

Daniel Croles Fitjar

Balancing the World

Contemporary Maya *ajq'ijab*
in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala



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In *Balancing the World*, the author illuminates what an *ajq'ij*, or “daykeeper,” is by presenting material he collected in a series of interviews with practitioners of Maya spirituality. Frequently labeled as Maya priests, shamans, spiritual guides, or even witches, the men and women called *ajq'ijab* do a variety of work to help their visitors, their ancestors, the spirits and the world itself. Nine interviewees from the Quetzaltenango area in the Guatemalan highlands tell about how they cure and avert illness, perform divinations, communicate with the ancestors and do their part in balancing the world. Most of them agree that they have been chosen for this responsibility and they see it as both a gift and a burden.

The Author

Daniel Croles Fitjar studied religion at the Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion at the University of Bergen (Norway) as well as US history and colonial history at the University of Amsterdam (the Netherlands). His studies have focused on theories of religion, indigenous religions and eurocentrism within the study of religion and history. The author has also lived and worked in Quetzaltenango (Guatemala).

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Foreword by Håkan Rydving

When Daniel Croles Fitjar travelled to Guatemala in August 2012 to collect material for his master's thesis, he did not know that the project would change direction and become something very different from what he had initially planned. His original intention was to write about the life history of a North European man who had become an *ajq'ij*, a Mayan ritual specialist. Accordingly, Mr Fitjar had prepared by reading a lot about how to collect material and how to analyse 'life histories'. He had also had the privilege of discussing problems of method and different theoretical perspectives with one of the main experts in this type of analysis, my colleague Professor Lisbeth Mikaelsson. In addition, she had given him suggestions about relevant texts to read in preparation for the period of data collection. Needless to say, although he later changed his plans, this preparation was still invaluable for the thesis he would eventually write.

Once installed in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, Mr Fitjar understood that in order to be able to write the life history of an individual *ajq'ij*, he had to know more about the different functions of this type of ritual specialist in Mayan society. He therefore started asking other people what an *ajq'ij* is and what an *ajq'ij* does – questions that changed everything. He was fortunate that several *ajq'ijab* (the plural of *ajq'ij*) and other Mayas were generous with both their time and their knowledge. Helped by many, among whom I would especially like to mention his local mentor Thomas Hart and his language teacher and assistant Victor García, the interview material grew into a treasure trove of interesting and varied information that presented a picture, full of nuances, of the roles of the *ajq'ij*. Consequently, Mr Fitjar abandoned the initial idea of basing his master's thesis on the life history of just one *ajq'ij* and decided instead to write about how a group of *ajq'ijab*, each of them in her or his own way, interpreted the role and performed the rituals of an *ajq'ij*.

In order to be able to collect a material of the kind presented here – a material that formed the basis for the master's thesis – it is not enough to have read and to know a lot about field-work and interview techniques, nor to have good assistance (although this is important). What is essential is a particular type of personality, a natural ability to put 'the persons who know' (the interviewees) at their ease and to make them feel that 'the person who does not know but who

wishes to learn' (the interviewer) can be trusted and that he or she respects the interviewee. One does not have to read many of the following pages to realise that Mr Fitjar is such a person. The many well-chosen quotations from the interviews with the experts, the *ajq'ijab*, are an illustration of precisely such respect.

However, in order to write an academic text of high standard, one also has to be able to situate one's own material in various contexts, to explain one's choices of analytical categories, to relate one's analysis to current theoretical discussions in one's field of study, and – not least – to relate the results to changes and variations in the spatial and temporal context where the material was collected. If one can satisfy all these requirements, the study will be of interest also for students and researchers whose main interests are in other areas.

The respect that permeates this study and puts the focus on the interviewed *ajq'ijab* and the interesting material they generously shared with the author, the clear outline and thematic arrangement of the text, which make the argument easy to follow, as well as the sharp and independent analysis of the material, all make *Balancing the World* an unusually interesting study, both empirically, methodically, and theoretically. It provides a lot of food for thought for anyone interested in the type of culture analysis that takes nuances and complexity seriously. This is certainly an admirable outcome for a master's project.

Håkan Rydving

Professor of the History of Religions
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Preface

Balancing the World was written in the spring of 2013 and was handed in as my thesis within the Master's Programme in the Study of Religion at the Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion at the University of Bergen. The text presented here is essentially the same as the one used in the thesis, although I have updated a few numbers and corrected a few spelling mistakes. This printed version also contains a new foreword by my supervisor for this project, Professor Håkan Rydving.

Several people have helped me with my project and with the publication process. I would like to thank all of my co-students for their valuable input, for good discussions and for proofreading my text (often several times) during our Master's study.

Vivian Sollid, Natalie Sagstad, Malin Martinsen, Signe Underlid, Lloyd Abercrombie, Cameron Beebe, Alex Clark, Vidar Pedersen, Bjørn Ola Tafjord and Lisbeth Mikaelsson have all helped me with developing ideas, developing questionnaires, finding literature and proofreading of the original text. I am especially grateful for all the help I received from Thomas Hart during my fieldwork, and also for his excellent book on Maya spirituality.

I would also like to thank my family; Christina Elmar, Magne Fitjar, Elisabeth Croles, Maaike Croles Fitjar and Kjetil Fitjar Bøe, for their continuous support and for travelling with me to places near and far.

The fieldwork was partially funded by the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Bergen and Signy og Ellert Wallendahls Legat. The publication of this book version was made possible by the Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion at the University of Bergen. I am very grateful for their economic support, and for Ingvild Nistov and Arne Mykkeltveit's help in the application process.

I would like to thank Peter Lang Publishers for publishing this, my first book. My contact Ute Winkelkötter has been very patient and helpful in the publishing process. I would also like to thank Christina Malitius for her help with editing the photos used.

Professor Håkan Rydving has been an invaluable support for me since I started this project. An expert mentor, he has a unique ability in encouraging his

students to reach their goals. I would especially like to thank him for continuing to help me with the publication of this text even though his work as my supervisor was formally over.

Muchas gracias a todos los que me ayudaron cuando estaba en Guatemala. Gracias a todos en la Casa Xelajú por recibirnos Christina y me. Gracias a Kristian Velasquez por su ayuda e interés en mi proyecto. Muchas gracias a Victor García, mi maestro, mi asistente, y mi mejor amigo guatemalteco. Espero que nos veamos pronto.

Sobre todo, le debo mi gratitud a Teresa, Rosa, Carlos, Odilia, Juan, Isabela, Manuel, Byron y Martin que han compartido su tiempo y sus conocimientos conmigo. Por eso estoy muy agradecido. Lo siento que no puedo dar mis agradecimientos a todos los participantes en sus propios idiomas.

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A few notes on spelling and pronunciation

I occasionally use terms in Spanish, K'iche' or Mam. If nothing else is specified, the term is Spanish. There are many differences from English when pronouncing Spanish words. This is far from a complete list, but these are maybe the most important differences:

In Guatemalan Spanish, *ll* is pronounced like *y* in *yoghurt*; *j*, and *g* in front of *i* or *e*, is pronounced like *ch* in *loch* or like a “strong *h*-sound”; and *h* is always silent.

When pronouncing K'iche' or Mam terms, the ' represents a glottal stop; *x* is pronounced like *sh* in *shirt*; *ch* is pronounced like *ch* in *church*; and *j*, like in Spanish, is pronounced like *ch* in *loch*. Nouns get the endings *-ab* or *-ib* in plural, but sometimes the interviewees used the Spanish ending *-es* for K'iche' and Mam nouns as well, and so *ajq'ijab* and *ajq'ijes* are both used as plural for the term *ajq'ij*.

My spelling of K'iche' terms is based on Allen J. Christenson's unpublished K'iche' – English dictionary.¹

1 Allen J. Christenson. “K'iche' – English Dictionary” Accessed 22.07.2014. http://www.famsi.org/mayawriting/dictionary/christenson/quidic_complete.pdf.

