

Voices of the Earth: Mayan Women's Testimonies as Resistance and Identity Reclamation in Post-Genocide Guatemala

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Abstract

This article explores the oral testimonies of Mayan women survivors of sexual violence in northern Guatemala as acts of political, cultural, and spiritual resistance to ongoing colonial violence. Drawing on decolonial feminist scholarship from Latin America and Indigenous epistemologies rooted in Mayan cosmology, the study approaches testimony as a living ritual rather than a static narrative. In this context, storytelling is not simply a recounting of the past, but a ceremonial act of re-membering—reuniting body, land, and spirit that have been disrupted by war and dispossession.

Methodologically, the research employs trauma-informed ethnography and testimonial inquiry grounded in relational ethics (*ética del cuidado*) and *acompañamiento*—walking beside survivors rather than speaking for them (Lykes & Crosby, 2019; Smith, 2021). The narratives were gathered through deep listening and reciprocity, respecting Indigenous temporalities in which time is cyclical and memory communal.

By interpreting these testimonies through frameworks developed by Latin American thinkers such as Menchú Tum & Burgos-Debray (1983), Anzaldúa (1987), Rivera Cusicanqui (2010), and Paredes (2010), this article redefines testimony as an act of epistemic and political sovereignty. The voices of Mayan women emerge not as accounts of victimhood but as manifestations of cultural endurance—reclaiming language, spirituality, and belonging as forms of justice when institutional justice remains absent (Velázquez Nimatuj, 2019; Rebecka, 2025).

Keywords: Mayan women, Testimonio, Testimonial narratives, Decolonial feminism, Indigenous epistemologies, Sexual violence and genocide, Trauma and memory, Colonial violence

1. Introduction- Historical and Political Context- The War Against the Maya

Long before Guatemala existed as a nation-state, the Maya had built civilizations that mapped both the heavens and the earth. From the lowland cities of Tikal and Yaxhá to the highland valleys of Chichicastenango and Rabinal, their temples and codices preserved a cosmology in which all beings were bound by reciprocity. The earth was not property but kin; mountains (*wi'che'*), rivers (*ja'*), and maize (*ixim*) were animate presences that sustained life through mutual care. Time was cyclical, measured not in progress but in balance—the continual renewal of life between humans, ancestors, and the natural world (Falla, 1994).

When the Spanish conquest began in the sixteenth century, this world was violently interrupted but never erased. Mayan communities withdrew into the highlands, preserving their languages, weaving patterns, and ceremonial calendars under the cover of Catholic festivals. They survived colonization not through direct confrontation but through continuity—keeping alive a collective identity built on *comunalidad* (shared being), *ayni* (reciprocity), and the understanding that the well-being of one is inseparable from that of the community and the land (Cumes, 2012).

This philosophy endured into the twentieth century, shaping the rural Indigenous economies of the Guatemalan highlands. Mayan villages practiced communal land tenure and collective labor (*faena*, *tequio*), structures that resisted capitalist enclosure. These systems represented an alternative to the plantation economy on which the Guatemalan oligarchy depended—an economy dominated by coffee and sugar barons who traced their lineage to the Spanish colonial elite (Sanford, 2003). For centuries, Indigenous peasants supplied the labor for these estates while being denied land ownership, education, and citizenship.

The revolution of 1944–1954 briefly opened a horizon of justice. President Jacobo Árbenz's agrarian reform sought to

redistribute idle land, much of it held by the U.S.-based United Fruit Company and local elites. For the Mayan majority, this reform was not merely economic; it was the first recognition of their right to land as the foundation of life. When the CIA-backed coup in 1954 overthrew Árbenz, it was more than a political reversal—it was the restoration of the racial order. The counter-revolution that followed criminalized Indigenous organizations and equated communal life with subversion (Green, 1999).

By the late 1970s, as Indigenous campesino movements and Catholic base communities began demanding justice, the Guatemalan state labeled them *internal enemies*. The army's "internal control" doctrine—trained under U.S. counter-insurgency programs—defined the highlands as home and territory to be purified. To the generals in Guatemala City, the Maya were not only a demographic majority; they were the living embodiment of an alternative social order that threatened capitalism and the myth of a *ladino* nation. Their languages, communal assemblies, and reverence for the land were interpreted as defiance. Therefore, the war that followed was political and ontological (Manz, 2004).

Between 1978 and 1984, the Guatemalan army and paramilitary patrols carried out a scorched-earth campaign across Quiché Alta Verapaz, and Baja Verapaz—regions where Mayan cosmology remained most intact. Villages were razed, sacred hills desecrated, and the keepers of ceremonial knowledge executed. The military understood, perhaps more clearly than outsiders, that to annihilate a people's spirit, one must destroy its relationship to the land. Soldiers burned maize fields, poisoned wells, and slaughtered animals considered spiritual companions. Women were targeted because they were seen as transmitters of culture—the weavers of the *traje*, the first teachers of the language, and the custodians of ancestral rituals. Rape, enslavement, and forced nudity became instruments to break that chain of transmission (Sanford, 2003; Green, 1999).

The survivors who rebuilt their lives did so within this cosmological framework. In interviews and gatherings across the northern highlands, women spoke of the land as a mother who had hidden them in her folds—caves, forests, and rivers—during the massacres. Many attributed their survival to *Ajaw*, the life force that dwells in everything. Their resilience was not only psychological but cosmological: to replant maize, to speak Achi or Q'eqchi', to embroider a *huipil* in the old designs was to re-enter the circle of creation that the war had tried to sever (Velázquez Nimatuj, 2019).

In Mayan languages, there is no exact word for *nature* as separate from humanity. The closest term, *k'aslemal*, signifies the living web of existence. This concept also structures their understanding of trauma and healing: a rupture in relationships—between body and soul, person and community, human and earth—must be restored through collective ritual rather than individual confession (Rebecka, 2025). The same principle governs their political resurgence. Movements such as CONAVIGUA, founded by Rosalina Tuyuc, and the intellectual work of Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Gladys Tzul Tzul, Aura Cumes, and Irma Alicia Velázquez Nimatuj, draw directly from this relational philosophy. Their activism and scholarship insist that to defend women is to defend territory, and to defend territory is to protect life itself (Menchú Tum & Burgos-Debray, 1983; Tzul Tzul, 2015; Cumes, 2012).

Traditional clothing, the *traje*, has become a visible declaration of this philosophy. Each pattern and color carries a code of belonging—cosmological maps woven by hand. During the conflict, the army forced women to abandon these garments to erase community identities; after the war, wearing them again became an act of defiance. In courtrooms, at exhumations, and in daily life, the *traje* now functions as a flag of continuity, asserting that colonization and genocide failed to erase Mayan womanhood. Preserving native languages is also part of this resistance. To speak Q'eqchi' or Achi in public institutions dominated by Spanish is to re-establish Indigenous epistemic sovereignty. As Velázquez Nimatuj (2019) reminds us, "language is our first territory; if it dies, we disappear."

Two years ago, when I traveled through Alta Verapaz and Baja Verapaz, the women I met called themselves *Ixoqib' tzij*—"women of the word." We gathered in circles, sharing food, songs, and silence. Their testimonies unfolded not as linear stories but as spirals: memories returning to the same points—a burned field, a child's cry, a grandmother's prayer—each time with new meaning. Listening to them required a different temporality that mirrors the Mayan calendar, where time repeats in renewal cycles. They taught me that testimony is ceremony, and that to speak is to sow (Lykes & Crosby, 2019; Smith, 2021).

This study does not seek to universalize Mayan women's experiences of sexual violence, nor to extract a generalized trauma model applicable across cultural contexts. On the contrary, it deliberately situates testimony within Mayan cosmology, language, and communal ethics, arguing that epistemic sovereignty requires resisting universal frameworks that erase Indigenous ontologies. The specificity of Mayan understandings of land, body, and memory is not a limitation of the analysis but its ethical and theoretical foundation.

This study, therefore, asks: How do Mayan women's oral testimonies—grounded in their languages, communal ethics, and spiritual relationship with the land—become acts of resistance, identity reconstruction, and intergenerational survival? Their words reveal that the Guatemalan genocide was not only an attempt to destroy a people but to destroy a worldview in which the land is sacred and woman its mirror. To tell these stories is to restore that mirror, piece by piece, until it

reflects life again.

2. Theoretical Framework- Decolonial Feminism and Indigenous Epistemologies

For centuries, Mayan communities have lived in relative isolation from the structures of the Guatemalan state — not out of withdrawal, but as a deliberate act of protection. In the mist-covered highlands of Quiché Totonicapán, Alta and Baja Verapaz, and the lowland rainforests of Petén and Izabal, villages were organized around *comunalidad*: a system of coexistence that binds family, land, and spirituality into a single fabric of life. This separation from *ladino* towns and governmental institutions was not only geographic but epistemic. The Maya maintained their own systems of governance, medicine, justice, and education, often conducted in their native languages — K'iche', Q'eqchi', Achi, Mam, Poqomchi', and others — within community assemblies and ceremonial spaces rarely entered by outsiders (Cumes, 2012; Tzul Tzul, 2015).

Daily life was structured around cycles of reciprocity with the earth. Corn, beans, and squash — the three sisters of the Mesoamerican diet — were planted following lunar and ritual calendars, accompanied by offerings of copal and prayer. Every act of cultivation was ceremonial; the land was not exploited but cared for as a living ancestor. The concept of *utz k'aslemal* (“good living”) expresses this harmony — an ethical order in which well-being arises from balance among humans, nature, and the spiritual world. The community, not the individual, was the basic unit of existence. Decision-making took place through the *asamblea comunal*, where elders, midwives (*comadronas*), and spiritual guides (*ajq'ijab'*) held equal moral authority (Velázquez Nimatuj, 2019).

The preservation of language, dress, and ritual was central to this autonomy. Each village developed distinctive *huipil* patterns — geometric maps woven in red, blue, and gold threads — signifying lineage, territory, and the sacred order of the cosmos. The designs were passed down from mother to daughter, making textile art both an archive and a pedagogy. The use of native languages in daily communication, storytelling, and prayer ensured the transmission of oral history and cosmological knowledge even when formal education was denied. These languages were the carriers of philosophy: in K'iche', for example, *nab'e* means both “origin” and “dignity,” reminding speakers that moral worth flows from ancestry (Falla, 1994; Cumes, 2012).

Mayan religious life remained layered and syncretic despite centuries of missionary conversion. Catholic saints were quietly merged with ancestral deities; church festivals doubled as Indigenous ceremonies. Behind the façade of Christian liturgy, ritual specialists continued to light fires to the four directions, to offer maize to the mountain spirits (*tzuultaq'a*), and to maintain balance between the visible and invisible worlds. These practices formed what Velázquez Nimatuj (2019) calls “the underground republic of the Maya” — a network of spiritual and cultural continuity that sustained the people through colonial rule, dictatorship, and war.

Isolation, then, was not a mark of backwardness but a survival strategy. Without state protection, communal structures became the primary sources of welfare, justice, and education. Births, marriages, and deaths were governed by customary law (*derecho consuetudinario*), and disputes were resolved through dialogue and reparation rather than punishment. Midwives were healers and historians who carried oral genealogies and cosmological prayers linking the newborn to the ancestors. Every ritual reaffirmed belonging to family, land, and the universe.

It was precisely this self-sustaining world that made the Maya a target of extermination. The Guatemalan military, operating under the Cold War logic of “internal enemies,” perceived autonomous Indigenous organizations as subversive. To a state built on private property and racial hierarchy, a communal people who believed that land cannot be owned — only cared for — represented a radical threat (Sanford, 2003; Green, 1999). Destroying their villages meant dismantling a social and moral order that stood in opposition to the colonial state itself.

Even in the aftermath of genocide, this communal ethic endures. Many highland communities continue to resist assimilation by reviving their languages, replanting ancestral crops, and re-establishing ceremonial centers once desecrated during the war. For them, to live apart remains a form of dignity. The separation that outsiders interpret as poverty or marginality is, in truth, a declaration of continuity — a refusal to surrender the foundations of *k'aslemal*, the Mayan art of living well. Thus, research must walk in step with Mayan traditions, following their paths of reciprocity, ceremony, and communal knowledge — not imposing an external lens but learning through their rhythm of knowing (Smith, 2021; Lykes & Crosby, 2019).

Western academic traditions have long claimed the authority to define what counts as truth, knowledge, and reason. In trauma and memory studies, this authority has often translated into epistemic colonization — the imposition of Euro-American psychological models onto Indigenous experiences. When the suffering of Mayan women is analyzed through diagnostic categories such as PTSD, the complexity of their cosmology and social being is reduced to the language of disorder. This is not an innocent translation; it is a continuation of the same colonial logic that once silenced their ancestors. As Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) reminds us, “colonialism is not a past event but a structure of thought.”

To interpret Indigenous pain through Western frameworks is to reoccupy Indigenous minds — an act she calls *colonialismo interno del saber* (the internal colonization of knowledge).

María Lugones (2010) deepened this critique by introducing the concept of the *coloniality of gender*, arguing that colonialism did not simply oppress women but invented a racialized gender system that imposed European hierarchies of body, sexuality, and reason. For Mayan women, this system rendered them simultaneously invisible and hyper-visible: erased as subjects of history yet targeted as bodies for conquest. Lugones insists that resistance must begin by dismantling this *modern/colonial gender system* and recovering the communal, relational understandings of womanhood that existed before colonization.

Julietta Paredes (2010), an Aymara feminist and founder of *feminismo comunitario*, reframes feminism as a collective practice emerging from community life rather than an individual struggle for equality. She writes, “*we are not fighting to be like men; we are fighting to heal the world.*” This approach rejects neoliberal and academic versions of feminism that privilege autonomy over belonging. Paredes’s notion of *cuerpo-territorio* (body-territory) is central: the woman’s body is the first land colonized, and its liberation is inseparable from the liberation of the land. In the testimonies of Guatemalan women, this idea is alive. When survivors describe their violation as the burning of a village or the poisoning of a river, they express an ontology in which body and earth are one (Menchú Tum & Burgos-Debray, 1983; Paredes, 2010).

Within Guatemala, Aura Cumes, Gladys Tzul Tzul, and Irma Alicia Velázquez Nimatuj have articulated a distinctly Mayan decolonial feminism. Cumes (2012) exposes how both state structures and Western feminism perpetuate colonial violence by assuming the universality of the Western subject. She calls instead for an *epistemología del nosotros* — an epistemology of “we,” grounded in collective rather than individual experience. Tzul Tzul’s (2015) sociology of *gobierno comunal indígena* (Indigenous communal governance) offers a political framework that centers Indigenous women not as victims but as authorities within systems of mutual care and responsibility. Velázquez Nimatuj (2019) extends this work by connecting the defense of Indigenous identity to material justice, emphasizing that language, dress, and land are not symbols but instruments of survival.

Through these thinkers, the present research aligns itself with a decolonial feminist epistemology that refuses the separation between knowing and living. In this view, theory is not produced in universities, but rather in the lived experiences of those who resist erasure. The Mayan women whose stories guide this study are themselves theorists of survival: their narratives embody what Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) calls *research-as-ceremony*. Storytelling becomes an ethical and political practice that reclaims authorship over one’s own meaning.

From this perspective, testimony is not a confession of trauma but a decolonial act of knowledge-making. When a Q’eqchi’ woman testifies in her mother tongue, surrounded by others wearing the colors of their ancestors, she reclaims her right to define reality. Her voice interrupts centuries of epistemic silence imposed by colonial science, religion, and law. In these moments, the spoken word becomes a ritual of sovereignty — what Rigoberta Menchú Tum has described as “*speaking the truth of the earth.*”

Therefore, the critique of Western trauma theory is not a rejection of its concern with suffering but of its ontology. Models developed in the aftermath of European wars — Freud’s trauma of the soldier, Caruth’s (1996) repetition of the unspeakable, Laub’s psychoanalytic witnessing — assume an individual psyche divided from the social body. Indigenous frameworks, by contrast, understand trauma as a fracture in the network of relationships that sustain life. Healing, accordingly, requires re-weaving those connections through collective ritual, reciprocity, and remembrance. This corresponds to the central premise of the War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) model: that trauma is relational, transgenerational, and political. WRSS resonates with Indigenous understandings by locating healing not in isolation but in the restoration of dignity, voice, and belonging (Rebecka, 2025).

To use Western epistemological categories to interpret these testimonies would, as Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) warns, be “an act of violence disguised as understanding.” In this context, scientific objectivity becomes a new form of conquest — a “scientific colonization of thinking” that extracts meaning while disqualifying Indigenous ways of knowing as myth or folklore. Decolonial research, therefore, demands new theories and a transformation of the researcher’s position: from interpreter to witness, from authority to participant in a shared process of remembrance (Lykes & Crosby, 2019).

In this theoretical framework, testimony itself becomes decolonial resistance. Each story told in Achi or Q’eqchi’, each *huipil* woven in ancestral motifs, each collective ritual of remembrance reasserts the continuity of Indigenous thought against the violence of erasure. These are not fragments of the past but acts of world-making — intellectual, spiritual, and political. To listen, then, is to engage in the work of decolonization: to unlearn the colonial gaze, to stand beside rather than above, and to honor the knowledge that emerges from the land, the body, and the community.

3. Literature Review- Testimony, Memory, and the Ethics of Listening

The oral traditions of Mayan women have long been central to the survival of culture and identity in Guatemala. However,

their recognition within formal scholarship emerged slowly — often at the intersection of anthropology, human rights activism, and Indigenous feminist thought. Early ethnographic research treated Mayan storytelling as folklore rather than political discourse. This began to change in the 1980s, when Guatemalan women and a few foreign anthropologists recognized that oral testimonies were themselves archives of resistance (Menchú Tum & Burgos-Debray, 1983; Falla, 1994).

Linda Green's *Fear as a Way of Life: Mayan Widows in Rural Guatemala* (1999) was one of the foundational anthropological works to document how Mayan women's everyday narratives reveal both the psychological residue of terror and the collective practices of survival. Green interpreted storytelling as a mechanism for reconstituting moral order after political violence. Similarly, in *Paradise in Ashes*, Beatriz Manz (2004) chronicled the history of the community of Santa María Tzejá, integrating women's life stories as expressions of courage and political awakening amid displacement. Victoria Sanford's *Buried Secrets* (2003) extended this work by connecting oral histories of women involved in exhumation and truth commission processes to the broader structures of impunity and the state's denial of genocide. Each of these studies acknowledged the centrality of women's voices in rebuilding collective history, even when working within Western research frameworks.

Indigenous scholars and activists have since transformed *testimonio* from a research object into a political methodology. Rigoberta Menchú Tum's *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y as íme nació la conciencia* (1983) broke the colonial boundary between anthropology and autobiography, demonstrating that the *testimonio* of an Indigenous woman could rewrite history itself. Later, Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj (2019), a K'iche' anthropologist, redefined Indigenous women's knowledge as public anthropology. Through her expert-witness testimony in the Ríos Montt and Sepur Zarco trials, Velásquez Nimatuj positioned Mayan women's oral histories as juridical truth and epistemic authority — not supplementary evidence but the foundation of justice. Her work reframed testimony from “data” into “ethical evidence,” integrating memory, law, and spirituality.

Aura Cumes (2012) and Gladys Tzul Tzul (2015) deepened this theoretical transformation. Cumes critiques Western feminism's universalism and calls for an *epistemología del nosotros* — an epistemology of “we” — in which knowledge arises from collective memory and lived reciprocity. Tzul Tzul's studies of *gobierno comunal indígena* (Indigenous communal governance) demonstrate how Mayan women exercise political authority through community structures and how storytelling itself functions as governance — a dialogical process of restoring equilibrium after disruption. These Indigenous feminist frameworks align closely with the principles of *feminismo comunitario*, articulated by Aymara theorists Julieta Paredes (2010) and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2010), who conceptualize the body and the land as intertwined territories of resistance.

Parallel to these theoretical contributions, participatory and feminist methodologies have sought to repair the extractive legacy of anthropology in Guatemala. M. Brinton Lykes and Alison Crosby's *Beyond Repair? Mayan Women's Protagonism in the Aftermath of Genocidal Harm* (2019) exemplifies long-term, co-created research based on *protagonismo* — women's self-determined agency. Through *photovoice*, dialogic workshops, and community memory projects, they co-produced testimonies with survivors rather than about them, transforming research into shared healing. Similarly, Rachel Sieder and Morna Macleod (2016) have illuminated the intersections between women's testimonies, Indigenous law, and transitional justice frameworks. Ricardo Falla's *Massacres in the Jungle* (1994), written as both priest and anthropologist, documented Ixil oral histories while respecting their cosmological worldview and ritual forms of remembrance.

Together, these scholars demonstrate that oral narratives are not peripheral to political history but central to its reconstruction. Their work reveals how Mayan women transform trauma into testimony and testimony into political action. Still, even the most progressive academic works often remain mediated through Western epistemologies that privilege the written word over the spoken one, and analysis over relationship. As Smith (2021) observes, “research has been one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world” because of its colonial history. To counter this, Indigenous scholars propose methodologies grounded in relational ethics and ceremonial knowledge — what Lykes and Crosby (2019) describe as “*accompanied research*,” and Smith (2021) calls “*research as ceremony*.”

This study extends these approaches by embracing a Mayan ethical and cosmological framework. Here, storytelling is not merely evidence but ceremony; listening becomes an act of solidarity and moral repair. The researcher's role shifts from interpreter to participant in a collective process of remembering. The ethics of listening are thus inseparable from the politics of justice — to hear is to acknowledge, and to acknowledge is to restore dignity.

In this context, testimony is not just the recounting of suffering; it is an act of sovereignty. Each word spoken in Achi, Q'eqchi', or K'iche' reclaims epistemic space that colonial institutions sought to silence. As the work of Velásquez Nimatuj (2019) and Lykes and Crosby (2019) demonstrates, these testimonies are not only vehicles for truth-telling in courtrooms but also continuations of an ancient oral covenant—the right to speak the world back into balance. To listen to

them, therefore, is to enter that covenant.

4. Research Questions

This study asks: How do Mayan women's oral testimonies—rooted in Indigenous languages, communal ethics, and spiritual relationships to the land—operate as acts of resistance and identity reclamation in the aftermath of genocide? More specifically, the article examines how testimony functions simultaneously as a healing practice, a political intervention, and an assertion of epistemic sovereignty.

5. Methodology- Oral Tradition, Identity, and Resistance

For the Mayan people, oral tradition is not merely a means of transmitting information; it is the foundation of their identity and a living covenant with their ancestors. Every story told carries an obligation — to remember, teach, and protect. Within this worldview, memory is not preserved in archives or written texts but sustained in relationships. Elders, midwives, and spiritual guides (*ajq'ijab'*) transmit knowledge through stories interweaving myth, history, and moral teaching. The spoken word possesses sacred power: it does not describe reality; it creates and maintains it. Words bind the community together and keep the cosmos in balance between the human, natural, and spiritual realms (Falla, 1994; Cumes, 2012).

From Extraction to Reciprocity- Decolonizing the Research Process

Traditional Western research methodologies — particularly those developed within anthropology and psychology — have historically treated Indigenous knowledge as objects to be *extracted*, catalogued, and interpreted by outsiders (Smith, 2021). This paradigm often reduces testimonies to “data,” stripped of context, language, and spirituality. Such practices reproduce Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) calls *colonialismo interno del saber* — the internal colonization of knowledge — where Western epistemologies claim universality while delegitimizing Indigenous ways of knowing.

This study rejects that extractive logic. Instead of collecting testimonies, it participates in their unfolding. Research becomes an act of *acompañamiento* — walking beside — and an ethical exchange rooted in *reciprocidad*, mutual care, and shared accountability. Knowledge here is not produced *about* Mayan women but *with* them, through dialogue, ritual, and co-creation (Lykes & Crosby, 2019). The aim is not to interpret their experiences through external theory but to allow theory to emerge from their own moral, spiritual, and communal frameworks. Consistent with this approach, the study makes no claim to represent other genocidal contexts; instead, it honors Mayan women's testimonies as knowledge produced within a distinct cosmological, linguistic, and historical world.

Decolonial scholars such as Smith (2021) and Lykes and Crosby (2019) have emphasized that research in Indigenous contexts must begin with humility and relationship rather than hypothesis. The Western researcher's claim to neutrality conceals a colonial stance of authority — the illusion that knowledge can be gathered without moral consequence. By contrast, Mayan epistemology insists that knowing creates obligation: to hear a story is to become responsible for its continuity and protection. As the women often reminded me, “When you listen, you carry the heart of what you have heard.” The methodology, therefore, transforms listening into an ethical act of solidarity — a way of *holding* memory rather than owning it.

Oral Testimony as Identity and Resistance

In Mayan communities, oral testimony is not merely communication, but a practice of resistance and a reaffirmation of identity. Each spoken word restores what violence attempted to erase — language, lineage, and cosmological belonging. When a survivor narrates her story in Achi, Q'eqchi', or K'iche', she reclaims epistemic territory that colonization sought to occupy. Thus, speaking becomes both political and spiritual: it re-establishes *jun winaq'* (wholeness of being) through communal recognition and reciprocity (Velázquez Nimatuj, 2019).

Unlike Western testimony, which is often understood as confession or evidence, Mayan oral storytelling resists closure. Testimony here unfolds as a spiral — returning again and again to the same moments of pain and endurance, each retelling adding new meaning. This cyclical temporality reflects the Mayan calendar and cosmology, where memory is not linear but regenerative. Speaking is a ceremony, and to speak is to heal. As Cumes (2012) notes, “*the collective voice of women is not only remembrance; it is the continuity of life itself.*”

In this sense, oral testimony is both archive and action. It resists erasure and asserts sovereignty over meaning. The narrative is not evidence of trauma but a declaration of survival, echoing Menchú Tum and Burgos-Debray's (1983) insight that to speak one's truth in one's own language is to rewrite history itself.

Relational and Ethical Framework

This study was guided by a survivor-centered, culturally grounded, trauma-informed, and decolonial ethical framework. Participants retained full agency over their stories; consent was understood not as a signed form but as an ongoing relationship built on trust and reciprocity. Within the ethics of *utz k'aslemaal* — living well and in balance — testimonies

were shared with mutual respect, and no narrative was recorded or translated without the collective agreement of all parties involved (Velázquez Nimatuj, 2019).

Trauma-informed practice draws from the Mayan concept of *k'ux*, the heart, which is the meeting place of emotion and spirit. Healing occurred not through analysis or exposure but through storytelling — through the communal act of being heard in one's own language, on one's own land (Rebecka, 2025). The researcher's role was not to diagnose but to witness, not to categorize but to co-remember.

Language was treated as sacred territory. Testimonies were delivered in Achi, Q'eqchi', and K'iche', then translated collaboratively into Spanish and later into English. Translation was approached as a ceremony — a dialogue between worlds — requiring cultural accuracy, reciprocity, and moral care (Smith, 2021). Many expressions — such as *nab'e k'ux* (the first heart) or *jun winaq'* (complete person) — were intentionally untranslated to preserve their epistemic depth and spiritual resonance. As Velázquez Nimatuj (2019) asserts, "*our words are our first territory*." Preserving linguistic sovereignty was therefore an act of justice.

Researcher Obligation and Reflexivity

In this methodological framework, reflexivity is not an academic formality but a moral responsibility. To engage with survivors' testimonies is to enter a reciprocal covenant: the researcher becomes a carrier of memory and, by extension, a witness accountable to the community. Following Smith's (2021) principle of *research as ceremony*, every interaction was guided by respect, transparency, and acknowledgment of power dynamics.

Fieldwork unfolded according to Mayan temporality, aligned with agricultural and ritual calendars, recognizing that knowledge cannot be detached from time, place, or ceremony (Cumes, 2012). Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) reminds us that practicing decolonial research means "unlearning the gaze of control." Accordingly, I positioned myself not as an observer but as a participant — present in ceremonies, silences, and daily acts of care.

This approach rejects the notion of the researcher as a neutral intermediary and instead embraces the role of a relational witness. Knowledge born from shared vulnerability carries transformative potential. The methodology thus becomes both epistemological and ethical—an act of resistance to academic extraction and a commitment to restoring dignity through co-created memory.

Through this decolonial methodology, oral testimony functions as both a site of healing and an assertion of sovereignty. It challenges the epistemic violence of Western research traditions while affirming Indigenous modes of knowing as living, relational, and resistant. To tell a story is to resist disappearance; to listen is to assume responsibility. This, in essence, is research not as extraction but as accompaniment — a process of remembering with, rather than about, the *ixqib'*, the women of the word.

Positionality and Researcher Reflexivity

As a non-Indigenous researcher trained in trauma studies and decolonial methodologies, my engagement with Mayan communities required an ongoing examination of power, history, and responsibility. My own family history of war-related violence sensitized me to the moral weight of testimony, yet I remained an outsider to the cultural cosmology that sustains Mayan life. Throughout this work, I positioned myself not as an interpreter of Indigenous experience but as a witness invited into ceremonial and relational knowledge. The testimonies shared with me emerged through trust, reciprocity, and community guidance, and my role was to carry them with humility and fidelity rather than to translate them into external theoretical frames.

Data, Sources, and the Mayan Women's Fight for Justice

This study draws upon fourteen life testimonies of Mayan women from Alta Verapaz and Baja Verapaz, Guatemala — twelve narrated in Indigenous Mayan languages (*Achi*, *Q'eqchi'*, and *K'iche'*) and two in Spanish. The participants, aged forty-seven to eighty-nine, were all children or young women when they experienced sexual violence at the hands of Guatemalan soldiers or Civil Self-Defense Patrols during the early 1980s. For most of their lives, these women remained silent, bound by the convergence of trauma, colonial religion, and patriarchal norms that branded their suffering as shameful.

In many Mayan communities, where Catholicism was layered onto ancestral cosmology, speaking about sexual violence was considered *pecado* — a sin — that risked moral exclusion and divine punishment. Silence, therefore, was both a protection and a form of imprisonment, reinforced by a social order that conflated purity with virtue and survival with silence (Velázquez Nimatuj, 2019; Rebecka, 2025).

Nevertheless, silence in Mayan cosmology carries dual meanings: it can both shield and await transformation. Indigenous women's movements across Guatemala have broken this imposed quiet in the past two decades, transforming silence into a collective voice. Their actions reopened ancestral channels of justice that link speech with balance and truth. The

emergence of the Mayan women's justice movement — spearheaded by organizations such as CONAVIGUA (*Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala*), Mujeres Transformando el Mundo, the Red de Mujeres Ixiles, and the Asociación de Mujeres Achi — marked a turning point in the nation's moral history (Cumes, 2012; Tzul Tzul, 2015).

Sepur Zarco- Reclaiming the Court as Sacred Space

The courage of the Q'eqchi' women of Sepur Zarco ignited this transformation. Enslaved and repeatedly assaulted at a military outpost during the war, they began in the late 1990s to gather in secret, guided by Indigenous leaders and feminists such as Rosalina Tuyuc, Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj, and Aura Cumes. Their whispered recollections evolved into public testimony that would change Guatemala's legal landscape.

In 2016, a High-Risk Court convicted two former officers of crimes against humanity and sexual slavery — the first time in history that a national tribunal recognized wartime rape as an instrument of genocide. The women testified in Q'eqchi', flanked by interpreters who were themselves survivors and advocates. Candles burned on the courtroom floor; ancestral cloths covered the tables; prayer opened each day of the proceedings. For a brief moment, the state's most colonial institution became a ceremonial house of truth (Lykes & Crosby, 2019; Velásquez Nimatuj, 2019).

Inspired by Sepur Zarco, Maya Achi women from Rabinal pursued their own path to justice. They, too, had been raped and tortured by Civil Patrollers in the early 1980s. For decades, they were silenced by fear and stigma, until alliances with Impunity Watch, Mujeres Transformando el Mundo, and other local collectives enabled them to reclaim their voices.

In January 2022, a Guatemalan court convicted five ex-patrollers; in May 2025, a second verdict condemned three more to forty-year sentences. These trials, conducted with Achi-language interpretation and supported by expert testimony from Velásquez Nimatuj (2019) and Cumes (2012), recognized sexual violence as a weapon of cultural annihilation. The women entered the courtroom wearing their *traje* — the woven embodiment of lineage and territory — transforming dress into declaration. Their words re-inscribe Indigenous presence within a system that once denied it (Manz, 2004; Sanford, 2003).

The victories of Sepur Zarco and Maya Achi reverberated through the highlands and river valleys. For many survivors who had endured decades of silence, these cases signaled that speaking out was no longer a betrayal but a duty. In the Mayan moral imagination, justice is not the punishment of the enemy but the restoration of equilibrium — the return of dignity to those who suffered and to the land that witnessed their suffering (Falla, 1994).

As survivors from these landmark trials became symbols of moral authority, other women began to step forward, encouraged by the possibility that their words, too, could heal history. The movement of speech thus became a political and spiritual act — a testimony that served as a ceremony, a form of resistance, and an intergenerational repair (Cumes, 2012; Rebecka, 2025).

Fieldwork and Context of Data Collection

This research took place within this new horizon of voice. The fourteen women who shared their stories with this study had closely followed the court cases through community radio and local gatherings. Several told me that hearing their sisters speak in Q'eqchi' and Achi before national judges gave them the courage to “open the heart.” They said, “When they spoke, the earth listened; now we must speak too.”

Fieldwork was conducted through multiple visits to Nebaj, San Juan Cotzal, and Chajhul communities. Conversations took place in kitchens, courtyards, and beneath ceiba trees — spaces the women chose where they felt safe and connected to their ancestral presence. The process followed the Mayan principle of *acompañamiento* — to walk beside — rather than the extractive logic of interviews common in Western ethnography (Smith, 2021). Dialogue was slow, relational, and interwoven with ceremony. Sometimes, the women chose to speak collectively, weaving individual memories into a single communal narrative.

Translation was entrusted to a Mayan survivor-advocate, a woman of profound moral authority within her community. She translated testimonies from Achi, Q'eqchi', and K'iche' into Spanish during the gatherings, preserving the idiomatic nuance and spiritual references. Later, professional recordings were rendered into English, with continuous consultation to ensure cultural accuracy. Certain expressions — such as *nab'e k'ux* (the first heart), *utz k'aslemal* (the good life in balance), and *jun winaq'* (the complete person) — were left untranslated to honor their epistemic depth (Velásquez Nimatuj, 2019; Cumes, 2012).

Each participant decided how her narrative would appear — anonymously or through symbolic identifiers linked to her community or weaving pattern. The women regarded this as a continuation of the justice struggle: to name their truth in their own words, languages, and forms. Speaking was no longer a sin but a ceremonial act of justice, echoing the examples of Sepur Zarco and Rabinal.

For the women who spoke in this study, testimony was not a confession but a re-entry into moral order. One participant

said, “We speak so our granddaughters will live without hiding.” Their words form a continuum that connects ancestral oral tradition, community ritual, and contemporary human rights law. The state’s recognition of genocide in the courts has not ended impunity, but it has opened a sacred and political space where Mayan women reclaim authority over their stories (Tzul Tzul, 2015).

The fourteen narratives gathered here thus belong to a larger movement of truth that began in the villages, reached the tribunals, and then returned home transformed. They illustrate how the Mayan concept of justice — *utz k’aslemaal*, the restoration of balance — can be incorporated into modern legal frameworks without losing its spiritual essence. To speak one’s truth in one’s own language is both resistance and renewal. These women, like those of Sepur Zarco and Rabinal, have become part of a collective genealogy of courage, serving as keepers of memory who transform pain into law, silence into ceremony, and testimony into a path toward restored dignity (Rebecka, 2025; Velázquez Nimatuj, 2019).

6. Discussion- Global Parallels and Epistemic Sovereignty

The brief references to other post-conflict contexts are not intended to suggest a universal model of healing or trauma. Rather, they underscore how radically different epistemologies generate distinct pathways to meaning, justice, and repair. In contrast to Western legal-clinical paradigms that dominate global discourse, Mayan women’s testimonies demonstrate a cosmology-specific mode of resistance grounded in land-based ontology and communal continuity.

The stories of Mayan women survivors of sexual violence in Guatemala are not isolated. They echo the experiences of women across continents who have lived through wars that sought not merely to control territory but to annihilate identity. In Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Bosnia-Herzegovina, as in Guatemala, women’s bodies became symbolic battlegrounds where ethnicity, gender, and power converged. Yet in each context, women have transformed those assaults into sources of collective strength, memory, and moral authority (Mukwege & Nangini, 2009; Rebecka, 2025).

As political theorist Hannah Arendt (2006) observed, the machinery of violence in modern states depends on the normalization of moral indifference — what she termed the “banality of evil.” In Guatemala, as in Rwanda and Bosnia, this bureaucratic detachment allowed sexual violence to become policy rather than excess. Similarly, Baaz and Stern (2013) demonstrate that in the Congo, rape operates not merely as an individual crime but as an instrument of governance and domination — one that reflects and reproduces the gendered hierarchies of the colonial and military order.

In Rwanda, survivors of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, particularly those organized through the association AVEGA Agahozo, transformed trauma into social reconstruction. Their testimonies before the *Gacaca* courts and truth-telling circles did not merely recount violence; they reconstituted communal dignity and transmitted moral lessons to future generations (Burnet, 2012). In the eastern DRC, women’s groups working with the Panzi Foundation, under the leadership of Dr. Denis Mukwege, have likewise reframed healing as collective activism, in which the restoration of the body is inseparable from the reclaiming of land, education, and political voice (Mukwege & Nangini, 2009). In Bosnia, survivors of the “rape camps” in Foča and Višegrad have fought for recognition that sexual violence was not incidental but systematic — a weapon of ethnic cleansing aimed at the destruction of community lineage (Skjelsbæk, 2012; Stiglmayer, 1994).

Across these geographies, a shared pattern emerges: sexual violence in war is deployed as a deliberate tool of domination that attacks the cultural and spiritual foundations of the group. In each case, women have responded through legal action and cultural preservation — reviving languages, crafts, songs, and community rituals that reaffirm their sense of belonging. The Mayan women’s struggle in Guatemala stands within this transnational lineage of resilience yet contributes a distinctive cosmological and decolonial dimension (Velázquez Nimatuj, 2019; Cumes, 2012).

In Guatemala, as in other colonized societies, the violence inflicted upon women’s bodies carried a double charge: it was both gendered and racialized. The Guatemalan army’s campaign against Mayan communities was an extension of centuries of colonial rule that had feminized Indigenous land and culture, treating both as property to be conquered. Rape functioned as a ritual of power, asserting not only military domination but also the supremacy of the *ladino*, Christian, patriarchal order over Indigenous womanhood and cosmology (Sanford, 2003; Manz, 2004).

The intergenerational echoes of this violence — the shame, silence, and rupture in kinship — mirror those in other postcolonial contexts. Yet in Mayan thought, trauma is never confined to the psyche; it circulates through the collective body. When the relationship between person, land, and spirit is broken, the entire web of life suffers. This cosmological understanding reframes trauma transmission as imbalance rather than pathology. Healing, therefore, cannot occur through individual therapy or diagnostic labeling; it must involve re-weaving social, ecological, and spiritual ties (Rebecka, 2025).

This view stands in sharp contrast to Western trauma models, which have historically pathologized survivors by isolating their pain from its historical and political roots. The language of “disorder” — post-traumatic stress disorder, depression,

or anxiety — individualizes suffering and erases its colonial genealogy (Caruth, 1996). By contrast, Mayan women understand recovery as the restoration of dignity through collective action: telling the story, participating in ceremonies, replanting corn, wearing the *traje*, and teaching the language to children. These acts are simultaneously therapeutic and political, embodying living memory that transforms survival into resistance (Velázquez Nimatuj, 2019; Cumes, 2012).

When Mayan women narrate their experiences in *Achi* or *Q'eqchi'*, they reframe the concept of healing. Their testimonies are not confessions to be analyzed but sacred exchanges reaffirming continuity between past and future, body and land, self and community. Silence, often pathologized in Western clinical settings as repression, is in Mayan epistemology a strategy of protection — a holding of the sacred until the right time to speak. Similarly, the recurrence of dreams, visions, and ancestral presence in their narratives cannot be reduced to symptoms of post-traumatic memory; they are manifestations of a cosmology in which the dead and the living coexist, where guidance and justice flow through the spiritual realm (Falla, 1994; Lykes & Crosby, 2019).

This worldview challenges the epistemic authority of Western psychology and anthropology, exposing how “objective” research has often acted as scientific colonization — extracting Indigenous stories and reinterpreting them within frameworks that deny their spiritual and political dimensions (Smith, 2021; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010). The insistence on categorizing Mayan women’s suffering through Eurocentric diagnoses perpetuates the very silencing that the women resist. To honor their knowledge, research must relinquish its claim to universality and allow Indigenous epistemologies to shape both the questions and the methods of inquiry (Tzul Tzul, 2015; Rebecka, 2025).

At the core of these reflections lies the principle of epistemic sovereignty — the right of a people to define the nature of their own wounds and the paths toward their healing. This sovereignty arises from the interconnection between language, land, and spirit in Mayan philosophy. To name trauma in *Achi* or *Q'eqchi'* is to place it within a moral universe governed by reciprocity, not pathology. Healing thus becomes the restoration of *utz k'aslemal* — harmony and right living — rather than a return to an illusory normal (Velázquez Nimatuj, 2019; Cumes, 2012).

Epistemic sovereignty also entails reclaiming authority over narrative. When survivors speak in their own language and on their own terms, they assert control over the boundaries of meaning — deciding what may be shared, what must remain sacred, and how the story should be told. Their testimonies become acts of decolonial authorship, rewriting both national history and the anthropology of trauma itself (Smith, 2021; Rebecka, 2025).

In this light, the fourteen testimonies gathered in this study belong to a much larger global movement of women who refuse to be defined by others’ categories. From the hills of Rabinal to the valleys of Rwanda, from Bukavu to Srebrenica, survivors of sexual violence are crafting new grammars of justice. They transform trauma from an individual affliction into a collective and political force for renewal.

For Mayan women, justice and healing remain inextricably linked to land, community, and ancestral continuity. Their voices remind the world that survival is not the end of suffering but the beginning of sovereignty — the reclamation of the right to name, speak, and exist on their own terms.

7. Conclusion- Testimony as Justice, Memory as Survival

The voices of the fourteen Mayan women who entrusted their stories to this research remind us that testimony is not merely speech, but also a ceremony, a form of resistance, and a means of continuity. To tell a story in *Achi*, *Q'eqchi'*, or *K'iche'* is to weave memory into the living fabric of community — to affirm that identity cannot be destroyed even when bodies and villages are violated. Their words are not confessions of pain but offerings of truth, spoken in the moral language of *utz k'aslemal* — the balanced life in harmony with people, ancestors, and land (Cumes, 2012; Velázquez Nimatuj, 2019). Each narrative stands as both remembrance and defiance: a declaration that the colonizer’s silencing project has failed (Smith, 2021; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010).

Through these testimonies, cultural continuity becomes a form of political endurance. Breaking a silence sanctified by fear and religious guilt restores dignity to individuals and the collective. These women’s stories, like their weaving and rituals, are repositories of ancestral wisdom. They transform memory into a living archive that transmits values of solidarity, resilience, and care across generations. Mayan women offer another possibility in a world that often reduces trauma to symptoms: remembrance as regeneration and storytelling as a form of moral repair (Rebecka, 2025; Falla, 1994).

Politically, these testimonies enact justice where institutional systems have faltered. When states deny accountability and courts delay truth, the women’s words become tribunals of conscience. Their oral histories are parallel courts — spaces where the authority to define harm and reparation belongs to those who endured it. In this sense, testimony functions as *justice in practice*, grounded in Mayan cosmology rather than Western law. Speaking becomes an act of self-determination that reclaims the right to interpret history and to reimagine justice beyond retribution (Lykes & Crosby, 2019; Tzul Tzul, 2015).

Nevertheless, such voices remain vulnerable. The archives of Indigenous women’s memory — recorded, oral, or

embodied — are under threat from the same forces that once sought to erase them: extractive research, digital appropriation, political neglect, and cultural commodification. Protecting these archives is an ethical imperative and a form of reparative action. To safeguard them, researchers must recognize the women who hold these memories as history authors, not as study subjects (Smith, 2021; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010).

Supporting survivor-led storytelling initiatives, Indigenous research collectives, and community-based archives is essential to ensuring that future generations inherit more than trauma — they inherit truth. Projects led by Mayan women, grounded in language revitalization, ritual remembrance, and artistic expression, represent the next stage of justice: a justice that listens, remembers, and restores (Cumes, 2012; Rebecka, 2025).

Ultimately, the testimonies of Mayan women are not relics of past violence but seeds of continuity. They carry the ancestral conviction that the spoken word can reorder the world. One participant said, “When we speak, Mother Earth hears us.” In that simple sentence lies the essence of decolonial healing: transforming pain into presence, silence into song, and memory into a map for future generations (Velázquez Nimatuj, 2019; Falla, 1994).

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In Mayan understanding, spirit, land, and word are inseparable. In this spirit, I honor the women who call themselves *Ixoqib' tzij*—women of the word—whose voices carry ancestral strength and moral clarity across generations. Their stories are not only memories of suffering, but expressions of life that continue to resist erasure.

K'ux ri qachoch', k'ux ri ulew, k'ux ri ixoqi'.

(The heart of the home, the heart of the earth, the heart of the women.)

This work is offered in respect to their spirit, their ancestors, and the living web of relations that sustains them.

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Glossary of Key Mayan Concepts

Achi / Q'eqchi' / K'iche'

Mayan languages are spoken in the highlands and lowlands of Guatemala. These languages are not merely communicative systems but carriers of cosmology, ethics, and relational ontology. Testimonies delivered in these languages situate memory, justice, and healing within a Mayan moral universe that cannot be fully translated into Spanish or English without loss of meaning.

Ajq'ij (pl. Ajq'ijab')

A Mayan spiritual guide and ceremonial timekeeper responsible for maintaining balance between human, natural, and spiritual realms. Ajq'ijab' interpret the Mayan calendar, conduct rituals, and guide communal healing practices. Their role reflects the Mayan understanding that trauma and restoration are collective and cosmological processes rather than individual psychological events.

Ixoqib' tzij

Literally “women of the word.” A self-designation used by Mayan women who speak publicly about lived experiences of violence, survival, and continuity. The term emphasizes moral authority, responsibility, and relational truth-telling rather than confession or victimhood. Speaking (*tzij*) is understood as a generative act that restores balance and transmits life.

Jun winaq'

Often translated inadequately as “whole person” or “complete human being.” Jun winaq' refers to a state of integrated existence in which body, heart, spirit, community, ancestors, and land remain in balance. Sexual violence and genocide are understood as assaults on jun winaq', fracturing relational integrity rather than producing individual pathology.

K'aslemal

A Mayan concept referring to the living web of existence that binds humans, land, ancestors, animals, and spiritual forces into a single relational field. There is no equivalent term in Western languages separating “nature” from humanity. Trauma, within this framework, is a rupture in k'aslemal, requiring collective and ceremonial restoration.

Nab'e k'ux

Literally “the first heart.” A concept referring to the ancestral, moral, and emotional center inherited through lineage and collective memory. Nab'e k'ux connects present experience to ancestral presence, shaping how suffering, dreams, silence, and testimony are understood. It reflects a cosmology in which the past remains active within the living.

Utz k'aslemal

Often rendered as “good living” or “life in balance,” though such translations are incomplete. Utz k'aslemal denotes an ethical order grounded in reciprocity, dignity, and harmony among people, land, and spiritual forces. Justice, within this framework, is not punitive but restorative—aimed at re-establishing equilibrium rather than assigning blame.

Acompañamiento

A relational ethic meaning “walking beside.” In Mayan and decolonial feminist practice, acompañamiento rejects extractive research and hierarchical expertise. It emphasizes shared presence, moral responsibility, and long-term commitment. To accompany is not to interpret or intervene, but to witness, carry memory, and remain accountable to the community.

Note on Translation and Epistemic Sovereignty

Many of the concepts listed here are intentionally left untranslated or only partially translated. This reflects the position of this study, which holds that Mayan epistemologies cannot be reduced to Western analytical categories without reproducing epistemic violence. Language is understood as a form of territory; preserving its integrity is therefore an act of justice.