



Center Amalipe

Guatemala: days before the end of the 13th Baktun

DECEMBER 2012

El Corazon del Mundo Maya

In late November and early December, when thousands of tourists made reservations for Southern Mexico and Guatemala, hoping to see the end of the world, predicted of the Mayan in their country, representatives of Amalipe and 6 organizations from Macedonia visited Guatemala. The visit was organized by the Centre for Equality and Health System Study (Centro de Estudios para la Equidad y Governanza en los Sistemas de Salud - CEGSS) in Guatemala and the "Open Society Institute" - New York. It was not part of the flourishing tourist industry related to the end of the world expectations "appointed" for December 21 2012. We visited Guatemala looking not to the past of the ancient Maya, but to their descendants' presence; we did not expect the end of the world, we saw how the community monitoring of

health services in indigenous communities at a grass-root level is and will continue to be made.



Guatemala is a country of contrasts. It greeted us with colors woven on looms by skilled female hands, which do not miss the thread of tradition; colors, tucked in the skirts, in hair and in the hospitable people's smiles, regardless of grayness of hopelessness in which they live.

Contrasts

"El Corazon del mundo Maya" - "The heart of the Mayan world" with this sentence Guatemala welcomes thousands of tourists every day landed at the airport in Guatemala City. Accompanied by a photograph of the pyramid of Tikal, the sentence

shows that the country keeps the ruins of the most ancient cities of an ancient civilization that captivates the minds of millions around the world with its splendor: the most accurate calendar in the world, exceptional knowledge of mathematics,

amazing architecture, unique in its depth in space vision and mentality.

Guatemala is a country of contrasts. We met the both faces of the country: the shine in the big modern hotels in the center of Guatemala City, where well-dressed white women and

Contrasts



You can feel it just standing in the center of the market, close your eyes and just listen—buzz, intonation, blend of languages and dialects...

and their caballeros have breakfast without losing a drop of aristocracy, and on the other hand the woman bent under the burden on her head, or 7-8 year polishers who instead of having happy childhood during the holidays fight each other for the attention of the white gentleman who wants to have his shoes mirror polished, that face, blackened by the sun by the burden of time or just because they are children of God, he has baked them in the oven of human history. In this game, however, the Lord plays with two queens ...

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smiles, regardless of grayness of hopelessness in which they live. On the first day we were in the heart of this color - Chichicastenango market, which struck us with its syncretism: religion, traditions, languages, beliefs, and most of all - the ability to preserve the richness of their culture and ... to survive. You can feel it just standing in the center of the market, close your eyes and just listen - buzz, intonation, blend of languages and dialects ... You can see it when you open your eyes and look up - not to the Lord - the Gods, Christian or pagan seems to have forgotten these people, even though they desperately and persistently try to pray for their blessing in pagan and Christian way. In the center of the market is located the big Catholic church

of Santo Tomas. In the past - in that other time - it has been mayan temple. The stairs to the entrance were also strewn with colours - not by the flowers that women sell but by the diversity of their clothes. Men and women were kneeling everywhere - in the church, around the church, in the foot of the church and quietly whispered pagan and Christian prayers, burned incense and herbs, offered gifts in sacrifice, crossed themselves and quietly returned to their everyday lives. We squeezed through the narrow gaps between stalls dotted with colorful hand-woven clothes that are an attraction for tourists, but for locals they are more than life - livelihood, necessity, tradition that women are trying hard to preserve in order to convey the vanishing proud to their children and to preserve their identity. Each of the stalls tempts with the colours of different *huipil*, skirts and belts from all parts of Guatemala - from the short skirts characteristic only for the Chichicastenango to the head ornaments made by the women in Nebaj. Every girl who sells is inviting us to buy something.



Contrasts



The girls are good merchants. It is difficult to leave even if you only look at any of the stalls. One of the girls stopped us. I didn't know her name – I called her Remedios... because the one hundred years of solitude are still

not over here... He showed me everything – she told me the story of every single thread - she showed me how the red, green and blue stripes intertwined into acute triangles in order to depict the high mountains in Guatemala, she showed me how the black and red stripes around the neck link in the rays of the Sun God, she also showed me the simplified images of the quetzal.

Even the quetzal is a symbol of the paradoxes in Guatemala. it is the bird – symbol of rich past and cultural heritage of the modern descendants of

the the Mayans. So is called the national currency – irony that keeps pulsing in the contrast between the great past and the desperate present of these same people who are put at the edge of poverty and hopelessness.

I take the hand made *huipil* and among it sunny colours starts our journey in Guatemala – “El Corazon del Mundo Maya”.

The similarities of the four municipalities is the high level of organization, although the conditions in

The Context

Through our whole visit we got convinced that Guatemala is indeed the heart of the Mayans' world: not so much because of the pyramids and the ancient towns (in fact we only visited one of them, and not the most brilliant), but because of the today's Mayans. According to the last census data over 40% of today's Guatemalans defined themselves as Mayans. At least 20% more are also Mayans but they prefer to declare themselves as “mestizo” or “ladino” to avoid the strong discrimination and also because they don't speak any of the Mayan languages as our Guatemalan hosts assured. Talking to them and our colleagues from Macedonia we couldn't stop joking that in Europe everybody wants to present (pass off) himself as a descendant of an ancient kin, even if it seems funny for the rest, but in Guatemala (as well as in Mexico, Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador)

millions of very real descendants of the ancient Indian civilizations want to hide their ancient origin. Of course that was painfully familiar to us – aren't there hundreds of thousands Roma in Bulgaria who prefer to define themselves in another way but not as Roma – because of the same reasons stated by our Guatemalan colleagues. The similarities kept astonishing us during the whole visit. For two weeks we visited four different communities, in which our hosts from CEGSS assist the community monitoring of health services: Tectitan, Ixchiguán, Nebaj and Zona Reina. They themselves differ from each other: Ixchiguán is the highest municipality in the country and Zona Reina is among the low jungles; the community in Zona Reina is marginalized while the one in Nebaj is significantly more organized. The common between the four municipalities is that enormous majority if the citizens are Ma-

yans and the municipalities themselves are among the poorest in the country; what they have in common is the high extent of organization, which we saw, although the conditions at which these people live; the common thing is also the active participation of women in every community we visited.....

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The Mayans in Guatemala and the Roma on the Balkans: find the differences



The models of exclusion are very similar. The combine discrimination, widespread stereotypes amongst all sections of society, an attempt to escape from your own identity

No matter how strange it sounds, it isn't at all difficult for a person to find a number of similarities between the situation of the Mayans in Guatemala (and probably of the rest of the indigenous people in Latin America) and the Roma in Bulgaria (and in the rest of the South-eastern countries). It turned out that the models of exclusion are very similar. The combine discrimination, widespread stereotypes amongst all sections of society, an attempt to escape from your own identity, considerably lower educational, social and health status, lack of participation in the authority and weak presence in the public institutions. After our hosts had acquainted us with the negative sense of the word "indio" (Indian) we had the feeling that they

were talking about a "gypsy" on the Balkans. The average Guatemalan uses the word "indio" mainly as an insult – a person with law culture, poor and dirty, and that is why many of the educated Indians, as well as a great part of middle class representatives prefer either to hide their Indian origin (which provokes ridicule – race traits is difficult to hide) or to use another word for themselves – *indigena* (native, aboriginal), Maya or the name of the corresponding group (Quiche, Kaqchikel, Mam....) On the whole you feel like you are at home.....

The main difference is that in Guatemala it is a matter of ethos exclusion which constitute between 40 and 60% of the population, while on the Balkans socially and politically

excluded are the Roma who outnumber between 5 and 10% of the population of the corresponding countries. is far more than only quantitative: The Mayans in Guatemala have been keeping until today their specific forms of social organization, including the hierarchy system of religious leaders, Mayan healers, etc. The structures of the indigenous inhabitants were officially recognized through the peaceful agreements in 19996 (which put in end of the Civil War), but the state does not finance them and does not support / control them by any form. That is why the conception to include the two regions is different. On the Balkans we talk about integration, which in principle does not change the type of the state, but it makes it inclusive all the population – something which is to interest of the absolutely all citizens and should meet active support of the elite of the majority. In Guatemala this process would lead to a serious transformation of the State itself: If it not only acknowledged but started including the



The Mayans in Guatemala and the Roma on the Balkans: find the differences

the local people with their social structures, Guatemala would turn into a multinational country: at least this is what the existing experience from Bolivia and Ecuador shows.

The fact that this process favours all citizens and makes the economy stronger is obvious, but the resistance of the present elite groups would be equally logical. The Mayans themselves are divided into 21 ethnic groups, plus the Garifuna Indians who are not Mayans.

These groups speak different dialects and keep (although relatively) inter-group endogamy.

The Government often uses this fact inciting one group against the other: to start with the *Conquistata* (conquest) (when the Quiche were defeated by a hundred Spanish and some tens thousand Kaqchikel) and to finish with the Civil war which lasted for 30 years and took 200 000 human lives (mostly of Indians killed by army and paramilitary formations of different

Indian groups as well skillfully incited against each other.)

This is one of the reasons because of which the Mayans in Guatemala to be unorganized at a national level.

We on our side told about the Roma groups on the Balkans, about the intragroup diversity which is often used to split the community but thanks Lord – not to the same parameters!

. Small plain cottages in the villages, "perched" on the hills and in the woods, scarce household goods and furniture, daily hard physical labour in the humble fields, fight for the bare subsistence

Living conditions

That the Mayans live significantly more poorly than the other Guatemalans is visible even with unarmed eye. Small plain cottages in the villages, "perched" on the hills and in the woods, scarce household goods and furniture, daily hard physical labour in the humble fields, fight for the bare subsistence. In some of the villages we got convince how right Sartre was saying that Nothingness also exists: we saw that there

was no electricity and running water, there was no bathroom; our computers didn't find any internet network. At the same time on the faces of those people the friendliest smiles were shining, and the hospitality with which they shared their scarce food with us, touched the deepest vibes of our hearts. As if we had been in the village Roma neighbourhoods in Bulgaria and Macedonia. In the towns, the quar-

ters of the newcomer Mayans who had arrived from the village regions looked like real ghettos: hastily put together structures of sheet iron and cardboard (in Bulgaria we call them "can – villas"), lack of any infrastructure, drug traffic – a real rival mach for "Stolipinovo" and "Nadezhda" and confirmation of the rule that ghettos all over the world are the same, no matter whether they are inhabited by Roma, Mayans, Arabs, or Afro-Americans.

Political participation

We asked about the political participation of the indigenous people in a country in which they are majority. We received answers too similar to those which we gave to the questions about the Roma political participation. The political parties in Guatemala purchase "Indian vote" in large numbers and with no exceptions: at some places

through the traditional community leaders, at others – through threats; persuasion and propaganda are so popular – although the country was studded with propaganda materials, nowhere we saw them to be written in any of the Mayan dialects.

On the posters and billboards there were no faces different from the white Caucasian

race. The Indians don't vote for the small Indian parties which appeared after the years of the Civil war. Even the Nobel Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchú has not managed to "break" that rule. We could not understand why the



Political participation



Mayans in Guatemala are not politically organized as the Indigenous in Bolivia (whose representative Evo Morales is President second term) or like those in Ecuador (where the Indian party Pachakutek is amongst the most important factors in the political life).

Probably the massacre of the most active elite during the Civil war and the intragroup conflicts contributed to this. The result is that only 4 of the Members of the parlia-

ment in Guatemala are Indians. Usually the Mayans are represented in the government by one minister – the Minister of Culture.

In the administration the officers with Indian features are visibly a small number, even though their number is constantly increasing and to be significantly higher than that of the Government officials with Roma features on the Balkans.

Gradually the number of people obtaining secondary or higher education increases, but it stays unproportionally low

Education

There was no need of statistics data to get convinced that the Mayans' health and educational status is considerably lower than that of the rest of the Guatemalans. In many of the Indian villages the schools teach only up to the third grade and after that children start work in the fields. At some places they walk for miles in order to attend school. There is no free transport to "focal" schools. The rule is most of the Indian children to finish

only basic education (sixth grade) or to drop off before that. Gradually the number of people obtaining second-

ary or higher education increases, but it stays unproportionally low. That is this comparatively scanty Indian middle class today is the engine of Mayans' struggle for decent living. For us, the members of Amalipe an organization actively working on the prevention of dropping off of Roma children from school the topic of early leaving of the educational system is painfully familiar. We saw that although the differences in the structure of the educational system, part of the reasons of the early leaving of the school are very similar: lack of motivation, lack of parents' commitment, early marriages (however here it is rather a result), including the lack of intercultural educa-

tion that would allow the Mayan and the Roma children see their cultures at school and to feel the school as their institution. We were amazed by the fact that in the history programmes in Guatemala the pre-Spanish history was reduced to two or three lessons and the Mayans were represented solely as a civilization which existed before the discovery of America. An Indian child can learn about the history of his or her ancestors and the traditions of his or her contemporaries as much as a Roma child can learn on the Balkans – in other words almost nothing. However Guatemala has tens of primary schools where they teach in Mayan.



Education

Of course, the differences between Guatemala and Bulgaria in respect of the education are considerable: our hosts kept being surprised that in Bulgaria there is free transport to every focal school, that there is free lunch and afternoon activities for the youngest children, that the teachers have higher education qualification (in Guatemala the teacher's qualification is obtained in the 12th grade), that the

school premises in Bulgaria are considerably bigger and better equipped than those in Guatemala. We explained that most of these acquisitions happen with means of the EU funds, but it obvious that Bulgaria invests more in its educational system, even in otherwise underfunded village schools.



Healthcare

The health problems that the Mayans in Guatemala come across are similar to those The Roma on the Balkans have, no matter that the health insurance systems are different. Enormous part of the Mayans is not health insured – a problem which a great part of the rest of the Guatemalans have. In fact the percentage of the health (and socially) insured people in Guatemala is only about 16% which makes the real functioning of the health and social systems impossible. In practice the state provides free health care for everybody: it concerns certain manipulations and is provided mostly in the hospitals. This is a great advantage for the big proportion of the health uninsured Guatemalans. The disadvantages are in the lower quality of services provided in the state hospitals,

the lack of consumables (paid by the patients), as well as in their geographical remoteness. The use of an ambulance (if at all there is such – at most places it is a luxury) even in cases of emergency is paid. Thus a great part of the inhabitants of the remote mountain villages can't use the free package of services. For Mayans treatment in hospital more a rarity, they use mostly the limited services provided by the local Health Centres built at municipal level in the bigger villages. That is why the ordinary Mayans most often use the services of local healers. Even the births are widely carried out at home. The bad living conditions, the low hygiene and health culture, as well as the difficulties in the access to quality health care services are the reason Guatemala to be at one of the first places in respect of

maternity and child death rate, and the life expectancy in the Mayan community to be considerably lower. By the way, during our whole journey we couldn't see Indians at age more than 50 – 55 years old.

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Self-organization and community mobilization

One of the most essential differences between the Guatemalan Mayans and the Balkan Roma which we observed was the degree of self-organization and mobilization. During the first four days we witnessed 3 demonstrations organized by different Mayan groups. The reason was a claim for adoption of a Law for Village Development. On the day when our group left Guatemala City and started a journey in the country our bus happened to be blocked for several hours on the Pan-American Motorway together with thousands of other vehicles. It turned out that Indian activists had blocked all the roads leading out of the capital, Notwithstanding the masks they were wearing it was obvious that enormous part of them are women. We talked to them to find out to what extent they understood the claims they stood for. It turned out that they know very well even details from the petitions for adoption of the law (village federations have been struggling for it for years) and that they are determined not to give in. They lifted the blockage only after they had achieved an agreement with the government.

In all communities we visited, the degree of self-organization and mobilization at local level was impressive. In practice every municipality and every village has community organization to which the Law for Civil Participation contributes. Periodically the local people elect their representatives in the Municipal Public Council, as well in the commissions for education and health care to it. Participation in the council is at absolutely voluntary principle (as a whole volunteering in Guatemala which has not been spoilt yet by the European funds, is a word which really has a meaning), but in practice everybody participates in the elections and

the elected are extremely responsible to their civil obligations. We were impressed by their faith that in that way they could achieve specific though small claims. We compared that faith with the skepticism spread among our Roma as well as the whole societies in Bulgaria and Macedonia.

Important peculiarity which we have to point out is that the self-organization and mobilization among the Mayans is mainly at local and municipal levels. Organized activities at regional or especially national level are rare. There are a lot of reasons for that, like the division between the separate Mayan communities and groups, as well as the contradictions between them is one of the main. The capacity of the activists we met was as for local and municipal level – they had a specific ideas, requirements and suggestions which they addressed predominantly to the municipal authorities. The State and its national institutions seemed too remote, and their cooperation rather imaginary for the locals. Virtually, nowadays there isn't a Mayan organization in Guatemala able to state and defend claims at national level. The lack of national intercession is extremely serious difficulty laid in front of the Mayan movement in Guatemala nowadays. Due to this difficulty the seething at the local level can't be channeled and to lead to stable results which would change the Mayans' lives.

Practically every municipality and every village has community organization that contributes to the citizenship participation law.

Women's participation



Arriving at the first communities, in which we had meetings – in Ixchiguán and Tectitan, we expected

to see predominantly male audience just like in every traditional culture. This however didn't happen.

The pleasant surprise turned out to be not a one time event situation, but a stable tradition – something we can't boast about on the Balkans – the active participation of women. In all four municipalities we visited the women constituted one third of the council participants and at some places even more.

Some of them are Presidents of the Councils and of the *Cocodes* in which they unite. One of the

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reasons for this situation our hosts pointed out was that the main purpose of the public councils was to improve the living conditions of the community and women are the people mostly involved with that. Another reason is that women are those who hold the community up as such – they preserve the traditions, keep the identity; try to teach the following generations to love their origins.

And in order the following generations to exist the living conditions have to be improved, maternal and infant death rate have to be decreased, the quality of health care has to be improved, etc.



Representatives of the community councils in Nebaj

Community monitoring of the health services

The results achieved are definitely present: in La Baroquia (Zona Reina) another ambulance has been procured, which is now property of the Community Council and the citizens do not pay for its services; in Nebaj the local hospital has improved significantly its work and has started servicing even the most remote villages treating its patients equally regardless of their origin;

The main purpose of our visits in the four municipalities was to compare the ways in which Community Monitoring of The Health Services was organized in Guatemala, Bulgaria and Macedonia. In the three countries this innovative way of supervision and evaluation is carried out after the so called "social audit" method or "community inquiry" developed by Prof. Abhijit Das who presupposes active participation of the local communities in the defining, carrying out and analysis of the main conclusions of the monitoring of health services as well as the follow up support to resolve the identified deficiencies. It turned out that this common methodological basis is realized in different ways in the three countries. Our colleagues from CEGSS in Guatemala work in communities which have already achieved a level or self-organization above the average level, They use the civil structures settled by the Law of Civil Participation – the Citizen's Councils and the health commit-

tees appointed to them to increase their capacity for better awareness in respect of the health services standards at a local level, monitoring of the provided health services and local advocacy (including establishing of contacts with institutions at national level to achieve the local claims). The results achieved are definitely present: in La Baroquia (Zona Reina) another ambulance has been procured, which is now property of the Community Council and the citizens do not pay for its services; in Nebaj the local hospital has improved significantly its work and has started servicing even the most remote villages treating its patients equally regardless of their origin; in Tectitan a donation with medicines has been received and the citizens do not pay for them any more... Small successes of great significance for the lives of the local people and the quality of the health services they receive. In Bulgaria, in many places Amalipe works with communities that are not organized.



Community monitoring of the health services

That is why considerable part of the initial efforts is put towards mobilization of the community and creation of social structures in it. thus for example the whole activity in the realization of a community based monitoring is assisted by Community Development Centers (CDC), in which two community moderators work - in every municipality in which community monitoring is organized a CDC is created, and it is not an already existing structure but one which is to be established. In every town or bigger village in the corresponding municipality there is a Community Development Club as well as volunteer groups (youth, women, and leader). Those structures organize weekly activities which are of im-

portance for the whole local community and they include representatives of the whole local community: for example clearing the quarters, information campaigns (on health, educational and other topics), celebration of holidays, community discussions (about the early marriages, Roma history and culture, etc.) The already established structures organize the community monitoring involving in it the most active parts of the local community. Later they also organize the advocacy at the local level to improve the provided services. Apart from that Amalipe organizes advocacy activities at national level through which it complements and supports the local advocacy carried out by the Commu-



nity Development Centers. Thus the conclusions which the community investigations reach give stimulus for change of the policies on the provided health services, which in great part of the cases is a necessary context for improvement of the provided services.

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Amalipe Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance is a leading Roma organization, working for the equal integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society. The organization plays a central role in organizing a Roma civic movement and advocating for Roma integration within the state institutions. Amalipe is a member of the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues (from 2006 to present) and the Consultative Council for Educational Integration within the Ministry of Education and it plays an active role in the work of both councils. The organization is also member of the Board of Center for Educational Integration of Children and Students from the Ethnic Minorities: branch of the Ministry of Education that implements Roma integration activities in the education field. The Chairman of the organization Deyan Kolev was elected as a representative of Roma NGOs in the Monitoring Committee of Human Resources Development Operational Program. Amalipe is also the only Roma NGO approved for observer in the Monitoring Committee of the National Strategic Reference Framework.



Instead of conclusion

Looking back we had the feeling that we had spent in Guatemala only several days. We left charged with a lot of ideas, inspired with hope by the success which our colleagues had been able to reach regardless of the conditions at which they work. We left with the idea that what we saw during our nine-day stay has to be seen by our community mediators, as well as to show what our communities have managed to achieve... all in all there is field for a lot of work together from now on.



Photo: Raphael Zepeda, CEGSS, Guatemala