

# ATATA MEANS RECIPROCALITY AWARENESS. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LIVING NATURE: PLANTS, TERRITORY, ANIMALS AND CULTURES.



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I

The purpose<sup>2</sup> of the following text is to present and preserve the concept ATATA: it is a composition of two ideograms (fig.1) of the Mhuysqa dead language. It can be defined as 'I give myself, you give yourself,' where giving is an act of receiving, and what you do to others is also affecting yourself. This exercise of reciprocity is a very important vibration of life; nobody can live without others, this includes all living creatures with whom we share the Earth. As a Colombian student of ancient history, I have experience in this concept over many years of learning the wholesome ways of living of the indigenous people of both Colombia and Mexico.

It was during my PhD research that I experienced and looked further into the Mhuysqa Mayan legacy. It was then that I realized the devastating reality that is currently affecting the quality of food. There is a systematic problem caused by the 'green revolution'; radical changes to the local ways of cultivation to the use of inputs made sold by big global corporations which are creating dependency as well as poisoning the seeds, the soil, the water, and therefore our own bodies. Meanwhile, as a response to this, an 'undercurrent' is developing everywhere – people are living according to new past principles of global corporations, recovering solidarity, hope, life, food, and bio-diversifying forms of being.

I have based my writings on the perspective of 'Heart & Epistemology.' What I mean is that heart and brain come together in my proposal of bringing to light my feelings and how to keep living and how to make collective decisions on territory (fig.2). The intention of this essay is to find ourselves and others' heart to heart. In fact, the heart is the place where you keep dreams, hope, joy, and pain, according to the Mayan culture. You need to have all these clear to know what is the kind of living knowledge you want to go over. The Mhuysqa's worldview, the human heart is named 'puyky', an onomatopoeia of the heartbeat, that is said to be connected to the beating of the cosmos itself, representing the frequency where one can find answers on the path of protecting life. The questions this essay aims to answer are: How to feel-think the future of food, water, a perspective of reciprocity? Why is ATATA a fruitful principle of the future survival of the human kind?

Mhuysqas are an ancient indigenous culture who live in the Cundinamarca and Boyacá regions of Colombia. They lost their language in the eighteenth century, which consisted of compact ideograms and hieroglyphics

representing complex ideas of their understanding of nature. The Mhuysqas speak Spanish and suffered persecution during the colonial period and the banning of their language, but they kept some of their ancestral ways of living. I have studied their language, named Mhuysqhubun, and I propose here to bring back to life the 'dead' word ATATA, which is not forgotten. ATATA is a palindrome unity made of two ideograms and hieroglyphics of the moon calendar: Ata and Ta.

Mariana Escribano,<sup>3</sup> a linguist who writes about the Mhuysqa language and worldview, explains that Ata refers to the number 1, which cosmogony is relative to the beginning of time. The eighteenth-century grammar of the priest Jose Domingo Duquesne, we can translate the ideogram as follows: "the goods of something else." This means common goods exist everywhere. It also refers to the primordial pond, which links it to water as well. Ta, the second sound of the unity, is the number 6 and represents a new beginning that is showing the comprehension of time. The priest Duquesne wrote that Ta means "tillage, harvest." The Ta ideogram also means the bearing of fruits, the giving of yourself freely, agriculture labor, and this perspective of the act of giving is an act of receiving; it also implies the responsibility of taking care of what you are receiving.

One of the most important acts of Mhuysqa culture was the offering of some holy lagoons. The main offering happened in the Guatavita lagoon (fig.3). This lagoon held the gold, offered by the Mhuysqas to the Spanish conquerors who heard of it and tried to dry the lagoon up. The leader of the town of Guatavita, covered in gold, would be introduced on a raft, adorned with more gold and emeralds. The raft would be then given to the lagoon followed by the leader who would introduce himself to the water as an offering of the gold that was covering him to receive a purification bath. This astonishing ritual of ATATA was done as a reminder of gratitude to water, one of the most important living beings. Reciprocity of the few sacred female entities living in the water, representing the lagoon itself, would hold the abundance of Mhuysqa people. One of the ways water supplied life to the people was rain, which provided corn to feed everybody. In order to understand this reciprocal interaction/cycle of humans-lagoons-rain-corn I refer to the Tzeltal Mayan people, who live in the Highlands of Chiapas in the Lacandona jungle of Mexico, who keep alive very ancient knowledge and have the belief that corn spirit is living in the mountains and lakes. It is given to the humans as result of offerings asking for maintenance of people. ATATA can be related to the Mayan Tzeltal concept of 'Ich' el ta muk' translated as "respect, recognition of all living things of nature."<sup>4</sup> The corn cycle is Tzeltal life itself and requires a permanent compromise, the way they explain this is referring to corn as a double being. Seen from one side as a baby and from the other as a woman supporting her family. When someone wastes corn, they can hear it crying – even a single seed is left on the soil and a piece of tortilla lies on the kitchen floor. When seen from the woman supporting her family, it appears as the harvest when the corn cobs have smaller corn sticks. These are signals that it is the mother of the plant; they do not eat it; they prefer to hang it up in the house as a gesture of keeping abundance present in the home and community. This double reciprocal relation of corn, demanding care on one hand and at the same time protecting its own people, is a meaningful trait of understanding the power of this spirit.

In Tenejapa, a Tzeltal town, they traditionally make an offering to an important lagoon named 'Ts' ajalsul' to show 'ich' el ta muk'. The ceremony authorities deposit a traditional handmade dress to the female being that is living in the water and is representing the lagoon itself who provides corn, and she happens to be also the mother of red corn. Red corn is now hard to find in the Highlands of Chiapas, it represents the strongest spirits and connection to ancestors and woman's blood. Some families are aware of the high value of these other varieties of corn (fig.4), and diversity becomes a challenge for these communities.

II

These cultures that live in a reciprocal cycle of the land they inhabit, we have arrived to a latent and urgent

conflicts surrounding food. In the 1950s, Mexican and United States politicians started an alliance to increase productivity of the most consumed cereals: wheat, corn, and rice. Even the pioneers of this project said so, this was not to fight off hunger, but there was an inequality in the availability of food. That inequality is still growing. The 'green revolution' began as a movement of engineers – George Harrar, Edwin J. Wellhausen, the Nobel Peace Prize winner Norman E. Borlaug. They worked together in Sonora, Mexico, at the Office of Special Studies which later was called the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) financed mainly by the Rockefeller Foundation. They developed a biochemical 'technological package' of pest control that started affecting natural interdependence of agricultural cycles, achieving full biocontrol of the process. Most of these substances were created during the Second World War as biological weapons to kill populations, such as the Japanese, and the spraying of fulminate herbicides. When the war was over, they needed to sell the products, and these herbicides were killing the traditional locally adapted seeds; they worked in two steps: First they collected a bank of germplasm to study the varieties of corn in Mexico, second they chose and separated only two varieties of the approximately 64 types adapted to the chemicals mentioned, producing a dependency on the seed which could not grow without pesticides. Then, as a major commitment of the governments, credits and funding, publicized this alleged progress as a need of peasants. They could then sell these 'packages' to the farmers, who only realized their negative effects: spoiling their soil, water, nitrates, phosphates, and other toxic elements that produced soil erosion and broke the biological equilibrium. Nowadays 'technological packages' in Mexico include hybrid seeds of white and yellow corn, chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and pest controllers. All of them come with a negative impact on health – proved this year in the United States in the court case of Dewayne Johnson vs. Monsanto regarding Roundup Ready, a pesticide that contains glyphosate.<sup>5</sup> When a community loses their traditional seeds highly adapted to their territories and the work of the generations, a new hybrid, the damage is difficult to undo. They want to go back to the organic ones they will need years of adaptation, recovering the soil again that will have a consequence of a low production. An unbearable loss of peasants in the nineties, genetic engineers modified the hybrid seeds and created new ones mixing animal and bacteria genes such as bacterium thuringiensis, the cereal creating the BT transgenic corn, also dependent on agrochemicals as well as not fertile, which meant that peasants needed to buy them anew each year. As a result of this process, today in Mexico there are sequences of transgenic contamination of 90.4% of the whole production of tortillas which are consumed every meal.<sup>6</sup> There is a lot of money invested in the creation of food that is low in nutrients and high in private patents owned by big corporations like Bayer (owner of Monsanto), Pioneer-Dupont, Syngenta, DOW Agrosciences, and others. This has created a scenario where the keepers of ancestral seeds started to be treated as criminals and the pollination of their harvest is transgenic plants.



The ancient cultural cycle of corn is now a dependent one. On one hand there is a biopolitical issue of the 'green revolution' where traditional practices of working the land were replaced by new technologies and cooperate businesses agreements. On the other hand, there is an issue of who has the capacity and power

deciding who lives, <-> therefore also who dies. Michel Foucault refers to a kind <-> authority that is “endangering life,” <-> hiding the evidence <-> being responsible <-> the dead.<sup>7</sup> According to this, foundations <-> corporations named <-> are contaminating corn <-> doing so guilty <-> an act <-> “endangering life.” <-> a result <-> such violent acts <-> natural goods, a huge crisis has manifested itself <-> the indigenous territories. Peasants are <-> poverty <-> part <-> consequence <-> the global competition, which has lowered the prices <-> some food. The only possible way <-> keeping producers <-> the market is <-> having more land where bigger quantities <-> food can be produced. This leads to land concentration; a few actors having control <-> important areas. Additionally, due to bad harvest the value <-> their products is so low <-> farming is unprofitable <-> the peasants, who lose their lands to these economical disasters. <-> <-> <-> that isn't <-> the state <-> Chiapas, which is a large producer <-> corn, is also importing the same cereal <-> South Africa. This type <-> transgenic imported grain can be found <-> the governmental rural stores <-> Diconsa, competing <-> <-> thus endangering local varieties <-> peasant production. <-> this losing cycle, farmers are first pushed <-> debt <-> then <-> the streets, forced to start working <-> others <-> the lands that used to be theirs; a result <-> the systematic process <-> impoverishment. All this is creating a downturn, wherein the indigenous young people are looking <-> other options to live. Thus some <-> them are migrating legally <-> illegally to the United States <-> other Mexican territories trying to find a job <-> touristic places. One elder man <-> Tenejapa said <-> an interview, “Sometimes it looks <-> the heart <-> young people is a stone, it seems nothing is important <-> them <-> nothing is touching them anymore. They walk <-> knowing where they are going, <-> robots.”<sup>8</sup> However, <-> the middle <-> such multilateral complexity some <-> them are keeping the seeds, water, lands, wisdom, <-> memory, alive.

### III

I feel-think offerings <-> getting water <-> food are a reminder <-> us to be grateful <-> what we have received <-> previous generations <-> take care <-> this common goods. Reciprocity might be something as wonderful <-> the kind <-> work indigenous cultures do when they are preparing their meticulous <-> ephemeral artistic compositions <-> offering <-> the water †. They spend a lot <-> time <-> <-> their hearts they know life ends when water is not flowing, <-> this offering is <-> the effort. When indigenous people are keeping corn, they are

cultivating the plant <-> great respect <-> an attention that goes <-> ‘just growing it.’ They also sit around a fire <-> the kitchen to reproduce face to face the teachings <-> the meanings, the varieties <-> the ways <-> harvesting <-> healing <-> corn; all the wisdom is given <-> this warm community-oriented touch. Learning to listen to the elders <-> keeping <-> touch <-> people who still know natural ways to cultivate as well <-> carry ancient seeds <-> memories, are ways to remember. <-> to resurge these practices today we need to act as well. We need to disseminate organic seeds <-> the knowledge to take care <-> them, appropriating available technologies to recover natural balance † <-> living (decontaminated) soils <-> water.

This is a time <-> creative collective praxis to protect life <-> common goods; humanity is living <-> a serious historical process. Something people <-> every country could do is to finding community solidarity <-> the act <-> conserving the biodiversity <-> food. <-> example, we can get <-> touch <-> the seed collectives which are taking <-> a significant labor <-> keeping germplasm banks to conserve seeds <-> low temperature environments, <->, more importantly, growing the seeds <-> the soil <-> renewing each cycle. We could also be responsible <-> <-> least one seed † survival, <-> our rural soils we should research cultural production systems <-> ‘milpa’ to associate the plants – <-> this case corn <-> beans <-> others – to have abundant <-> various harvests. <-> the urban areas walls, roofs, <-> pots are great hosts to plants; also schools <-> parks. Reinforcing local exchange <-> producers <-> conscient consumers is also important. <-> organizing time <-> sustainable, organic, abundance <-> sharing it <-> children we are offering to the Earth <-> humanity life, autonomy, <-> richness. <-> this way we make the noble effort to keep alive the rainbow seeds (varieties <-> food) to give the future <-> much colors <-> flavors <-> we have received <-> earth <-> our previous generations.

That is why taking myself serious is an act <-> reciprocity, which means <-> (inter) acting <-> <-> the power <-> my heart is necessary <-> <-> my work <-> my way <-> living I am affecting others, known <-> unknown. <-> native people say it is <-> the heart <-> we can be aware <-> the consequences <-> our acts <-> the territory we live <-> <-> ignoring other lands <-> people. This is related <-> developing fair economics <-> politics that reduces inequality. It is important to highlight <-> dealing <-> the urgent problem <-> ecocide means dealing <-> the collateral disaster <-> genocide – provoked <-> that ecocide. Addressing such issues will demand <-> we recognize, respect, <-> embrace our cultural differences,

belief systems, traditions, <-> languages ☒ ☑ ☐ ending any cultural supremacy <-> dominance that requires the oppression <-> starvation <-> others ☑. Reciprocity is a relationship <-> living nature: plants, territory, animals, <-> cultures to which we have a lot to re-appropriate <-> learn <->, <-> feeding ourselves is a process where awareness, memory, <-> re-learning are needed (fig.6). The construction <-> a good way <-> living named \*Lekil kuxlejal\* (full, dignified <-> fair life) <-> Tseltal language is not only a product <-> harmonic relations <-> nature <-> society, we can only get there <-> a collective transformation process where both concepts <-> reciprocity ATATA <-> \*ich él ta muk'\* are present <-> both a local and/or global scale, <-> political intimate acts <-> public transnational reciprocal agreements.

#### Footnotes

1. To Yaku.↵
2. Pérez Moreno, María Patricia. O'tan - o'tanil. Corazón: una forma de ser - estar - hacer - sentir - pensar de los tseltaletik de Bachajón. Chiapas, México. FLACSO, Quito. 2014↵
3. Escribano, Mariana. \*Semiological research on Mhuysqa language, Decryption of moon calendar numbers.\* Antares, Colombia. 2002↵
4. López Intzin, Juan “Ich'el ta muk': the plot in the construction of the Lekil kuxlejal”, in: Feel-think gender. La Casa del Mago, Guadalajara. 2013↵
5. Levin, S. and Greenfield, P. Monsanto ordered to pay \$289m as jury rules weedkiller caused man's cancer. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/aug/10/monsanto-trial-cancer-dewayne-johnson-ruling>. 2018.↵
6. Álvarez-Buylla Rocas, Elena. \*Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems. IE y C3, UNAM, México. 2017 [http://www.dgcs.unam.mx/boletin/bdboletin/2017\\_607.html](http://www.dgcs.unam.mx/boletin/bdboletin/2017_607.html)↵
7. Foucault, Michel. The History of Sexuality\*. 1997.↵
8. López Intzin, Juan.↵
9. <-> : as a part of speech a conjunction make visible the interdependence. Being in relation to others. Use a pencil to connect the phrases using conjunctions. ↵