**“*This present relationship and its beauty*…”**

**Indigenous Youth Activism and Desire-based Research**

**in the Postcolonial Caribbean**

Submitted by:

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[INSERT IMAGE 1]

A Maya community in Toledo District, Southern Belize

# Toledo District, Belize: The “Sounding of the Conch Shell” Maya Youth Gathering

The conch shell is a tool that has been used by the Maya for generations to invite people to attend a community meeting. The shell is sounded by a person appointed by an Alcalde (traditional Maya leader) and when the reverberations of the conch echo across the landscape villagers are signalled to make their way to the collective gathering. Historically, these gatherings have been referred to as an *ab’ink* by the Maya. At an *ab’ink*, participants are given the opportunity express their concerns on matters affecting their communities. This practice of sounding the conch shell to call people together to an *ab’ink* is what we symbolically adapted for our initial “Sounding of the Conch Shell” (SOCS) Youth Camp.

The camp was conceived by a group of young Maya organisers committed to raising the voices of Indigenous youth from the Julian Cho Society (JCS). The JCS is an autonomous organisation dedicated to Indigenous rights through research, education, and advocacy in Toledo District, Southern Belize. We, the Maya organisers of the JCS Youth Planning Team (Seferina Miss, Florenio Xuc, Donna Makin, Rosita Kan, Roberto Kus, and Elodio Rash) are seeking to build a space for Maya youth to share ideas and mobilise. Included in the initial SOCS camp, held in June 2019, were 15 JCS scholarship recipients, nine young women and six young men, whose ages ranged from 14 to 19. The gathering they attended aspired to cultivate relationships in which Maya youth could begin to engage in dialogue on issues affecting their villages, develop skills related to Indigenous leadership, and underscore the importance of community engagement – all while being cognisant of the vital role women play in traditional Maya governance.

[INSERT IMAGE 2]

Welcome banner made by Maya youth to greet attendees that hung across the community space.

# Why did we organise the SOCS Youth Gathering?

The passing down of Maya knowledge from one generation to the next is of grave concern to the youth as they realise the danger posed by losing their Maya culture, heritage, identity, and cosmovision. The SOCS gathering was created not only to be a space where youth would gather to encounter traditional knowledge but also a space where they could support each other and gain confidence in order to address concerns they have as youth. The transmission of traditional knowledge from Elders to youth was a core aim of the camp. The participation of youth in the shaping of their futures was another point of emphasis. Accordingly, the SOCS gathering endeavoured to instil courage and inspire youth to become actively involved in co-creating the social relations that will define their villages. The ultimate goal of camp, thus, was to motivate youth to contribute to the construction of peaceful, united, hard-working, and self-governing Maya communities. In order to do this, some homework, critical thinking, and research – in the face of the allegorical “capitalist hydra” – needed to be done (EZLN 2015).

Notably, the SOCS gathering was primarily organised and coordinated by Maya youth themselves. Pragmatically and methodologically, the research activities included a photovoice project, art-based dreaming exercises, transect walks, Maya heritage site visits, envisioning sessions, presentation and co-listening activities, reflective journaling, and interactive games. Politically and theoretically, the SOCS camp was a creative, engaged, and collective process of identifying and recording the varying joys, pains, dreams, and desires held by Maya youth in a postcolonial Caribbean and Central American context and global political economy that, historically, has been and continues to be hostile towards the existence of Indigenous people. Our research methods, in turn, took a variety of flexible, non-rigid, emergent, and “convivial” forms (CCRA 2019). These included photography, narrative-writing; drawing, painting, and colouring; walking conversations; and communal dialogue sessions, to name a few.

[INSERT IMAGE 3]

Members of the JCS Youth Planning Team discussing ideas and activities for the SOCS camp.

The driving force behind the research activities was fuelled by *Unangax̂* scholar Eve Tuck’s (2009) proposal that communities in struggle, particularly Indigenous and negatively racialised communities, avoid “damage-centred” preoccupations and move towards research that is “desire-based.” Notably, Tuck’s clarion call to privilege desire over damage is neither meant to indicate that the consequences of colonialism are “over,” nor is Tuck suggesting that intergenerational and persisting colonial trauma go unspoken of or be denied. Rather, Tuck is offering desire-based research as an “antidote” to the dangers posed by damage-centred research which pathologises communities and defines them either by their injuries – or what they are perceived to be lacking. Indeed, the Maya communities of Toledo District, especially the youth, are neither poor nor to be pitied. In fact, they are rich in the way of hopes, dreams, joys, and conviviality – even amidst lasting colonial pain. In turn, the SOCS gathering was meant to allow both the dreams and laughter of Maya youth to burst free. And they did.

# What did we do at the SOCS Youth Gathering?

The initial SOCS gathering was a one-week youth camp facilitated by the Maya youth organisers in partnership with a host of international allies, collaborators, and accomplices. Maya spirituality is of great significance to our culture. It is seen as a way to communicate with our ancestors, our spirits, and our creator to ask for guidance, wisdom, and protection. Therefore, it was only fitting that we started off the SOCS camp by asking for these things via ceremony as we attempted to dream about the future for both our generation and the Maya generations yet to come.

[INSERT IMAGE 4]

A Maya spiritual leader opening the gathering and asking for guidance, protection, and wisdom.

To set the tone of the camp and open the minds of the attendees, keynote presentations were given by Indigenous leaders inclusive of Maya Alcaldes (both men and women), land rights activists, and spiritual healers. In addition, youth speakers from the grassroots movement AYO (Aboriginal Youth Opportunities), of Cree and Anishinaabe nations respectively, shared personal stories of youth organising in what is now often called Canada. The importance of amplifying and centring Indigenous voices, as well as building and supporting one another as part of a youth movement, featured prominently. “Nothing about us without us,” was and remains a poignant message. The week-long SOCS camp also included field visits to Maya heritage sites and a host of envisioning, dreaming, and game-playing activities.

More specifically, the SOCS camp was divided into three key segments: 1) a photovoice project; 2) an arts-based dreaming and envisioning the future session; and 3) the conception and development of an action plan that would later be implemented by the Maya youth attendees.

For the photovoice project, 15 youth were given cameras to capture images across differing Maya communities throughout Toledo District. The primary aim was to encourage the youth to take pictures of sites, places, and scenes that resonated with them; in particular, the joys, pains, and dreams they experience as both Maya people – and youth. The arts-based “Dreaming of Our Future” exercise, facilitated by Maya scholar Dr. Filiberto Penados, was conducted to provide a medium through which Indigenous youth could share their visions, hopes, and aspirations of a just, sustainable, and liveable future. The third key area was the development of an action plan, which was based on themes identified in the photovoice and arts-based dreaming exercises. Markedly, the Maya youth began thinking of themselves not merely as a group of kids, but as contributors to a social movement.

[INSERT IMAGE 5]

Camp organisers, attendees, and non-Indigenous collaborators co-creating desire-based research.

# The Segments of the SOCS Youth Gathering

## Photovoice

The photovoice project challenged the youth to fully immerse themselves in their communities and connect with their joys, pains, and dreams. Participants were separated into teams to travel along differing routes and visit numerous Maya communities as a means of assisting them in capturing the stories they would like to share with their peers. The youth, armed with cameras, were able to take photos related to the strengths, challenges, opportunities, and threats to both Maya communities, culture, and lands.

[INSERT IMAGE 6]

Maya youth and international co-researchers eat lunch during their photovoice heritage site visits.

One team spoke on the significance of embracing one’s culture and heritage, another team addressed the importance of education in liberating one’s mind, and the last team highlighted the importance of protecting the Earth. The youth’s stance on cultural revival, gender equality, and environmental protection was adamant, and the themes continually re-emerged throughout the week-long camp. The youth were particularly enthusiastic when realising their peers had photographed and spoke about similar themes and held concerns in common – they saw they were not the only ones thinking about Maya heritage, culture, survival, and revitalisation. That is, Maya youth at once realised the potential they possess and the change they can bring about if they are united and assert their collective identity and pluralistic dreams.

[INSERT IMAGE 7]

Photovoice narrative shared by Yanira, taken along a highway in Toledo District, Southern Belize.

*“The forest is the most valuable thing that has been passed on to us. If you ever ask us, the Maya, we will tell you that ‘Our life is from the forest.’ This present relationship and its beauty give us the reason to grant respect to the natural world and the living organisms that it contains. In our communities, the forest provides resources to use, to build shelter and houses. For instance, the cohune leaves from cohune tree are an important part of roofing. The trees as logs are cut down and then used to make the structures and also the walls of homes and shelters …I also need and want opportunities to learn about the Maya farming, and also the forest.”*

## Dreaming of Our Future

The “Dreaming of Our Future” exercise questioned the youth on their aspirations for their communities, peers, and themselves. Participants were posed with the question: “Where do you see your community in the next 5-10 years?” They were then handed a blank canvas to draw, colour, and cast their dreams upon. The dreams shared by the youth throughout the exercise are dreams Maya people have continuously envisioned through our historical and ongoing struggles. Dreams of living in peace, protecting our land, Indigenous cultural resurgence, the importance of good health, a gender just society, critical education, and the continuation of Maya traditional knowledge.

From the dreaming exercise, the youth identified six key areas for intervention and action: 1) Maya youth leadership; 2) land protection; 3) education; 4) gender equality; 5) identity, culture, and traditional knowledge; and 6) health and well-being. Using these themes as inspiration, the youth developed action points to either enhance their joys or remedy their pains, as well as achieve the dreams and activities they intend to carry out in 2020. The youth, through the dreaming exercise, made clear their awareness of issues faced by their communities and demonstrated that they are willing to continue the struggle for Maya rights, recognition, and self-determination.

[INSERT IMAGE 8]

## Maya youth present their photovoice images, narratives, dreams, and action plans on the final day to village members and Alcaldes before enjoying traditional Maya fare, song, music, and dance.

## Action Plan

Once themes for action were identified, the youth were placed into groups to initiate conversations about how they could begin to address the concerns pinpointed in the dreaming exercise. From the six themes identified, they further narrowed down to three key areas they felt needed the most attention. The three themes selected were: 1) Maya identity, culture, and traditional knowledge; 2) Maya youth leadership; and 3) gender equality. One group felt that the way to build the youth leadership skills of the present Maya youth was for them to collectively learn from their Elders. They expressed the need for exemplary leadership in their communities and further stressed the need for the youth to be taught the skills that will make them ethically grounded, committed to justice, and organisers who acted with integrity.

Another group’s action plan focussed on gender equality. They felt they should raise awareness amongst Maya youth about the importance of women in traditional Maya governance via workshops organised by youth, for youth. Ultimately, the group wants to empower young Maya women to become actively involved in the affairs of their communities. They also wanted to inform young men of the importance of offering respect to women and women leaders. A third group reasoned that they could identify Elders in their respective communities who could be invited to share teachings on varying traditional Maya practices and worldviews, ensuring the passing down of Indigenous knowledge from one generation to another. These workshops will span across 2020 and see youth learning customary practices and knowledge they may not have had the chance to learn growing up. The future actions will be a means to honour our ancestors and ensure that ancestral knowledge survives for centuries to come.

[INSERT IMAGE 9]

Participant photo showing a sign promoting gender equality in the Maya village of San Benito Poite.

The final day of the SOCS Youth Gathering was one we wanted to resonate with the Toledo Alcaldes Association (TAA), Maya Elders, and family members who were invited as special guests. The TAA is the highest arbiter and custodian for Maya customary law. The action plan was presented to the TAA Executive and Elders to demonstrate that Maya youth have genuine concerns for their communities and are motivated to build peaceful, united, and resilient communities. We assembled Maya Elders, women, men, spiritual healers, and children to listen to the voices of Maya youth. The camp closed with a traditional Maya ceremony at Nim Li Punit (a Maya Temple) to give thanks to the creator and our ancestors for their guidance and protection throughout the initial SOCS gathering and to ask for wisdom as we continue our journey.

# Going Forward

In sum, the Maya youth have spoken; they must be a part of decision making, even if it is just to be informed about new developments within and across their communities. They have made their mandate. Common ground related to the joys, pains, and dreams of the youth has been identified and established. In light of this, we then began to ask ourselves what lies beyond the initial SOCS camp?

Maya youth organisers are now fervently pursuing the action plans they developed and are hoping to hold an annual SOCS camp. Progressive work has already begun on calibrating the ideas generated by the 15 youth who attended the initial gathering. Organising events devised from the research as early as December 2019 and throughout the rest of 2020 are now on the Maya youth agenda. Issues related to gender equality, primarily shedding light on women in governance, women’s rights, and questioning masculinity and gender stereotypes, have all been made a priority. Secondly, Maya youth outreach, leadership training, and the mobilisation of youth from other villages have been emphasised. The aim is to have youth present at every Alcaldes assembly, collaborate with the TAA, and be represented on the Alcaldes Steering Committee.

To ensure that every community meeting conducted by Alcaldes is inclusive, both youth and women must be informed, present, heard, and in positions of leadership. Thirdly, youth will be included and even contribute to organising of upcoming projects and workshops related to traditional Maya knowledge and customary practices. This is imperative. Because as the Maya always say – it is through *se’ komonil* (“togetherness in dignity”) that we will conquer every challenge we face, especially those created by capitalism and colonial power.

[INSERT IMAGE 10]

Maya youth with collaborators visiting the sacred temple and heritage site at Nim Li Punit to raise the Maya flag and assert their survival, presence, voices, and “resurgence” (Simpson, 2017).

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