify the whole community behind their cause. Community leaders achieved this through pushing the megacolector as an electoral issue in the elections of 2019, several months after the initiation of their awareness campaign. Through claiming their opposition against the megacolector as opposition *for lake/life/community* (Figure 125), mayoral candidates were pressured to take a platform against the megacolector. Consequently, during the elections, five out of the six candidates openly took a stance against it.



Herederos del Lago (2019c)

Community Unifiers

Community leaders have also managed to unify Pedranos across religious and political divisions through tying the megacolector to some of San Pedro's main unifying cultural fibres – art, football, the *feria* (patron saint fair) and children. As in the case of Pedrano religiosity, the opposition movement's presence here is also a mixture of grassroots and top-down initiatives.

²³⁷ For this reason, many community leaders choose not to attend COMUDES at all.

- Art

San Pedro is internationally renowned for its artists, both its naïve painters and its conceptual artists. In December 2019, Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' orchestrated a mural festival in defence of the lake in the *cancha* (Figure 126). The event involved many of San Pedro's famous artists, who had lacked strong convictions on the megacolector when I interviewed them the previous year.

Figure 126: 'For the defence of the lake' Mural Festival (December 2019)



Comunidad Tz'unun Ya (2019b)

As well as this top-down initiative on the part of Comunidad Tz'unun Ya', opposition to the megacolector has also been organically expressed by San Pedro's artistic community. For example, during the 'Festival of the Lake' body painting competition in April 2019, on their own initiative,

competitors painted the opposition movement's slogan, '¡No Al Megacolector!' on the back of a participant (Figure 127). The image was subsequently utilised by community leaders themselves.

Figure 127: Body painting festival



TV Tz'unun Ya' (2019d)

- Football

As Eduardo Galeano (1997) notes, football and identity are always tied, and this is certainly the case for San Pedro. Their football team is a source of great pride to the community, having achieved success regionally with its recent foray into the country's second division, and its

importance is reflected in the community's expensive new stadium, easily the most impressive around the lake. Community leaders ensured the opposition movement's visibility at one of the team's key matches, organising a photo opportunity before playoff with a poster protesting the megacolector (Figure 128). Yet without community leaders' direction, football teams have also emblazoned implicitly anti-megacolector slogans on their jerseys (Figure 129). Rather than outright hostility to the megacolector, these slogans articulate an ancestral devotion to the lake (i.e. opposition *for*). They implicate the coincidence of the opposition and revindication movements.

Figure 128: 'In the final of the departmental championship, the team of San Pedro la Laguna supported the position of the people on the MEGACOLECTOR'



Herederos del Lago (2019d)

Figure 129: 'Let's care for our lake' (adult jersey), 'The lake is alive, let's care for it' (children's jersey)



Quiacaín (2019a)

- **The Feria**

The *feria* is the most important date in San Pedro's cultural calendar, it commemorates San Pedro, the patron saint of the community on June 29th. This involves a week-long period of festivities (parades, dances, a funfair) that Pedranos enjoy as their main annual holiday. As Petrich (2006) explains, the *feria* was formerly a Catholic celebration (to the exclusion of Evangelicals), but it has symbolically shifted in recent years. Now it is principally a celebration of the community itself, which Petrich (2006) likens to the 'town's birthday'. She explains that the festivities are above all, a claim of belonging to a territory and a common history (Petrich, 2001b). It is therefore one of the few contexts in which Pedranos are united across their divisions.

The *feria's* parade is a moment for Pedranos to define their culture and values, not just to themselves, but also to outsiders. As I mentioned in Chapter 6, processes of revindication could be discerned in how the parade in 2018 principally honoured town elders. It is notable then how the following year in 2019, the opposition movement featured prominently. Figure 130 below shows a section of this parade, where several youths held aloft a traditional *barrilete* (kite) with the slogan 'No Al Megacolector' attached. Kites are one of San Pedro's traditional pastimes, and this whimsical display goes to show the extent to which community leaders have successfully managed to fuse the opposition movement to Pedrano identity. This display is at once celebratory of the community and critical of the megacolector, once again implicating Pedranos' opposition *with* the revindication of ancestry.

Figure 130: The anti-megacolector *barrilete* in the 2019 parade



Quiacaín (2019b)

- Children

Children are the ultimate community unifier as the sole guarantee of the community's 'futurity' (Escobar, 2018). It is perhaps for this reason that community leaders have utilised their image in their opposition movement, most notably through a video (filmed in the community museum) in which a charismatic traditionally dressed girl vigorously denounces the megacolector from a prewritten script (Figure 131). The video was published on Facebook with the accompanying caption:

For Indigenous people, the boys and girls have equal voice and representation in the care and defence of natural elements. (Herederos del Lago, 2019e).

Guatemala's modern laws exclude children from political life and voting in national elections. However, historically in San Pedro they were allowed to participate in a range of community activities as means for learning and developing skills as they became ready to contribute themselves (Rogoff, 2011). It is notable then how community leaders have attempted to include children in the opposition movement, encouraging them to sign their names in their 'practice' *consulta* in March 2019 (Chapter 9) (Figure 132).²³⁸ Recognising children's political agency in this way is undoubtedly a useful tactic to oppose the megacolector; as I highlighted in Chapter 9, AALA do the same with their 'Agua Limpia Ya' movement. However, in Pedranos case it is *more than* just tactical, it is also an epistemic disobedience, and a revindication of San Pedro's epistemic self-determination.

Figure 131: Girl denouncing the megacolector



Herederos del Lago (2019e)

²³⁸ A practice which other Indigenous communities in Guatemala have also followed in their own *consultas* (Fulz, 2016; Laplante, 2014).

Figure 132: Pedrano children at the ‘practice’ *consulta* (March 2019)



TV Tz'unun Ya' (2019e)

Community Tensions

Recognition that communities are [...] discursively performed and negotiated amidst social difference does not [...] diminish their significance as [...] catalysts for action

(Coombes, 2007, p.62).

In the previous section I argued that the threat of the megacolector has unified the community, but there is a certain danger to this presentation - it risks romanticising the community (Simpson, 2014). This is not my intention, I recognise that the ‘community is not the absence of conflict’ (Selis and Maso, 2014, p.25), but in accordance with Coombes’s (2007) statement above, I rather suggest that San Pedro’s divisions do not diminish the significance of a *discourse* of community in driving opposition to the megacolector. Even so, in this section I will shed light on some of the extant tensions of the community’s mobilisation that I observed during my fieldwork.

Besides the question of gender relations that I addressed briefly in the introduction to Part 2 (p.212), another tension which emerged in the early days of the opposition movement was the prevalence of distrust. Some community leaders questioned the loyalty and motives of one particular Pedrano involved, primarily due to the ambiguity implicit to the cocode position. Community leaders were unsure whether he was expressing his own opinion on behalf of his COCODE, or rather the line of the institution he was employed by. Since the cocode position is only voluntary, it can often lead to divided loyalties and conflicts of interest. Fears of this ilk are also heightened by AALA’s strategy of co-opting community leaders (Chapter 9).

I also observed tensions between different COCODES. This issue reared its head as the opposition movement began to gain pace. Originally, the movement was led by cocodes from the

COCODE of Chuacanté with whom I was carrying out my participant observation. However, as Chuacanté is only one of San Pedro's four *cantones*, it was felt by community leaders that ownership of the movement had to be seen to belong to the community as a whole. Consequently, greater efforts were made to include the wider community (i.e. other COCODES and the Elder Council). Yet some community leaders took issue with Chuacanté's seeming reluctance to hand over the reins.

Community leaders were also divided on the extent to which the municipality should be involved in the opposition movement. Some argued that the community needed to appear as a united front, a position which would be compromised by excluding the municipality. As with Chuacanté's domination, community leaders didn't want their movement to risk coming across as partisan, since this would make it easier to publicly discredit. Others however argued that cocodes were the true representatives of the town, and that the municipality's involvement wasn't necessary. This sentiment was compounded by their distrust of the municipality and the mayor's ambiguous position regarding the megacolector in particular.²³⁹ In August 2018 they called for a 'special COMUDE' to force the mayor to provide further clarification, given that he had publicly received San Pedro's blueprints for the megacolector earlier in March. During this special COMUDE he insisted that he was neither for nor against the megacolector, and this neutral stance has largely been maintained since. Although the mayor has been involved in some of the community's opposition activities, he has also managed to avoid outspoken criticism of the megacolector, but this position is always shifting.²⁴⁰

What is particularly interesting in San Pedro's case is how cocodes and the Elder Council came together to pressure the mayor to explain his position. As I mentioned in Chapter 6, the COCODE system often functions in practice to limit the power of ancestral authorities (Costanza, 2015; Romero et al., 2018). Cocodes are also frequently co-opted by mayors as a means to exert their influence (Copeland, 2019a), indeed, many Pedranos I interviewed were critical of the cocode role for this reason. However, both of these tendencies were noticeably upended by the opposition movement in which cocodes and the Elder Council have formed a united front under the new platform of Comunidad Tz'unun Ya'.

The municipality's ambiguous stance somewhat complicates the notion of a unified community against the megacolector. Yet the megacolector conflict has also seen the municipality's power commandeered by the community leaders of Comunidad Tz'unun Ya'. Significantly, it was

²³⁹ Mayors often act against the community's interests for personal gain, as in the case of the mayor of San Lucas Tolimán who received payments to allow a coffee *finca* to extract water from the lake (Chapter 8, p.220).

²⁴⁰ In the *amparo*'s public hearing in September 2020 for instance, the mayor spoke out more critically against the megacolector.

they who visibly represented San Pedro's political authority through delivering the *amparo* to the Constitutional Court in September 2019. Even though the Elder Council was only re-founded in 2017, its public prominence in the megacollector conflict (and within Comunidad Tz'unun Ya') can be understood as a revindication of ancestral political autonomy. Moreover, it is clear that Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' is more than just a single-issue organisation. It has for instance been utilised as a platform to coordinate efforts against COVID-19.²⁴¹ In this way, the megacollector conflict has not just strengthened San Pedro's sense of community, it has also engendered longer lasting forms of revindication and political self-determination. This process is what Bastos Amigo (2020) describes as the 'reactivation of the political facets of community institutions', through their 'becoming the center of communal action against the State and other agents, as well as the space from which the community imagines its future' (p.10).

A Law for the Lake

In the remainder of this chapter, I want to delve deeper into the ontological dimensions of the megacollector conflict. Ontological excesses have at times emerged in my discussion, for instance through the references the opposition movement has made to the lake's personhood in their public statements. However, in this section I will present a closer reading of ontology and its mobilisation by Pedranos. To do so, I will explore a matter distinct from, but inextricably tied to the megacollector conflict – attempts to establish a law to protect Lake Atitlán.

A draft bill to legally establish Lake Atitlán as national heritage was first drawn up by the government in 2012, so called 'Iniciativa (Initiative) 4526' (Congreso de Guatemala, 2012). Although nothing came of this at the time, in February 2020, the bill was once again debated by the government. Immediately following the debate, Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' (2020b) published a press statement outlining their opposition to the initiative. The first article (of the bill's four articles) stipulates:

Article 1) Lake Atitlán, its basin and surroundings, as well as the interaction derived from the nineteen municipalities that make up the Department of Sololá, are declared National, Natural, Cultural and Historical Heritage of the People of Guatemala.

Pedranos' response to this reads as follows:

²⁴¹ In fact, this was Comunidad Tz'unun Ya''s main concern for most of 2020.

By stating that Lake Atitlán is NATIONAL HERITAGE, the hegemonic and mercantilist vision of the Nation-State as owner of this Natural Good is maintained. And, therefore, with absolute right over the lake basin, a vision that can be concretized in policies that systematically promote the disposessions and grievances of Indigenous Peoples.

The expression 'interaction derived' is nothing more than the extension of Eurocentric colonialism that objectifies the subjects of rights, their cultural, spiritual and environmental practices, considering them part of the cultural heritage of the 'people of Guatemala'.

In short, it leaves aside the advances in the matter of social, political, economic and cultural rights of Indigenous Peoples that recognize the special relationship of the lake with Indigenous peoples.

Pedranos' response is informative on a number of accounts, mostly through evidencing their opinions on the issue of sovereignty and rights. For example, Pedranos take issue with how the bill objectifies both themselves and the lake as heritage belonging to the 'people of Guatemala'. This paternalistic notion is prevalent in Guatemala, where the media frequently refer to 'nuestros indios' (our Indians) (Chirix García and Sajbin Velásquez, 2019).²⁴² This objectification also acts to symbolically shift-decision making away from the Indigenous communities to the state. While Pedranos don't deny that the lake is within their territory, they find the initiative's notion of the lake's ownership as inappropriate. One Pedrano for instance pointed out to me that in the Tz'utujil language, the lake cannot be possessed, it is not possible to say, 'our lake'. In their critique, Pedranos also draw on a human rights discourse to stress how the bill neglects their 'special relationship' with the lake (i.e. their relationality).

On a more pragmatic level, Pedranos also worry that the initiative could be used as a legal mechanism to impose the megacollector, and evidence for his fear can be found in the initiative's third article:

Article 3) For its part, the Ministry of Public Finance, will contribute in the most agile way to specify the scientific efforts, which are undertaken for the best performance, conservation and dissemination of the Natural, Cultural and Historical Heritage of the People of Guatemala that constitutes the Lake of Atitlán.

Here it is implied that the government would fund the 'scientific efforts' which best conserve the lake, which of course AALA lobbies as being the megacollector. Pedranos articulate their fears about the megacollector in a list of objections shown in Table 8 below. Here Pedranos argue that the initiative lays the groundwork for the lake's privatisation through an 'extractivist conservation project' – i.e. the megacollector.

²⁴² This is especially true in the case in the tourist industry, which as I explained in Chapter 4, externalises Mayan culture into a folkloric, commodifiable product (Xinico Batz, 2019).

Table 8: Pedranos' objections to Iniciativa 4526 as outlined in their press statement (Comunidad Tz'unun Ya', 2020b)	
Article	Objection
4)	<u>The initiative 4526, evidently maintains the mercantilist Eurocentric logic that sees Lake Atitlán as a resource, object of exploitation for capitalist accumulation.</u> While for us Indigenous peoples the water/lake, we recognize it as a living and sacred being, and a source of life and collective law.
5)	<u>We consider that this initiative is a tool that seeks to pave the way to an extractivist conservation project,</u> turning the initiative into a malicious instrument that seeks to legalize the dispossession and denial of our legitimate right to territorial self-determination that we observed as people since pre-colonial times in the department of Sololá.
6)	<u>This initiative is nothing more than a mechanism for the colonization of natural assets, built under conservation principles linked to the logic of the market,</u> and supported by a capitalization of nature, which thinks of the lake as an object of transaction and exploitation. This initiative does not take into consideration the needs of the communities that live in the basin. Its contribution to the improvement of the quality of life of our communities is nil.

More than just opposing Iniciativa 4526, Pedranos have drafted their own law for the lake (i.e. opposition *for*). While Iniciativa 4526 aims to protect the lake *through* such 'scientific efforts' like the megacollector, Pedranos' draft law is instead premised on protecting the lake *from* such projects. Many community leaders mentioned this as a desired outcome during interviews in 2018, and hints of the law can be seen in their petition against the megacollector.²⁴³ The urgent threat of Iniciativa 4526's debate in 2020 however forced them to concretise their ideas. A community leader sent me a copy of Pedranos' draft law, but I am unable to quote it here since it has not yet been made public, and this process has been put on hold indefinitely due to COVID-19. However, I am able to provide an overview of its key points.

Pedranos' draft law subverts Iniciativa 4526 in a number of ways, most significantly at an ontological level. As Table 8 above shows, in their press statement Pedranos condemn Iniciativa 4526 for portraying the lake only as a 'resource' and 'an object of exploitation'. Instead, they claim to recognise it 'as a living and sacred being' (article 4). Pedranos' own draft law builds on the sentiment, through recognising the lake as a sacred and life-giving grandmother.²⁴⁴ As I mentioned in Chapter 8, Pedranos object to how the environmental governance of the lake prioritises Western scientific knowledge over their lived community knowledge (i.e. their endogenous epistemology). However, their draft law proves their opposition is not only an epistemic disobedience. Rather, it is concerned with the very *nature* of the lake itself. Pedranos are performing an 'ontological

²⁴³ In Topic 4 of Table 7 (p.285) community leaders propose to pass a 'municipal agreement that integrates the protection of beaches, the lake and its ecosystem'.

²⁴⁴ Mirroring the wording of their *amparo* against the megacollector (Chapter 1) - 'Our Lake is much more than water, it is a living being' (Colectivo San Pedro, 2019a, p.2).

disobedience' (Burman, 2016) to the state's modern ontological conceptualisation (and valuation) of the lake as a resource.²⁴⁵

In drawing Grandmother Lake into the political debate in this way, Pedranos strain the state's multicultural limits and oblige lawmakers to acknowledge the *otherwise*. In doing so, they also provide an ontological opening 'to the consideration of other ontologies as plausible and viable alternatives to the modern one' (Blaser, 2013a, p.556). In this way, the lake emerges as the ontological site for political negotiation, and this 'ontological disjuncture' (Yates et al., 2017) grows with every press statement and news article which visibilises the lake as being *more than* just a resource (de la Cadena, 2015a). In this sense, Pedranos' draft law is ontologically radical, but is important to recognise that it is also significantly anchored in a modern human rights discourse. It appeals to both the ILO-169 Convention and the UN's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as well as various articles within Guatemala's constitution. It also cites other cases in which the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has successfully defended Indigenous groups' attempts to protect their territories. In this way, their draft law appears as an instance of 'border thinking' (Grosfoguel, 2011), a transmodern blending of ontologies.

Rather than aiming to delink (Mignolo, 2007) from the modern/colonial state *in toto*, Pedranos exhibit a more pragmatic compromise.²⁴⁶ This can be seen especially in the draft law's approach to the issue of sovereignty, since although it aims towards recognition of the lake as Indigenous communal property, it does not deny the state's authority or its simultaneous claims to ownership of the lake as state property. On the contrary, its wording affirms the lake as a good of the state, but it adds a caveat - that this good is to be managed by a new state-community authority which would then be responsible for the lake's protection and restoration. In effect, Pedranos' draft law seeks to replace AMSCLAE with a more representative form of governance, since none of the lake's Indigenous communities are currently represented on AMSCLAE's board of directors. This is a point which they raised explicitly in their report 'The Silent Project to Privatize Lake Atitlán' (COCODES, 2019):

AALA and CAMTUR [Association of Tourism] are two private structured organizations that have a seat, voice, and a vote within the structure of AMSCLAE, [...] But [...] the people living in the towns and communities around the lake [are not allowed] to voice their opinions and concerns; they are left without participation. (p.10)

²⁴⁵ And ultimately the OWW's dualistic distinctions between humans and nature (de la Cadena, 2015a).

²⁴⁶ Which finds greater accordance with Rivera Cusicanqui's (2012) decolonising practice (see also Anthias, 2018).

Although ontological excesses emerge in Pedranos' discussion, their draft law appears to be motivated primarily by this issue of political exclusion. Its claims are also made less on the basis of ontological difference than a modern discourse of rights. Rather than confronting the state or delinking from it, Pedranos' draft law is about appealing to the state's multicultural Constitution. Accordingly, even though the law discusses the lake as a sentient Grandmother, Pedranos' dispute with the state is not a clear-cut ontological conflict. Cepek (2016, p.625) warns against focusing on 'the bare content of abstract propositions while paying little attention to their pragmatic function' and performative context. Owing to my own essentialist tendencies (Chapter 2), I was immediately drawn to the alterity-affirming content of the draft law, to the neglect of its possible pragmatic functions. In Cepek's view, this neglect 'amounts to a failure to relate to our subjects as critical intellectual agents whose analytic capacities are just as powerful, vexed, and complex as our own' (ibid). In Chapter 9, I scrutinised AALA's mobilisation of Indigenous spirituality to advance the megacollector, but I have thus far neglected the possibility that Pedranos' opposition movement might be engaging in the same tactic. In the next section I will address this possibility and examine whether Pedranos' opposition to Iniciativa 4526 and the megacollector constitutes an ontological conflict.

An Ontological Conflict?

If Pedranos' opposition to the megacollector and Iniciativa 4526 is to be considered ontological, we would expect to find 'conflicting stories about what is there' (Blaser, 2013a, p.548), and indeed this can be discerned in the statements about the lake below:

What's really going to happen if there's no more lake, [do] you know how much it represents to Guatemala? One third of all international tourists say they would come to Guatemala because of Lake Atitlán [...] So if you do your math [...] that's 400 million dollars that comes to Guatemala because of Atitlán [...] so that's at stake for the whole country

(Eduardo Aguirre)

Atitlán is the force that keeps us alive, it is as if you had no air, you cannot survive. For us it is like that, if the lake is not there, we could not survive, it is a vital element

(Community leader)

These statements by individuals from opposing sides of the megacollector conflict reveal a significant ontological difference, and as I demonstrated in the previous section, this same difference also characterises rival attempts to establish a law for the lake. For both AALA and the government, the lake is primarily valued for its utilitarian benefits as an economic resource. In contrast, when I

questioned Pedranos about the lake's significance, like the community leader above, they usually responded that 'el lago es vida' (the lake is life).

Regardless of Pedranos' political-economic fears that the megacollector is a resource grab, their opposition is also clearly influenced by an ontological disagreement, as one community leader demonstrates:

For [AALA] the lake is a place of recreation. "Yes, lets rescue Atitlán, we are worried for Atitlán because we won't have anywhere to sail our boats or jet skis, we won't have anywhere to go for leisure". No, Atitlán for us isn't that, Atitlán for us is our home.

This critique is not unwarranted. When I asked Eduardo Aguirre about his connection to the lake, he confirmed a recreational outlook, describing his fond memories of learning to swim at his parent's vacation home (see also Jumique, 2020). He also inadvertently revealed that the lake is not actually his home - he commutes instead from Guatemala City. Unsurprisingly, the recreational outlook of AALA's leadership has fed into their institutional output, and this is a cause of ontological friction. Some Pedranos for instance criticised the inappropriateness of AALA using an analogy of a swimming pool to explain the lake's contamination to the Indigenous communities.

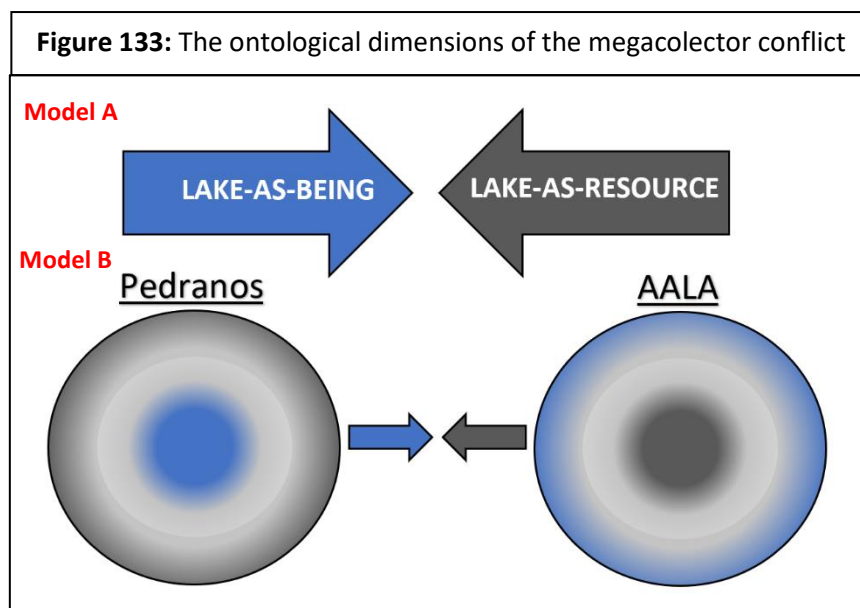


Figure 133 above depicts my conceptualisation of the ontological dimensions of the megacollector conflict. Model A shows how it may superficially appear as a simple clash of ontologies, whereas Model B takes account of its true complexity. Now, as to whether the megacollector conflict is an ontological conflict, this answer depends very much upon the individual you speak to. Throughout Part 2 I have shown that neither Pedranos nor AALA are cohesive, homogeneous entities, and the clear-cut ontological disagreement displayed in Model A does not universally apply.

On the one hand, many Pedrano community leaders *do* adhere to the notion of the lake as a sentient being, and their public discourse *always* refers to it as such. However, as I explained in Chapter 7, many younger Pedranos see the lake as a modern resource. There are also those more ontologically ambiguous Pedranos who sit somewhere in-between both positions (as represented by the ch'ixi grey). Similarly, AALA *always* references the importance of the lake as an economic resource in its public discourse. However, as I showed in Chapter 9, some of AALA's Indigenous employees share Pedranos' relational understanding, and one of their non-Indigenous employees expressed a spiritual appreciation for the lake's affective energy (Chapter 7, p.196) which implicates them as somewhat ontologically ambiguous.

There is also AALA and Pedranos' respective mobilisations of ontology to consider. Pedranos rely on the support of scientific experts (like Juan Skinner) who oppose the megacollector on modern grounds (Chapter 8). Conversely, AALA relies on a strategy of cosmetic multiculturalism to indicate the megacollector as mindful of the lake's personhood (Chapter 9). The strategic mobilisations of each party thus provide an ontological coating at odds to their core ontological discourse. Under closer examination then, my research suggests that Model B is a more accurate conceptualisation of the ontological dimensions of the megacollector conflict than Model A. However, it is important to recognise that Model B was drawn largely from the opinions that individuals expressed during interviews, and as I have repeatedly stressed throughout this thesis, more important than what an individual *professes* is what they *do*. A stated opinion doesn't necessarily align with an individual's *performance*, and this performance 'is the key process we must attend to in evaluating whether we should treat a conflict as ontological or not' (Blaser, 2013b, p.25).

As I discussed in Chapter 7, for many Pedranos the threat of the algal bloom in 2009 engendered a sort of 'defensive' mass worlding event of their relationality. In this way, Pedranos' ontological conceptualisations of the lake may shift depending on circumstance. For this reason, the ontological dimensions of the megacollector conflict should be understood as fluid, and Model B should only be read as a snapshot in time. The reason why the megacollector conflict is more easily recognisable as Model A rather than Model B is due in no small part to Pedranos' strategic essentialism, which manages to obscure some of the ontological complexities which I have outlined in this section. It is to this issue that I now turn.

Strategic Essentialism

Many Westerners are quick to wish for and accept the “truth” of any indigenous statement that describes the earth and its features [...] as sacred, agentive beings. (Cepek, 2016, p.632)

When critiquing PO in Chapter 2, I noted how this framework tends to neglect the possibility of strategic essentialism, that is the assumption of a homogenous image in order to pursue political goals (Revilla-Minaya, 2019). In this section however, I will draw attention to the ways in which Pedrano community leaders essentialise their own relationality with the lake for political advantage. I have already proven Pedranos to be ‘critical intellectual agents’ (Cepek, 2016) through my earlier discussion of their mobilisation of discourses of community against the megacollector. However, I was more reticent to draw attention to their practice of strategic essentialism, given the possibility that my discussion could be used to undermine the ontological basis of their opposition to the megacollector. I do so then *cautiously* (Coombes et al., 2011), not to undermine their argument, but rather to shed light on the local histories and contexts which have shaped its trajectory.

There were two occasions during my fieldwork when the possibility of strategic essentialism was brought to my attention. The first occurred at the Mayan ceremony preceding Ajpop Tinamit’s assembly meeting that I described in Chapter 9 (p.259). During the ceremony, several attendees conspicuously remained on the side-lines for its entire duration, including Concepción, a key figure in San Pedro’s opposition movement. At the time, she explained that she felt uncomfortable, and I didn’t pry any further. I don’t know whether her discomfort was due to religious beliefs or something else, but her and other attendees’ non-participation was informative. It showed that not all of Ajpop Tinamit’s members necessarily adhere to their cosmogonic public discourse. For example, on October 12th 2019, Ajpop Tinamit (2019) called a press conference to declare Lake Atitlán “Atit’ Tlán’ (Grandmother Lake), a living being, sacred and subject of collective law’, stating:

The management of water based in our communities has a sacred connotation that is respected and based on a cosmovision that recognizes [water] as a living system, that signifies life.

*[...] Water is not reduced to the compound of hydrogen and oxygen [...] **Water is respected, it is spoken to, it is discussed, it is caressed, it is transmitted joy and sorrows.** Everyone knows that the water feels, reflects, cries and is also sad, we the original people of Guatemala, we are not oblivious to these practices, **our relationship with the water is deep, mystical, sacred and cause for respect.***

Ajpop Tinamit's statement is powerful, but it nonetheless cloaks a more diverse range of opinions. Indigenous members may be opposing the megacollector for political, rather than cosmogonic reasons, even if both share the same overall objective.²⁴⁷

I saw similar circumstances replicated in San Pedro's opposition movement. Following a COMUDE, one community leader, Viento Tuy Navichoc, objected to how others had referred to the lake as Atit Ya' (Grandmother Lake) in their written petition against the megacollector. I spoke to him about his objection the following day, and he explained it as follows:

*The lake signifies my life, without her I die. That's why we call her our mother lake, not grandmother, no, no, no! There are others that say 'Atit Ya' or 'Qa Tee Ya', no, she is imox, the lake is imox.*²⁴⁸

Yesterday they used [the word] 'grandmother', it sounds very bad, but I can't say that, it's already written. It's 'Qa Tee Ixoq', and the words don't translate. If you translate them, they don't have the same taste nor the same meaning. So I agreed with [the other community leaders], and left it there. But yes one can say it like this, 'Qa Tee Ixoq' or 'Atit Ya', but the lake for me is life itself.

Viento's objection reflects the diversity of Pedranos' ontological conceptualisations about the lake (Chapter 7), yet he strategically accepted what was for him a mistranslation or 'equivocation' (de la Cadena, 2015a) of the lake's meaning for the sake of the other community leaders. He did so because they argued that this was the most *effective* option. Viento thus demonstrates how the threat of the megacollector has encouraged Pedranos to efface their multi-vocality with the lake to present a cohesive 'Grandmother Lake' narrative. Certainly, this process is not unusual in the context of resource conflicts. Bovensiepen (2020) for instance argues that the external threat of extractivism 'requires a singular unambiguous meaning of place and thus leads to the incommensuration of difference' (p.24) and the silencing of ambivalence.

When thinking about strategic essentialism, it is important to pay attention to power relations. As Coombes et al., (2011) point out, the stage on which strategic essentialism is performed is not usually of Indigenous communities' own making. Blaser (2013a) similarly states that 'many indigenous politicians find few avenues to contribute to [...] protecting their worlds other than through the use of ("our") widely available categories and symbols of alterity' (p.558). As a result, he suggests that their 'self-representations tell us more about the status of the hegemony of the categories being used [...] than about the existence of those radical differences (ibid). While I don't totally agree with Blaser's statement (more on this in a moment), he raises a valid point. The role of

²⁴⁷ In conversations with Concepción for instance, I noticed that her critiques against development tended to be rooted in a Marxist perspective rather than spirituality.

²⁴⁸ *Imox* being the *nahual* for water.

outsiders' 'hegemonic categories' is important, and we can see this clearly in the megacollector conflict through the influence of the 'hegemonic category' of multiculturalism.

As I outlined in Chapter 4, the state's neoliberal multicultural governance sets strict limits on the Indigenous communities' economic and political aspirations. It is therefore a savvy strategy for Pedranos to wrap their demand for political inclusion in the less threatening guise of cultural rights. As Hornborg (1994) states, 'the issue is not whether all the motives of the participants have been exposed or truthfully presented, but whether those offered are accepted by the public (media, authorities, etc.) as legitimate' (p.250). The legitimacy of the cosmopolitical 'rights of nature' discourse has been affirmed by the national DOT movement (Copeland, 2018), as well as on the international stage through Indigenous communities' demands for 'relational environmental justice' (Ulloa, 2017).²⁴⁹ Pedranos are well aware of this, and during community meetings Bolivia's 2010 'Law for Mother Nature' often entered discussions (Vidal, 2011). One community leader even proposed inviting Bolivians to San Pedro to help guide their own efforts. From this angle, Pedranos may also be articulating their opposition through an essentialised Grandmother Lake narrative to better appeal to outsiders' multicultural sensibilities, and the identity expectations of global audience (NGOs and international media etc.) that yearns for "authentic" cultures (Coombes et al., 2011).

Besides this international context of multiculturalism, Guatemala's historical relationships and political structuring must also be considered (McNeish, 2008). In the 1990s, the social and political activism of the Pan-Maya movement relied on essentialism as a means to creating a unified and common sense of Mayan identity. Mayanists 'cleaned' their traditions of 'Western influences' in order to preserve those elements judged to be 'ethnically pure' (Bastos and Cumes, 2005, p.10),²⁵⁰ and such tendencies have continued in the 21st century through what Sieder (2011) describes as the NGO-ization of the Mayan movement. External support for the work of local Indigenous activists has led to the systemisation of Mayan law and the politicisation of the Mayan cosmovision, sometimes resulting 'in a questioning of local practices, on the grounds that they are not "authentically Maya" enough' (ibid, p.65). As Bastos (2012) criticises, as a result of these processes, complex versions of 'Mayanness' are erased at the expense of more simplistic, institution-endorsed narratives:

Mayan spirituality [...] often cease to be religious practices and become representations of Mayanness that are developed in spaces increasingly distant from ordinary Mayans. Instead, they are linked to other actors such as politicians, tourists, gringos [Americans], schools (ibid, p.160).

²⁴⁹ In 2017, both the governments of New Zealand and India recognised the personhood of specific rivers (Kothari et al., 2017), and the rights of nature discourse is even being invoked in non-Indigenous contexts (Perez-Solero, 2020).

²⁵⁰ Producing what Xón Raquiac (2018) describes as a sort of 'nahualismo' or 'ajawismo' (p.317).

Of course, in the megacollector conflict it is Pedranos themselves who are simplifying their relationality with the lake. But they are doing so in the context of a state reluctant to grant Indigenous rights. Pedranos are following in the footsteps of the Pan-Maya movement through a strategy which has a proven track record, not just nationally, but also around the lake.²⁵¹

While Blaser (2013a) argues that self-representations in resource conflicts tell us little about radical difference, I instead support Bovensiepen's (2020) proposition that such representations should not be entirely dismissed. This is primarily because of the *performances* that representational practices involve. As she notes, the performances that groups stage to show who they are 'momentarily fix people's assumptions about "what is"', and in turn, this 'informs how actors want to be seen by others –even if such representations are not necessarily stable' (Bovensiepen, 2020, p.11). In other words, representational practices can bring into being the very actors that are claimed to be in conflict - resource conflicts can *produce* as well as *reveal* ontological difference. Consequently, it is possible that ontologically ambiguous Pedranos participating in the opposition movement could come to recognise the lake's personhood as a result of their participation. As the lake's spiritual potency is exacerbated by the megacollector, like the algal bloom before it (Chapter 7), the opposition movement may be a worlding event in its own right.

In conclusion then, while this section has argued that Pedranos' self-representation involves strategic essentialism, I do not mean to imply that Pedranos are disingenuous. I merely point out that their ontological positioning is more complex and ambiguous than presented in public discourse.

Conclusion

To return once again to my research question of whether the megacollector conflict is an ontological conflict, I think we can say with confidence that it is. But this is not to negate the political and economic context in which it is embedded. Critically, the ontological dimensions of the megacollector conflict only motivate *some* Pedranos, what unites them *all* is the question of San Pedro's sovereignty. As I have shown, the advancement of the megacollector has brought to bear Pedranos colonial exclusion from decision-making. Their opposition is as much about their desire for self-determination (i.e. revindication) as any ontologically grounded hostility to the megacollector. Few Pedranos expressed personal opposition to the megacollector on ontological grounds, and some

²⁵¹ One interviewee for instance explained to me how one area of the lake's shoreline had been successfully protected from development through tactically declaring it a sacred site.

actually claimed they would support it if wastewater were instead kept within the basin for local *campesinos'* use rather than exported to *finqueros*.

In their public output, Pedrano community leaders *always* emphasise their relationality with the lake, and this is what the eye is immediately drawn to. However, they also *always* condemn their exclusion from decision-making,²⁵² and beyond preventing the megacolector, it is clear that their other main goal is to be included in the lake's management (Figure 134). As I mentioned earlier, the main basis for their draft law for the lake is the creation of a new state-community authority to replace AMSCLAE. Overstating Pedranos' ontological opposition to the megacolector risks understating the extent to which they 'are enmeshed in the very systems that oppress them, and lack the means to put alternatives into motion' (Copeland, 2018, p.17). Ultimately, the megacolector is just a symptom of the lake's modern/colonial governance, and with greater political inclusion, Pedranos could get to its root cause and prevent modern/colonial projects like the megacolector from ever getting off the ground.

Figure 134: 'THE HEALTH OF THE LAKE is discussed with the people, not with a club of friends'



Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' (2020f)

As Copeland (2018) states, 'Discourses that ignore spiritual connections to territory [...] lose sight of a valuable organizing principle and rhetorical tool' (p.16). Pedranos have realised this and capitalised on their relationality with the lake to defend their sovereignty. There are however

²⁵² Most recently at the *amparo*'s public hearing in September 2020.

dangers to their essentialist strategy. As Coombes et al., (2011) caution, 'Indigenous peoples are not always able to control the outcomes of their activism...self-identification as "authentic" can sometimes miscarry and its benefits are indefinite' (p.475). For example, through reducing their complex relationality with the lake to a simplified definition, it can be more easily appropriated by others. As I showed in Chapter 9, with little effort AALA was able to display their multicultural credentials in their promotional videos. However, the greatest danger lies with how Pedranos have made their claims for political inclusion contingent on a *fixed* notion of relationality with the lake. If this becomes a normative standard (Killick, 2019), there is a potential for Pedranos to be politically disenfranchised (Conklin and Graham, 1995, Pieck, 2006; Hope, 2017). I have already shown how 'authenticity' is used by AALA to delegitimise ancestral authorities - the same tool could foreseeable be leveraged against Pedranos' opposition movement.

The megacollector conflict is likely to continue for many years, and whilst many community leaders currently understand the lake as *Qa Tee Ya'* (Grandmother Lake), the situation of the younger generation is quite different (Chapter 7). Strategic essentialism is useful now, but it could prove oppressive in the future. In the long-term, it might be more politically expedient for community leaders to draw attention to the lived reality of their transmodern relationality with the lake. As Coombes et al., (2012b) state, 'rather than romanticising their connections to nature and community, it is Indigenous peoples' negotiation of the hybrid present which offers cause for optimism' (p.693).

Chapter 11: Final Thoughts

In this closing chapter of the thesis, I will start off by summarising my principal research findings. After which I will discuss some of their wider conceptual and empirical implications, as well as my thoughts on future avenues for investigation. I will end the chapter by reflecting upon Lake Atitlán's future in light of recent developments.

Research Findings

At its heart, this thesis is a story about the constraints to the recognition of the pluriverse – and the efforts against these constraints. The richer and more diverse community of Tz'unun Ya' is breaking out of the constrictive equivocation of San Pedro in which it has been confined for hundreds of years. However, a perspective of political economy/ecology is unable to capture the deeper meaning of the megacollector conflict as a pluriversal edification struggle (Neusiedl, 2019), framing it as only a resource conflict. Studies investigating the megacollector conflict from this angle (e.g. Bordatto, 2019; Aviña Escot, 2020) provide an important analysis. They highlight that fear of a resource grab shapes Pedranos' perception of AALA (Amigos del Lago) as *enemies* rather than *friends of the lake*. This factor does drive their opposition movement, but it fails to capture what's truly at stake. Aviña Escot (2020) for instance attributes the megacollector conflict merely to 'dissimilar perceptions about the same reality' (p. 231) and tensions between 'corporate' and 'community environmentalisms' (ibid). In her account, neither the wider significance of the megacollector conflict nor the vitality of the lake as an actor are discussed. It is this absence which instigated my principal research question:

How can we understand the megacollector conflict as more than a 'mere resource conflict'? (Coombes et al., 2012a).

To answer this question, I had to look beyond the theoretical tools of a conventional PE analysis, adopting PO and MCD analytics. Doing so allowed me to better explore Indigenous motivations, and to see beyond the superficial oppressions framing the conflict. It enabled me to understand the critical connection between Pedranos' opposition and their deeper frustration with the silencing of their unique ways of knowing, thinking and being. This discovery accounts for my decision to structure the thesis in two parts, to first foreground and contextualise San Pedro's revindication movement in Part 1, before opening the discussion to the megacollector conflict itself in Part 2.

Each of my chosen theoretical frameworks allowed me to draw out different aspects of what San Pedro's revindication entails and the megacollector conflict's relation to these processes. On the one hand, MCD enabled me to understand revindication as decolonial resistance to modern/colonial impositions, whilst PO allowed me to recognise revindication as an effort to realise ontological multiplicity.²⁵³ Yet while the megacollector conflict (vis-à-vis San Pedro's revindication movement) is a multifaceted ontological conflict *and* a platform for decolonial resistance, it cannot be reduced to either. Although the megacollector is a lightning rod to Pedranos' grievances with the OWW (Law, 2011) and modernity/coloniality, Pedranos' opposition is also deeply pragmatic - Pedranos object more to the megacollector's political imposition than its modern rationale (Linton, 2012). Their opposition movement is thus as much about their broader political-historical experience of exclusion, and their desire to revindicate San Pedro's autonomy, as the megacollector itself.

This insight reveals the principal conceptual implication of my research. As useful as MCD and PO analytics are, they exhibit a reductive tendency to overstate and reify boundaries between ontologies at the expense of engaging with the more complex realities. This purist/binary thinking problematically risks overlooking those solutions that are more pragmatically based on a messier ontological approach. While MCD advances the necessity of 'delinking' from the CMP, my findings suggests that transformative actions are often more pragmatically based on selective engagement with it. Pedranos opposition movement is dependent on alliances across ontological difference, and they have drawn upon more ontologically ambiguous sources to construct their own solutions to the lake's contamination.

The ontological differences of the megacollector conflict emerge principally from Pedranos' strategic essentialism and their framing the lake as a sacred grandmother. Yet overstating the megacollector conflict's ontological dimensions so as better to appeal to Guatemala's multicultural politics is a 'cosmopolitical risk' (Cepek, 2016) which could elide the pragmatic functions of Pedranos' opposition, most notably their pressing desire for political inclusion and self-determination. As Coombes et al., (2011) state, such an approach 'may embarrass the state to uphold "traditional" rights, but it seldom leads to [...] the realization of Indigenous political autonomy' (p.475).²⁵⁴ In their *amparo*, Pedranos argue that without recognition of the lake's rights 'any project can threaten Lake Atitlán' (Colectivo San Pedro, 2019a, p.2). However, recognition alone is not enough to guarantee protection. Until the lake's Indigenous communities have achieved

²⁵³ These two realizations corresponding to my sub-research questions I. and II.

²⁵⁴ See also Radcliffe (2020) for an overview of the limits of rights instruments as a mechanism for Indigenous empowerment.

greater self-determination, modern/colonial governance will continue to pose an existential threat to the lake.

In this case, we can see how prioritising the ontological dimensions of the megacollector conflict can act to obscure the very power asymmetries which are fundamental in shaping the articulation of ontological difference in the first place.²⁵⁵ Consequently, my research proves the importance of keeping ontological analyses firmly grounded in ethnography, and putting them into closer conversation with political economy, that is to 'ontologize political economy' as Burman (2016) suggests.

In a similar way, the 'decolonial problem' that Yates (2020) identifies in MCD, i.e. its inability to account for the 'messy, contradictory space where multiple epistemologies, analytics, and praxis collide' (p.4), points to the need 'to complement decoloniality with other approaches' (p.5). In effect, what is needed is a more nuanced approach which pays greater attention to ontological ambiguities. Fortunately, there are several conceptual approaches which can be drawn upon, some of which are merely under-utilised within the conceptual toolkits of MCD and PO themselves, such as the concepts of 'transmodernity' (Dussel, 2012) and 'partial connections' (de la Cadena, 2015a). As Coombes et al. (2011) state, geographic scholarship has 'relegated Indigenous peoples to habitual case studies of neo/colonial excess or of heroic resistance thereto' (p.473). My findings suggest an urgent need to depart from this trend and think about environmental conflicts in a more ontologically expansive and nuanced way.

Research Implications and Future Avenues

Other researchers concerned with addressing the ontological multiplicity of environmental conflicts should take a more nuanced approach, but beyond taking ontological ambiguities into account, this requires greater consideration of individuals' worlding practices, and the contingent and fluid nature of ontological difference. This shift is also advocated by several other researchers (e.g. Cepek, 2016; Killick, 2019; Bovensiepen, 2020; Mézáros, 2020), and my findings thus support this emerging trend in the ontological literature. A more nuanced approach will helpfully move abstract discussions closer to the dynamic realities of Indigenous lives, and it will also help shift emphasis away from conflict and resistance, to the possibilities of collaboration and alliances that are so urgently required.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵ This is why it is useful to put PO and MCD into conversation, given the latter's attention to the CMP and the coloniality of knowledge in particular (Mignolo, 2018a).

²⁵⁶ Put differently, we need to focus on reconceiving decolonial cracks in terms of 'possibilities for building bridges between worlds' (Yates, 2020, p.5).

With this in mind, a useful direction for future research on Lake Atitlán would be to delve deeper into those partial connections which offer hope for collaboration and alliances in spite of uncommonalities (de la Cadena, 2015b). Areas underexplored in this thesis include the relationship between Western scientific knowledge and Indigenous knowledge about the lake, as well as the role of the lake's resident expat population, many of whom are involved in local politics.²⁵⁷ Another fruitful avenue for future research would more comprehensively address the situation of the lake's Indigenous youth. To follow up Bovensiepen's (2020) pertinent assertion that ontological difference can be produced as well as revealed by threats like the megacollector, it would be useful to test this hypothesis and investigate how the megacollector conflict has affected the youth's perception of the lake.

Beyond the lake, my research also raises a number of questions on a wider scale. The processes of revindication visibilised in the megacollector conflict are pertinent to the current political moment in Guatemala - that is the deepening of modernity/coloniality and the decolonial response to this.²⁵⁸ Pedranos' opposition to the megacollector provides insight into some of the new paths that this response is taking, through for instance the increased role played by women and young people,²⁵⁹ as well as the significant utilisation of social media to mobilise action. Pedranos' efforts are also indicative of what has been proposed as the end of the era of neoliberal multiculturalism (Hale, 2020). After almost two decades of failed attempts to block extractivism through ILO-169 Convention-sanctioned *consultas*, the deficiencies of the limited multicultural mechanisms available to Indigenous communities are becoming increasingly apparent (Sieder, 2021).²⁶⁰ While Pedranos are seeking to prevent the megacollector through this mechanism, as I discussed in Chapter 10, this is not their only focus. They are also channelling their energies towards constructing their own alternative narratives orientated by an autonomist discourse, such as their proposal for a new body to oversee the management of the lake, and it to these truly transformative visions of the future where our attention should be directed.

²⁵⁷ Although perhaps more difficult to access, it would also be interesting to explore the position of vacation homeowners and members of AALA.

²⁵⁸ Revindication, the growing DOT and food sovereignty movements, as well as efforts towards establishing alternative modes of development and governance in the form of Buen Vivir and the Plurinational Constituent Assembly are a response to a new wave of extractivism, the criminalization of land defenders, and repression of Indigenous autonomy and ancestral authorities (Sieder, 2017; Chivalán Carrillo and Posocco, 2020).

²⁵⁹ Notably in 2021 the community leader Paulina del Carmen González Navichoc assumed the position of first *cargador* of San Pedro's Elder Council, the first woman to do so (FGER, 2021).

²⁶⁰ Sieder (2021) contends that the *consulta* mechanism has become a sort of trap to manage resistance and displace claims for self-determination, and that ultimately it will never satisfy Mayan communities' demands for respect, voice, or recognition of alternative epistemologies and ontologies.

My research also has implications on a more global scale, insofar as the megacollector and its advancement by an environmental NGO is representative of what could be seen as a sort of new, morally ambiguous extractivism that has emerged as human rights and green issues have gained political prominence. This trend has been accompanied by increased corporate virtue signalling and greenwashing initiatives which seek to co-opt and divert sympathetic energies to profiting a corporate agenda (Baletti, 2014; Morgenstar, 2019; Uranga 2020). In the resulting distorted information landscape, the underlying extractivist dynamic is not immediately explicit, which makes it an area in need of urgent investigation.

On a final note, my research underlines both the need to decolonise research with Indigenous communities, and some of the methodological barriers to doing so. Although my research offers little in the way of answers, I hope that my honest and reflexive stance will encourage other researchers to continue the conversation about ways to better horizontalise relations with Indigenous communities.

The Future of Lake Atitlán

Throughout 2021 the megacollector conflict has taken a backseat to COVID-19 and the more immediately pressing concerns of public health and economic livelihoods. Even so, Pedranos continue to investigate, organise, and build alliances (Conocer para Transformar, 2021; Ajpop Tinamit, 2021; Red K'at, 2021). During this time, efforts have been directed towards swaying public opinion through publishing investigative articles against the injustices of the megacollector's imposition (Aburawa, 2021).²⁶¹ I cowrote one myself with Comunidad Tz'unun Ya', focused on the colonial strategies that AALA employs to advance the megacollector.²⁶² After concentrating on my own thesis for four years, I saw this article as a priority to entering into a deeper relationship of reciprocity, and likely my best means of 'walking with' Pedranos in current circumstances. Soon I will be returning to Guatemala to begin working for an NGO, where I will hopefully be better positioned to maintain contact with Pedranos and support their opposition movement.

As for the megacollector conflict itself, it is difficult to predict an outcome. The only certainty in this time of great uncertainty is that Pedranos are steadfast in their determination to protect the lake from outside interests. For the moment, it seems that her best hope lies with their pluriversal aspirations for the revindication of Tz'unun Ya'. Revindication holds the transformative potential for a different Guatemala - a Guatemala in which many worlds fit.

²⁶¹ More are also planned to be published later this year.

²⁶² 'La Imposición Colonialista del Megacollector por la Asociación Amigos del Lago de Atitlán' (May and Comunidad Tz'unun Ya', 2021).

Lake Atitlán is a reason for permanent struggle,
of those who love you and respect you with conscience
(Quiacaín Sac, n.d., s.18)

Figure 135: Pedrano community leaders at the *amparo*'s public hearing (September 2020)

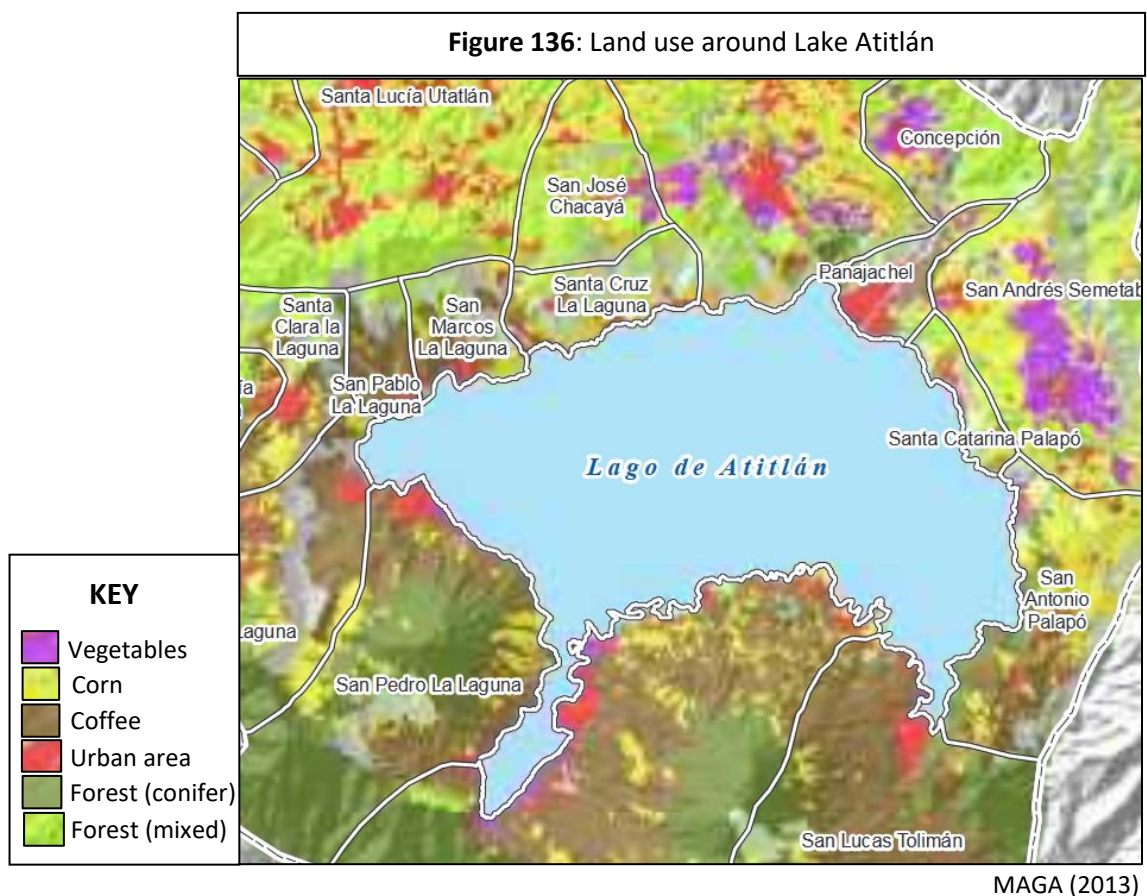


Jaguarpromociones (2020)

Appendix 1: Sources of Nutrient Overloading

1. Chemical Fertilizers

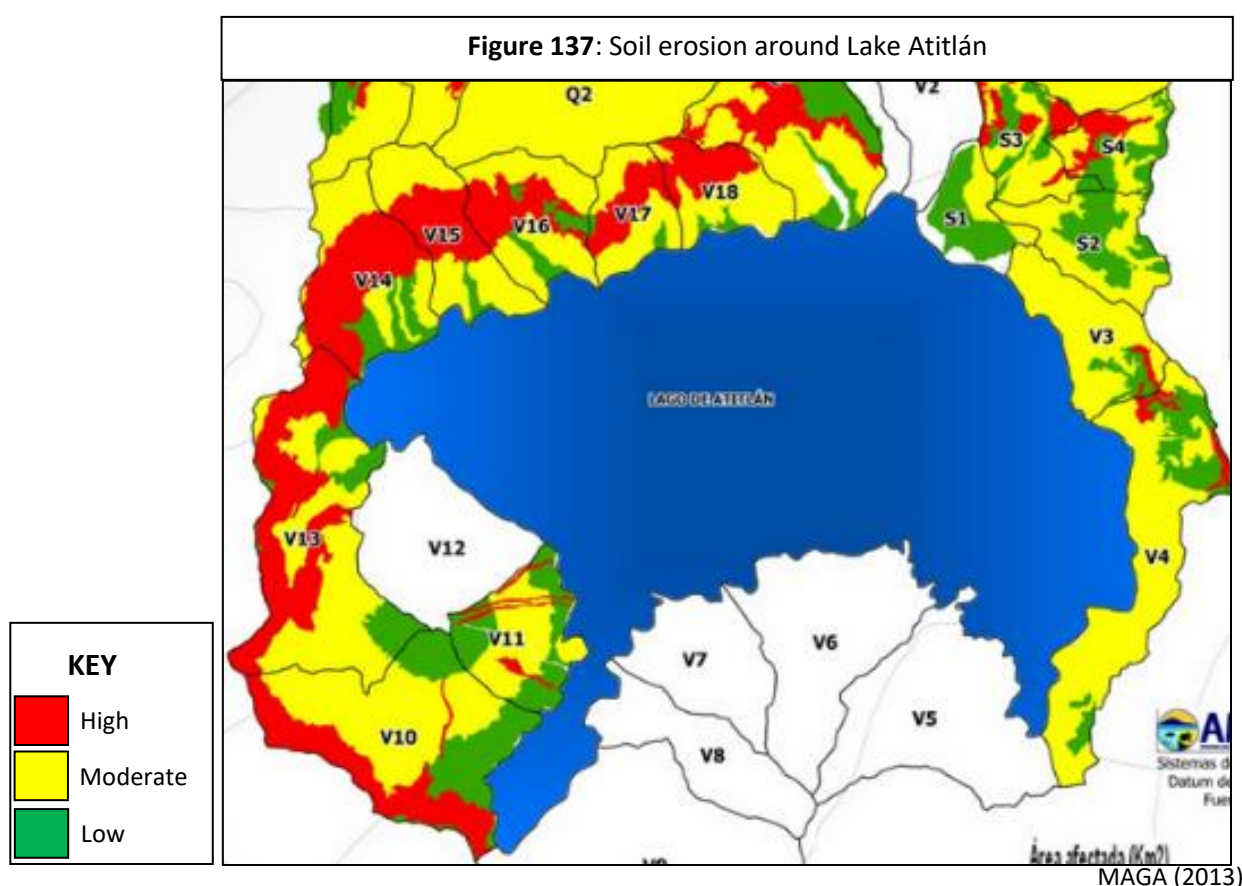
Since the 1960s, chemical fertilizers have been extensively applied to the crops in the lake basin. As Figure 136 below shows, the basin is extensively cultivated, with coffee plantations dominant on the slope of the basin's volcanoes of the southern shore, and vegetables on the opposite shore. In the rainy season (May - October), fertilizer runoff washes directly into the lake from agricultural plots. The two main inflowing rivers, the Rio Quixcab and Rio Francisco also unload a considerable proportion of nutrients from further upstream.



2. Soil Erosion

The basin's volcanic soils are rich in nutrients, which like chemical fertilizers, wash into the lake during the rainy season. Less frequently, hurricanes pass over the lake, causing deadly mudslides and depositing vast amounts of soil into the lake, as was the case with hurricane Stan in 2005 and Agatha in 2010. As the Figure 137 below shows, almost the entire basin suffers high rates of soil erosion, except a few remoter, forested areas. The steep sided slopes of the basin make

Atitlán vulnerable to this process, but it has also been exacerbated by human interference, extensive rates of deforestation, forest fires, and intensive farming techniques. These techniques replaced traditional methods like the building of stone terraces, which encouraged soil conservation.



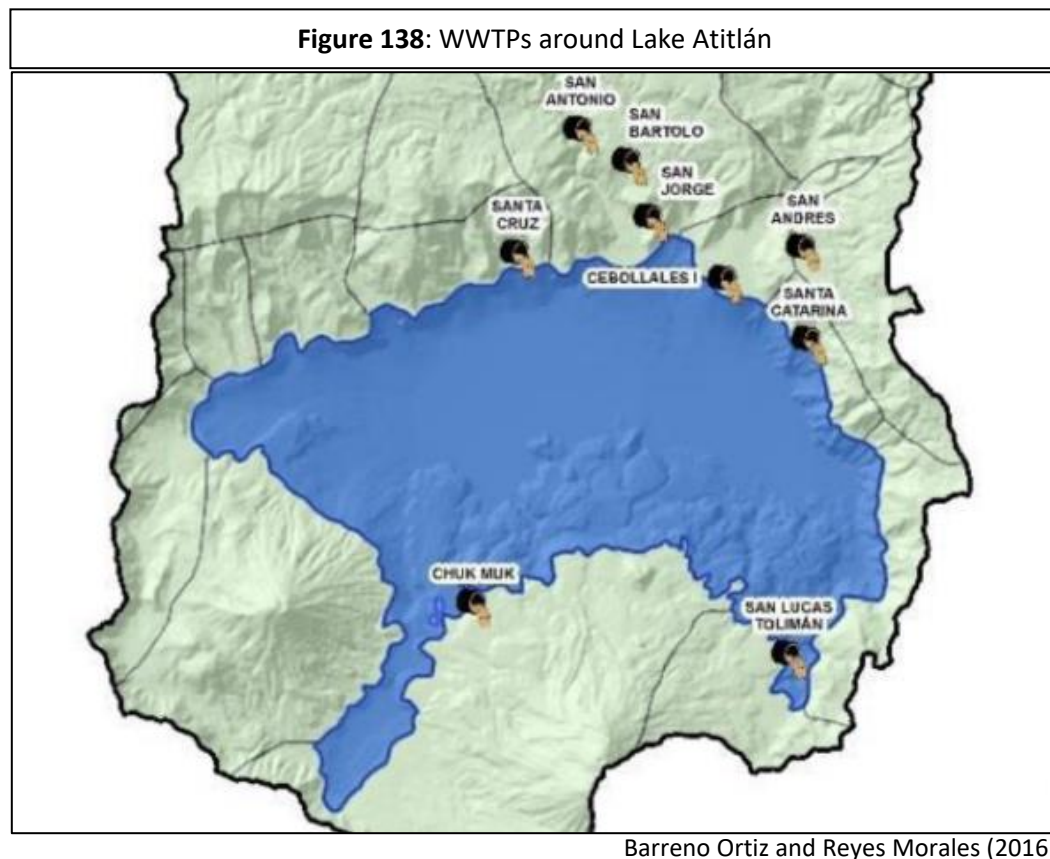
3. Wastewater

The lakesides town produce large volumes of wastewater,²⁶³ a significant proportion of which flows directly into the lake in the form of untreated or partially treated sewage (point-source pollution). However, some communities like San Pedro utilise septic tanks, so that the wastewater only seeps into the lake gradually in a filtered form. Although there are a few wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs) in the basin (see Figure 138), none of these are operating to full capacity, lacking the technical and financial resources to do so. Many more would need to be constructed to tackle the wastewater problem, especially in light of the rapidly increasing population. AALA argues that there is inadequate space within the basin for this to be a viable option,²⁶⁴ although it remains the

²⁶³ Including both greywater from surface runoff (mainly detergents) and blackwater (sewage).

²⁶⁴ The tertiary treatment of wastewater requires large areas of flat land for the maturation ponds.

preferred option of AMSCLAE. As well as containing high concentrations of nutrients, the wastewater contains parasites and dangerous pathogens such as *E. coli*.



4. Atmospheric Deposition

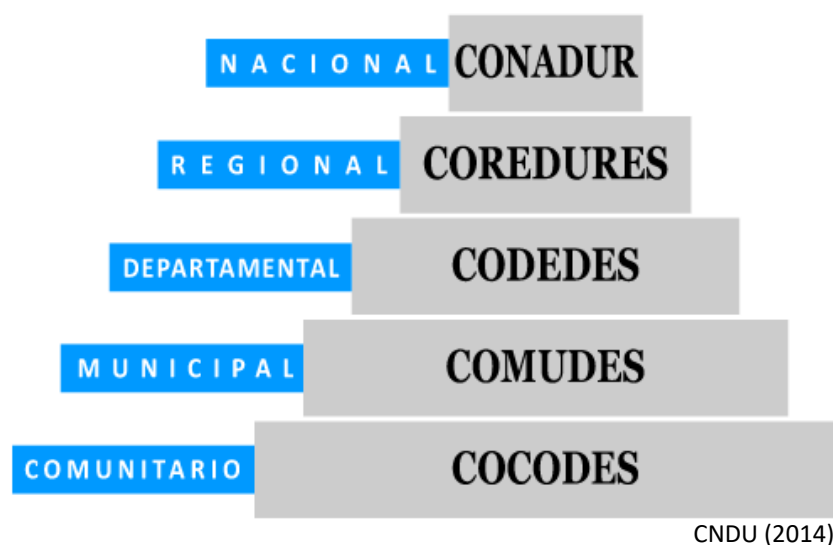
The fourth major source of nutrients was only recently discovered by researchers at UVG (Universidad del Valle). They measured the impact of atmospheric deposition from air pollution, largely from vehicles emissions in Guatemala City over 100km away. These pollutant gases mix with suspended water in the atmosphere and are washed into the lake through rainfall. The researchers were surprised to discover that atmospheric deposition was an even greater source of nitrogen than the two rivers which flow into the lake (Ovidio et al., 2018). The problem with this diffuse non-point source pollution is that it lies outside the jurisdiction of the lake's authorities, action must be taken in Guatemala City to tackle this problem.

Appendix 2: COCODES - Additional Context

The two-year term of cocode is unpaid,²⁶⁵ and it can involve a significant amount of responsibility and dedication, although this varies greatly between COCODES (Larson, 2008). COCODES are formed according to the 'principals, values, norms and procedures' of each community (CGC, 2002), which can differ substantially between communities, and even within the *same* community. Some of San Pedro's COCODES for instance functioned with a greater degree of cohesion and dedication than others. In the case of the COCODE of Chuacanté where I carried out most of my ethnographic research, weekly meetings were led by the COCODE's president, with most of the six cocodes in attendance.²⁶⁶

COCODES are the lowest level of Guatemala's council structure, which contains five levels of representation (Figure 139). This council structure extends all the way through the municipal, departmental, regional and national tiers of government.²⁶⁷ The next level above the COCODE is the municipal development council (COMUDE), which takes the form of a monthly town council meeting presided over by the municipal mayor. As the head of the municipal council, the mayor coordinates the meeting, in which the other members of the municipal corporation (councillors) are included. Also present are the cocodes representing each COCODE, and representatives from other public and civil societies entities. Again, as with COCODES, the functioning and specific makeup of the COMUDE can vary widely between communities.

Figure 139: Hierarchy of Development Councils



²⁶⁵ Although cocodes can obtain benefits from their position in other ways, sometimes through corruption.

²⁶⁶ Although some were perpetually absent. Absenteeism is quite common in the position of cocode.

²⁶⁷ Although in practices, the higher up the pyramid, the less often meetings occur.

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