

Responding to Crisis through Healing and Transformation: A Case Study of Kaqla Maya Women's Group in Guatemala

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Abstract: Founded in 1996, Kaqla is a network of primarily Maya indigenous women in Guatemala who organized to challenge the patriarchal society that kept them under a veil of oppression and violence during decades of internal conflicts. Members of Kaqla define it as a social movement with special emphasis on transformation, both personal and social, through political analysis and healing as its foundation. This paper is about the philosophy and practice of adult education at Kaqla. This is part of a larger ethnographic study on how healing has led to personal and social transformation for indigenous women in Guatemala.

Introduction

The year 1996 marked the long-anticipated end to Guatemala's 36-year internal armed conflict, which saw the assassination of more than 200,000 people, thousands more forcibly disappeared and over 1.5 million internally displaced (United Nations, 1997). During this time women were victims of rape and sexual violence; they were kidnapped, tortured and murdered. According to the survivors of the March 1982 massacre of Rio Negro where close to 200 women and children were killed, indigenous women were accused of siding with the guerrilla forces; they were humiliated and systematically marched to their mass grave (personal communication with Iboy, an indigenous Maya Achi man who survived the massacre). When this violence was supposed to end with the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords, the country was facing a new crisis: what needs to be done in times of peace? For some, this crisis emerged as a time of creativity and change. As a response to the shifting political climate, indigenous women began to meet and organize as a means to challenge the patriarchal society that kept them under a veil of oppression and violence. Healing became a key component of this organizing as a way to better understand their shared and personal experiences. The women's use of holistic healing approaches allowed them to better situate themselves as political actors in a society that had not acknowledged them in the past.

In this context, the *Grupo de Mujeres Mayas Kaqla* (Kaqla Maya Women's Group - Kaqla) was created as a group of Maya indigenous women working for and with other indigenous women. Their work places a special focus on healing all forms of oppression and violence. "Oppression goes further than political, cultural, social and economic conditions, it affects our authentic self, our potentials, our emotional and spiritual self, and in order to overcome these effects and traumas, it isn't enough to do a theoretical or political analysis. We must transcend" (Grupo de Mujeres Mayas Kaqla, 2004). Kaqla is a "space and possibility to be and do politics in another way" (Grupo de Mujeres Mayas Kaqla, 2004). The group has written five publications since its inception and their work is rooted in transformation, both personal and social, through emancipatory cultural changes.

Despite the growing number of studies focused on healing, there is little research that focuses on how indigenous women use healing as a tool for political empowerment and subsequently, to make transformative changes in their life. Although some studies show the importance and connection between social justice and healing (Haines, 2009; Shilling 2001), research, which explores the experiences of indigenous women in the Guatemalan context is lacking. This paper is a brief report of a larger ethnographic study that seeks to bridge this gap, examining how healing has led to personal and

social transformation for indigenous women in Guatemala. The study is a result of 8 years of work and observation in Guatemala, documentation review and key informant interviews.

Here, we introduce and discuss the work of Kaqla through the eyes and words of *Abelina*, a young and an active member of the group who welcomed the opportunity to share her learning and experiences with Kaqla since early on. She began by emphasizing Kaqla's focus on transformative learning through a reflective practice in challenging the local and national systems of oppression. According to Abelina, women with different perspectives and life experiences have joined Kaqla. She remembered that when women began to meet in Kaqla, there was a clash between so-called traditional indigenous women and non-traditional indigenous women; there was also a clash between the young and the old. Her first recollection was about her dilemma in using indigenous dress, "*traje*", which she had stopped wearing because it drew racist remarks in public. As soon as she joined Kaqla and participated in their gatherings, she was sure to wear it. "*Ni de loca* - not even crazy - would I go without it," she said; although she was initially unsure what other women might say or think about her. She said that she was confident that she had the rights, and that her *traje* was important, but every time she put it on, she felt like they (society) were going to attack her, or discriminate her. She continued,

"We knew our rights and what inequality is, but our heart and head have different ways of being...I knew that wearing my *traje* was right, but I was still afraid and too rational [to start wearing it]... I started wearing my *traje* once every part of body, my centre, felt like I could do it".

Her emphasis on this story is because wearing *traje* has brought up questions about the homogenization of indigenous women: what they should wear and how they should act; and has engendered important conversations and debates about racism, ethnicity, and culture in the group. For Abelina, this was part of allowing and acknowledging feelings and emotions as part of a healing process by Kaqla women.

Kaqla's Practice of Adult Education

Indigenous writers in the global north write about the need to include self-determination and liberation of a People and of a Nation in their own personal liberation (Ouellette 2002; St. Denis 2007). When Kaqla formed, the women began to engage in processes which allowed them to imagine an organization for Maya women. After initially coming together in 1996, they had done a needs-assessment by 1998 with 35 women to see how they should proceed and created a long-term work plan (Grupo de Mujeres Mayas Kaqla, 2006). During this process, they began with a humanistic philosophy for their education, and later called it holistic humanistic education; "We wanted to include everything," Abelina emphasized. The process helped the women identify what they wanted to focus on, which led them from theoretical conversations to incorporating healing processes. Things started to change when the women began to talk about how racism hurt them, how their feeling of inferiority by oppression affected them, and how they got sick because of resentment. "And there were times when we began to cry together," (Abelina) when the women talked about how they lived through sexual violence. "We were already conscious about our rights, about inequality, and we knew we needed to start taking the shape of a new kind of leadership" (Abelina).

In 1999, Kaqla started creating leadership and training processes for Maya women, which focused on reflecting on diverse kinds of oppression, developing Maya women's leadership and contributing to building a way of thinking based on the history, philosophy and practices of Maya culture and universal

knowledge (Grupo de Mujeres Mayas Kaqla, 2002, p. 7). Through a “political healing” process, the women worked to understand and deconstruct the impacts of colonialism, the domination of cultural beliefs and values and the role of government in perpetuating oppression and definitions of liberation. In 2000 and 2001, healing became an essential tool in their leadership training (Grupo de Mujeres Mayas Kaqla, 2002, p. 7).

‘Political healing’ is necessary, which for Kaqla implied creating spaces and incorporating group therapies to talk and heal emotional, spiritual and energy traumas generated by oppression. *Encuentros de Formación* (trainings) constitute apt spaces to break the silence of the “great secrets of Maya women.” It’s about reflecting beginning with memory, theoretical analysis and awakening our body memory, through energy exercises (Grupo de Mujeres Mayas Kaqla, 2006, p.7).

The training sessions used a methodology that Kaqla had worked to create since its inception. Despite the strong indigenous movement in Guatemala, the experts, the women of Kaqla first looked to were typically men and Mestiza women or foreigners. This was also the case as they experimented with different healing practices; the women of Kaqla introduced bodywork into their healing, including Reiki, yoga and breathing techniques. Though, they initially looked outward for expertise and guidance, once they had more practice and deepened their learning, they began to look inward and connect with indigenous methods that would help them both in healing and political analysis. Abelina remembers, “[healing] was like an oasis...we worked through violence, the war...religion. We took it all in...but then it was our turn to become teachers”. The women came to use a distinctly indigenous approach, appropriate for the Maya women involved with the group.

With the purpose of recuperating a humane spirituality, Kaqla generated spaces of spiritual connection with the Heart of the Sky, Heart of the Earth, the energy of the universe, divine light and universal love. Thus, we incorporate elements of practices of Maya spirituality, which respects diverse ideologies, practices and beliefs (Grupo de Mujeres Mayas Kaqla, 2006, p. 8).

Incorporating elements of Maya cosmology was an integral part of their experience and has proven to be an opportunity to connect with elders in their communities. Abelina notes, “Cosmology is the network of life...a possibility to no longer only look at myself, to look at my belly button, but to see myself as part of the universe”. She emphasizes that the re-valuing of Maya cosmology has transformed her relationship with other women”. In 2009, Kaqla published, “Mujeres Mayas: Universo y Vida,” (Maya Women: Universe and Life) a compilation of interviews with indigenous women elders. The book is a collection of stories intended to honour and value the life and work of indigenous women. Abelina explains that diversity and the acceptance of difference has been an important aspect of Kaqla; “difference is explicit in Kaqla. Every new woman that joins will change how we work and are together”. Abelina as a young lesbian Maya woman has been accepted in the group, but she says that she still needs “lesbian spaces, and spaces to nourish her artistic self. “I am not only a Maya woman; I am an artist, a youth, so I need other spaces to nourish me. And that’s okay”, she concluded.

Transformative Learning through Healing and Political Action

Holst (2009) writes about broadening the understanding and use of education and training and its possible contributions to social justice. Likewise, Vella (2002) writes extensively about adult learning and notes that, “effective adult education is political” (p.77). Indeed, Kaqla’s approach to adult

education is political. At the heart of the group's decolonization process is transformation and liberation; as they deconstruct oppressive colonial structures and participate in processes of critical reflection, personal and social changes have emerged.

Kaqla women seek a radical transformation of the systems that govern their lives. Cranton (1994, p. 16) writes, "Emancipatory learning, then, is a process of freeing ourselves from forces that limit our options and our control over our lives, forces that have been taken for granted or seen as beyond our control". Mezirow (1991) also discusses liberation and its connection to transformation, and Brookfield examines how ruptures can "jerk people into awareness of how life could be different" (2005, p. 200). Likewise, Chovenac, Ellis and Lange (2008) write,

"Emancipatory, liberatory, radical or critical adult education is a form of adult education that is generally a response against repression, poverty, oppression and injustice and a struggle for justice and equality. Critical learning attempts to foster an individual's consciousness of himself or herself as situated within larger political or economic forces and to act upon those forces for social change" (p. 188).

Since the beginning, Kaqla's main goal has been to "transform the situation of oppression of Maya women, looking for profound social and political changes, through formation processes and constructing new dynamics of thought from the point of view of Maya women, based on Maya history, cosmology and culture as well as universal knowledge" (Grupo de Mujeres Mayas Kaqla, 2010, p. 9). To do so, they have applied gender, ethnic and class analysis to deconstruct the oppressive system in which the vast majority of indigenous Maya women live. Using this analysis, coupled with healing practices, has led to transformative learning. This transformation leads to a strengthening in political leadership and work towards social justice.

Kaqla: Feminist, Indigenous, or Both?

Abelina characterizes Kaqla as both a feminist and indigenous movement. Indigenous author Ouellette (2002) offers a distinct indigenous perspective on feminism through history and present day analysis. She notes how liberal, Marxist, radical and socialist feminism do not represent aboriginal women, and in fact, she considers Western feminist thought to be racist. Ouellette gives examples of this throughout the history of the feminist movement and notes that an indigenous worldview may not be in accord with any kind of traditional feminism. Ouellette looks at the impacts of colonialism, the domination of cultural beliefs and values, and the role of government in perpetuating oppression and definitions of liberation. This is also the framework within which Kaqla works.

Through their dialogical and learning circles and workshops, Kaqla women engages in discussions on political changes and alternatives to the status quo, which currently is a political hierarchy and culture that promotes violence, oppression and discrimination. Kaqla members, each, have their own way of describing the group. Abelina notes, "We're post-colonialists". She goes on to say that it depends on each member's *formación* (previous training or upbringing). She continues, "But we share our own cultural understanding on body work, medicinal plants, any knowledge that can be used to protect the network of life".

Personal transformation is at the core of the work of Kaqla. "If we want to eradicate oppression, we can and should exterminate the oppressor that is in each of us. We can't change what's around us if we don't change ourselves" (Grupo de Mujeres Mayas Kaqla, 2006, p. 13). Abelina also believes that one must

take personal responsibility for the changes that happen in one's life and situation. In the Guatemalan context, because of the implications of internalized oppression and paternalistic charity which has permeated Guatemalan civil society organizations following the signing of the Peace Accords, indigenous women are referred to as poor and helpless. Kaqla works to debunk that myth and help women take charge of their own lives, especially in the context of a patriarchal society that both blames women for the situation they are in and prevents them for seeking out their own solutions. "The work of Kaqla is to strengthen people and tell them, you are responsible for your own life. We tell our husbands, our sons, our community, our god that they are responsible" (Abelina).

Healing: A Challenge or an Opportunity?

For Abelina a challenge for Kaqla has been a constant feeling of being judged by others:

"As an organization, this is what has been challenging: having an organization where we incorporate tools because amongst ourselves, we are too demanding, we are perfectionists... We have done amazing things, but it's interesting that we haven't been able to share how much we've learned and grown for fear of being judged or not being perfect".

In the cases where Kaqla has chosen to share their learning, for example through their publications, they have been subject to harsh criticism. In particular, the publication of their book, "La palabra y sentir de las Mujeres Mayas de Kaqla" (trans. "Word and Feeling of the Maya Women of Kaqla", 2004) raised a lot of discussion and judgment in the social movement community, challenging Kaqla for incorporating healing as part of their mandate for political action for liberation. According to Abelina, since its beginning, many people, including the NGO community and indigenous women who knew of Kaqla peripherally criticized Kaqla for concentrating on healing and therapeutic processes. The women of Kaqla took this critique seriously and for a short period of time dropped healing from their work. Abelina remembers others outside the group saying:

'They give them money so they can do their therapy...so they can go and cry'. Others said, 'They are only receiving, they aren't giving anything back.' We were focusing on healing but by this point, we had lost our political orientation... Kaqla wasn't created to do healing...So, we decided to stop the healing processes".

Though, some members saw the practice of healing as a waste of time, others began to consider it as an important step of a political process and helped reintegrate healing into the work of Kaqla and brought Kaqla to a full circle. Abelina refers to this period of questions and debates over the place of healing in their practice as Kaqla's special and important struggle. As a result of this challenge Abelina said "We were transformed and we related to people differently".

Conclusion

Kaqla is a political organization for Maya women, which was created to explore the impacts of internalized oppression on the indigenous population in Guatemala. It is a space where Maya women can come together to share ideas, debate and reflect. By analysing and understanding the historical implications of internalized oppression on indigenous peoples, the members of Kaqla incorporate mind-body-spirit healing practices aimed at healing past traumas and historical memory. Kaqla believes that healing is a necessary step in a holistic process to overcome the impacts of gender, class and ethnic oppression at a personal and social level. When healing and transformation happens, a person and a

group of people can propose new and creative ways of living and being in the world, which honour and respect indigenous culture, knowledge and history.

By learning how history has been told through a racist lens over generations, indigenous peoples can begin to deconstruct the impacts of colonization, heal from this history of violence and creatively imagine a new existence. “It’s our responsibility to recover our history. What pride, what self-esteem, and what identity are our children going to have if we don’t start to tell our story?” (Grupo de Mujeres Mayas Kaqla, 2006, p. 13). Kaqla believes it is important to use a myriad of healing techniques and practices, which they have learned from outside facilitators and indigenous teachers. They incorporate the use of Maya knowledge and traditions as a foundational element in their work. In many cases, re-connecting to their Maya cosmology and spirituality has been one of the most important and meaningful aspects of their participation within the group.

For Abelina, it is difficult to say how Kaqla will evolve. Many women have participated. They have changed their way of thinking and working. There have been ruptures and others have come back. There are many seeds that have been sown. Personally, she will continue to participate for Kaqla continues to nourish her as it has always been her source. “I can’t be without Kaqla because it’s where I go to think, re-examine... I learn, I evolve, my comrades challenge me... [Kaqla] gives me everything” says Abelina.

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