



Mesoweb Publications

# The Aj Poop B'atz' Project

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In the sixteenth century, Q'eqchi' leader and visionary Aj Poop B'atz' changed the course of Q'eqchi' history. As he watched the Spanish forces invade western Guatemala and saw the devastation that they brought to neighboring communities he faced a choice: fight and risk the death of his people or accept the Spaniards in hopes of saving them. Noting the inevitability of Spanish invasion, he chose to welcome the Spaniards in peace to protect his community and Q'eqchi' practice. For this choice, he is revered today as a symbol of Q'eqchi' identity.

Today, 450 years after his death, Aj Poop B'atz' remains a prominent part of Q'eqchi' historical memory. In San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala, he is recognized as the town's founder and culture hero. His story is told by community elders and leaders, and Chamelqueños attribute their strength, perseverance, power, and authenticity to his sixteenth-century actions.

In 2006 I founded a collaborative work group in Chamelco, the Grupo Aj Poop B'atz', to investigate Aj Poop B'atz' and his cultural significance. Together several Chamelqueños and I collected oral narratives and historical documents about Aj Poop B'atz' from community elders, local officials, religious clergy, and others. Though we learned a great deal about Aj Poop B'atz' through our work, we realized that the story was being lost as younger generations of Chamelqueños failed to learn it as their ancestors had. We sought ways to revitalize the story and to find outlets in which to share the results of our research.

In 2009 my collaborative group and I petitioned Chamelco's municipal government to establish an annual holiday honoring Aj Poop B'atz'. We proposed that August 3 serve as his holiday, to commemorate the date on which he was named "Lifelong Governor of the Verapaz region" by Spanish royal decree: August 3, 1555.

The municipal government accepted our proposal, creating an opportunity for the community to remember their founder and their history annually. We celebrated this holiday for the first time in 2010 with a *ceremonia maya*, a talk for Chamelco's school children, an ethnohistoric symposium, and a public marimba concert.<sup>1</sup> Chamelco has celebrated "Aj Poop B'atz' Day" each year since with a variety of historical and cultural activities. These events serve as a way for the community to regain the history and memory of their great leader.

My collaborators and I wanted to ensure that Chamelco's children learn the story of Aj Poop B'atz'. We noted that Chamelco's schools offer few opportunities for children to learn local history and have few documents that teach them about their powerful historical legacy. In 2012 my collaborator Sebastian Si Pop, Q'eqchi' activist and former president of the Q'eqchi' branch of the Academy of Mayan Languages, and I wrote a bilingual children's book about Aj Poop B'atz' for use in Chamelco's schools. The book, which is entitled *Li qawa' Aj Poop B'atz' ut li resilal xyu'ameb' laj Chameelk / Aj Poop B'atz' y la historia chamelqueña*, is written in Q'eqchi' and in Spanish. We donated 500 copies of this book to Chamelco's schools and other regional cultural institutions in June 2012. We were invited to present the book publicly at a gala celebrating Chamelco's annual fair and before all of Chamelco's school teachers at the municipal celebration of "Teacher Day." We also signed two contracts with local NGOs, giving them the rights to publish the book in Guatemala for more widespread use in local schools.

The book, which is written for third-to-sixth

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<sup>1</sup> The 2010 celebration and the children's book project were both financed by the Rollins College McKean grant, which is generously donated by the Elizabeth Morse Genius and Charles Hosmer Morse Foundation.

grade students, tells the life story of Aj Poop B'atz' and discusses his cultural significance. What follows is a short summary of the book. It is not a literal translation, but rather a summary of the information collected by the Grupo Aj Poop B'atz' through our collaborative investigations.

Aj Poop B'atz' was born in a distant village of Chamelco. At the time of his birth, lightning and thunder danced through the hills in recognition of the man who would become the last great king of the Q'eqchi'. He became *Aj Poop*, "leader," of the Q'eqchi' after the Spaniards abducted and killed the previous leader in 1529. He was elected because of the strength, wisdom, and cautious nature he possessed.

Aj Poop B'atz' prepared to resist the Spaniards, who sought to enter the region. While numerous Maya groups fell under Spanish rule, Aj Poop B'atz' tried to keep his people free of Spanish domination. Nevertheless he quickly saw the destruction and death that they brought to neighboring communities. To protect his people from conquest, Aj Poop B'atz' received the Spaniards in peace. He accepted Catholicism, enabling the region's peaceful settlement and protecting Chamelqueños from forced conversion and death.

In 1544 the Spanish friars took Aj Poop B'atz' to Spain as a representative of Mesoamerica's indigenous population to meet Spanish king Carlos V. They walked through caves under the earth, flew through the air, or travelled by sea to Spain. With them, they took gifts of quetzal feathers, birds, and textiles. After a long and arduous journey, the men arrived at night at the king's palace. Aj Poop B'atz' lined the throne room with gifts he brought from Chamelco. In the morning the king awoke to the birds' songs and asked to meet Aj Poop B'atz' immediately. As Aj Poop B'atz' was led into the throne room, he was ordered to bow for the king. He refused, replying that "one king does not bow for another king." Stunned, King Carlos admired Aj Poop B'atz' and gave him silver crosses, cloth, incense burners, and most famously, silver bells for Chamelco's church.

Returning to Chamelco, Aj Poop B'atz' erected a cathedral to house the Spanish bells and to serve as the town's center of worship. Many Chamelqueños state that he did so in one night, whistling the spirits of the wood into place. Some say that Aj Poop B'atz' called out to the forest animals for assistance. He built the church in one night they say. In recognition of his power and efforts, the Spanish king named Aj Poop B'atz' governor of the newly established Vera Paz region on August 3, 1555. This act, however, was unnecessary because Aj Poop B'atz' had already been

elected as the region's leader by Q'eqchi' elders in 1529.

At the end of his life, Aj Poop B'atz' entered a cave in the side of a sinkhole in Chamil, a village of Chamelco. He did so to hide as the Spaniards were pursuing him because they felt threatened by his great power. Here he died. Chamelqueños visit this site today to perform ceremonies for his blessing during planting and harvest seasons.

Today Aj Poop B'atz' is a fundamental part of Q'eqchi' history and culture. He is the founder of Chamelco and the grandfather of all Chamelqueños. Without his vision of peace, Chamelco would not be a community that loves peace and conserves its language and the other cultural practices that sustain its identity. For his work and his battle for the Q'eqchi' community, he will be an unforgettable part of the lives of all Chamelqueños, of yesterday, today, and always.