

“Memory and Death: Study of the social organization in the community of Panabaj, Santiago Atitlán, Sololá, Guatemala, after the devastation of Hurricane Stan.”

Loreley Fortuny – loreleypaolafortuny@gmail.com

Abstract

In 2005 a mud slide buried Panabaj. Survivors are gathered in a risky area, waiting to be resettled. Analyzing memories is essential in finding solutions for their cultural needs.

Introduction

Panabaj, a Guatemalan community with 3504 Mayan persons was affected by a mudflow occurred in October 2005. Survivors of the catastrophe are living in transitional shelters built with the intention of a temporary stay. In June 2008 they are still gathered in a risky area, under deplorable conditions, meanwhile a safe territory can be provided for their definite resettlement.

An emergency plan has been implemented, and people in the refuge, different religious organizations, NGO's and CONRED (National Coordinator to Reduce Disasters) are working together to take specific actions before, during and after emergency situations.

In this group with a rich cultural, historical and religious background, its education is a challenge. Knowing the perception they had of the events, understanding it through their Cosmo vision, and teaching how to preserve their surroundings to avoid deforestation by using good agricultural practices that permit sustainable development in order to diminish this kind of disaster must be the aim of upcoming projects.

Results gathered in this anthropological research are relevant to implement good environmental practices. The analysis of this complex community provides information that is fundamental in constructing social theory to comprehend behaviors and anticipate tendencies in the execution of projects aimed to improve its future. The objective is achieved by listening to learn from each other and working together with actions adapted to every particular contextual situation.

This case can be taken as a base study, to elaborate methods and engage populations with similar characteristics in EIA processes.

Background

Spanish and twenty-one Mayan languages are spoken in the center and southeast of Guatemala, Central America.

Indigenous communities represent more than the 50% of the total population in the national territory. They communicate in these Mayan languages transmitted as a maternal tongue that reproduces their culture and maintains their identity. Since the Mayan tongue

is used in the family and locally, Mayan speakers have to learn Spanish (as a second language) to interact in certain contexts where Spanish is spoken as the official language.

Guatemala is divided into departments. In the department of Sololá is Santiago Atitlán with an extension of 136 square kilometers and an altitude of 1592 meters at sea level. Its yearly pluvial precipitation is of 1000 to 2000 millimeters in the range of 1500 to 2400 meters at sea level. The average temperature around the Lake Atitlán, one of the border landmarks of Santiago Atitlán is stable because of the presence of water, ranging from 18 centigrade degrees to 24 centigrade degrees. Soil is deep and moderately deep, with rocky subsoil of grey medium texture. Among its crops there are vegetables, coffee, peaches, and mixed forests.

On the base of the volcanoes of San Lucas Tolimán and Santiago Atitlán is situated the territory of Panabaj, which means in Tzutuhil “on the stone”. Rains used to drag stones, which are found constantly by farmers when raising crops, from the Volcano San Lucas Tolimán¹ (3537 meters height), and covered this area with them. Before October 5, 2005, there had been always a channel for the course of the water.

The residents living there represented the 11% of Santiago Atitlán’s population, all of them indigenous people.

Events and Effects

On October 2, 2005 Hurricane Stan was detected 250 kilometers northwest, in the Gulf of Mexico. On October 5, 2005, a mud slide coming from Volcano San Lucas Tolimán buried the community of Panabaj. Survivors were transferred to several refuges, and gathered finally in the Refuge Tzanchaj.

The first week of November 2006, information about health of the population (368 hurt, 76 recovered corpses, 23 orphans and damage to mental health) and infrastructure damage was released by the Public Health Center regarding the Refuge Tzanchaj².

On November 15, 2006, 82 corpses were recovered. According to estimates, 121 persons died and there were 131 disappeared.

An action plan with stages for prevention, promotion, and attention was drafted. Activities, functions and institutions were defined, and a communication system was implemented with specific actions for evacuation strategies. The population was organized by its leaders and professionals to follow it.

¹ See Petrich, P. (1997). *Nuestra geografía del Lago Atitlán*. Guatemala: Muni-K’at.

² See Ministerio de Salud Pública. (2006). *Plan de emergencias, contingencia y desastres del centro de salud y la red municipal de salud. Municipio de Santiago Atitlán, Sololá. Noviembre 2006*. Guatemala: MercyCorps y Ministerio de Salud Pública.

In 2007 people continued living 600 meters away from the mud slide zone, in Refuge Tzanchaj, in the “temporary shelters” of 6 by 3 meters. The current population was 1,020 inhabitants, which is the 29% of the refugees in 2005.

Nowadays refugees are still waiting for a place to live definitively.

The population was aware about the conditions of the volcano and the possibility of a slide. The Priest of the town stated that they were advised to leave their houses since June, 2005. Deforestation was a common subject, which had been explained, both causes and consequences.

From the gathered information, regarding the language barrier, senior refugees and young adult women understand Spanish, but their answers to questions are basic monosyllables or simple gestures, since they do not speak it.

Young men and children are the ones who speak Spanish and translate when needed. Male activities and school require them to do it, and keep them in contact with foreigners. It is difficult for them to articulate ideas in Spanish.

Education is a vital factor to be noticed. Illiterate people are more prone to believe that the slide was God’s will and the cause was their sins, in contrast with school educated people, children among them, who say it was because of the deforestation. Some of them have been participating in reforestation campaigns.

For the ones understanding Spanish, education is more accessible and they are open to practice occidental educational models.

Resignation seems to be the easiest way to deal with things that can not be changed due to the economic situation, lack of another place to go, jobs and land. They are people whose income per capita is about \$2 a day, and have to support a family with an average of four children. There was not a specific place to relocate them, and they were not able to pay for somewhere else to go. They had no choice, and the way in which they face this is by saying that if God wants them to die, that would happen there or somewhere else.

Psychological treatment is given to refugees. The coordinator of the Psycho-Social program, an indigenous inhabitant from Santiago Atitlán, states their aim is to recuperate lost values. They are focused on kids, to teach them to respect and help their community. He believes the social problems are caused by the alienation suffered by the population when they do not reproduce their own culture.

To understand this social performance it is necessary to have a historical background of the studied group.

History

The town of Santiago Atitlán, when Catholicism arrived, was left with no spiritual Catholic leaders, and obligated to resign to its own beliefs. In that way, a new form of spirituality was born, since people instituted their own leaders, and mixed their former beliefs and practices with the few new rituals, by reproducing them with no understanding of their significance, but giving their own significance, and symbolizing characters from their spiritual representations with saints, and angels³. These indigenous groups have a blend of significance in rituals.

In the 1950's, after the attempt of an agrarian reform, social movements were developed resulting in a civil war that marked the syncretism that constituted the spiritual context of the indigenous groups. The Catholic Church and some participants took action to change the way in which poor farmers were treated, beginning to help communities to improve their quality of life. At the beginning this happened without interfering with oligarchy, but lately it started by representing a threat to power groups, who have been always served by indigenous communities. One of them was the military power. Many of its members were owners of land, and used the services of indigenous people to produce, and increase their wealth. Prosecution and elimination of leaders (most of them Catholic activists, intellectual groups, political opponents and farmers) began. Indigenous communities were especially targeted by the death squads⁴.

Social structures were broken in families by converting some of their members (from a nation in which a majority of indigenous people were Catholic) in Protestants. Their ideology was modeled according to preachers, who acted in line with the president's policies and oligarchy needs.

Because of the elimination that was taking place, people were arrested and if they were part of the Catholic Church accused of being guerrillas and revolutionaries and disappeared under unknown circumstances after being captured by army forces.

In Panabaj, 13 people were killed in 1990, when one person of this community was taken by soldiers, and residents attempted to stop these acts. The army was forced to leave their location. The 13 people are considered heroes and were buried in the "Peace Park". This monument was partially damaged by the mud slide.

In the rescue efforts in 2005, army forces were part of the teams sent all over the country to help, but they were not able to get into Panabaj. Even under those catastrophic conditions, this community did not allow them to enter nor help their people.

³ See Mendelson, M. (1965). *Los escándalos de Maximón, un estudio sobre la religión y la visión del mundo en Santiago Atitlán*. Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional.
Monclús Estella, A. (2004). *Educación y cruce de culturas*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

⁴ See Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico. (1990). *Guatemala memoria del silencio*. Guatemala.

The majority of residents in Panabaj are Protestants now. Their former ideology was drastically changed without permitting entrance to their prior beliefs. These people are used to changing constantly what they say. This behavior was learned since the colony, and later reaffirmed and reproduced during these centuries as a survival strategy⁵.

This survival strategy has proved to be an advantage in the organization of the community, since the plan developed through assessors in order to deal with a future slide has been a success in simulated situations.

Conclusions

Mystification of thoughts, cosmology and historical background are components that have to be understood and used as base for the education of this community; to avoid misunderstandings; to transmit meaningful concepts in their own language, not only the spoken one, but with all of the subjective significance that ideas have in their particular perception.

A lesson to be learnt is that death of people in Panabaj due to the hurricane could have been diminished or even avoided if a multidisciplinary group of assessors would have worked together with the community. Before the hurricane, there was a complete absence of social experts, and scientific knowledge was not applied by the affected because of the lack of adequate tools when transmitting it. After the tragedy happened, the assessment of professionals with proficiency in different fields has been used (engineers, environmentalist, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, physicians, etc), but projects are still isolated, and social and technical issues are handled separately. If an environmental impact assessment process were developed with communication among the experts who lead these projects by interchanging ideas and thinking on solutions, goals could be achieved more efficiently.

⁵ See Garavito, M. (2004), *Violencia política e inhibición social, estudio psicosocial de la realidad guatemalteca*. Guatemala: Magna Terra.