

To the people of Guatemala and the world

WE REPUDIATE AND CONDEMN THE MURDER OF GRANDFATHER AJQ'IJ DOMINGO CHOC CHE

The organisations and individuals signing this declaration are shocked and outraged by the brutal murder of the elder, grandfather Ajq'ij Domingo Choc Che. To burn a human being alive expresses a viciousness, cruelty and lack of minimal respect for life. What we know about this horrifying act is this: for the past months, there have been rumours in the Chimay community of Guatemala that Tat Domingo was a sorcerer. This became the motivation for deadly violence against him by a murderous mob. As in other cases, it appears that members of the same community have come to commit such a criminal act, led by a fanatical religious interpretation of the Judeo-Christian paradigms and monotheistic biblical culture.

Tat Domingo Choc Che was a father of a family, a community member who worked to help others, and an expert in the knowledge of herbs and medical plants and their ancestral uses. His specialty in Mayan science was *Aj Ilonel*. He belonged to the Council of Mayan Spiritual Guides Releb'aal Saq'e 'and was part of a team of Guatemalan and European scientists who worked on research projects with the University of Zurich, Switzerland, the University College London in the UK, as well as the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala. He was a man with a recognised track record in his community, his region and at the international level.

Mayan culture is holistic; this means the knowledge of plants and healing ceremonies are intrinsically linked. Therefore, Grandfather Domingo was Aj-ilonel and Ajq'ij at the same time: to work with the plants, one must also be in communion with the air, water, fire and earth, as well as with the ancestors. Tat Domingo was an essential part of his community, and some of his murderers and their children would certainly have been cared for by him in the past.

And yet, on Saturday 6 June 2020, Junlajuj K'at, in the community of Chimay, municipality of San Luis Petén, under the accusation of being a "sorcerer", Tat Domingo was burned alive. He ran like a human torch, while his attackers pursued him and kept him from finding refuge, until he finally fell and burned to death. The videos of this mob violence with their disturbing images have "gone viral" and reveal the identities of those who participated in this abominable crime. For the aggressors, the sorcerer is dead; but for us, Tat Domingo has become a star of light, of life, of truth and justice. He will be remembered in our invocations and in our ceremonies. No one can stop that.

The persecution and criminalisation of specialists in Mayan traditional knowledge has never stopped. Indeed, it dates from the founding of the first colony by the Spanish. Invaders and missionaries, in the name of God, the church and the King of Spain, captured, tortured and murdered the grandmothers and grandfathers Ajkun, Iyom, Ajq'ij and others. In addition, they burned the books, papyri and paintings, the masterpieces of our ancestors. During the internal armed conflict in the 1980s, the army high command, as part of its counterinsurgency strategy, linked "witchcraft" with support for the guerrillas, as a way to justify the criminalisation, persecution, torture and murder of the grandmothers and grandfathers – the wise men and women of the Mayan culture. This has left ongoing impacts in the social imagination, also because the centralised, autonomous or semi-autonomous state institutions and civil society related to education have no policies to promote the teaching of, and respect for, the

traditions and scientific knowledge of indigenous peoples, which does not separate spirituality from knowledge, because it is about life itself.

The murder of Tat Domingo Choc Che is one more example of the discrimination, racism and xenophobia that exist in all spheres of Guatemalan society. Far from being eradicated, they continue their damage through the institutional work of the educational system, social media, churches, sects, political and judicial systems, and so forth.

The scientific value of the knowledge that Mayan and other indigenous peoples hold is recognised and embodied in governmental commitments, included in the Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In this Peace Agreement, the State of Guatemala recognises the existence and ongoing practices of discrimination and racism, and it agrees that as long as they are not eradicated, the country will never be able to progress. The progress of the Maya is progress that advances the entire country.

In the Mayan culture, being Ajq'ij or Aj Ilonel implies a life mission for which extraordinary qualities are developed to preserve and transmit ancient Mayan knowledge of all aspects of life to the next generations. The person who is Ajq'ij channels the knowledge needed by individuals and communities, therefore, the Ajq'ij is considered to be the protector and teacher of the community. Not surprisingly, this role is contested by the priests and pastors, social and political leaders, teachers and others.

The killing of Mayan spiritual guides has been an ongoing catastrophe in the lives of the Mayan People, as historical references of their cultural knowledge and practices are annihilated. This loss has left a gap in the principles, values and norms of Mayan life. This void has been filled by the fundamentalist sects of the Catholic and Evangelical religions that have proliferated in the communities. Today, there are Catholics and Evangelicals who criticise the practice of Mayan spirituality; for example, when they see red or black candles, they describe them as being the colours of the devil. This conception is entirely contrary to the traditional Mayan philosophy and worldview, in which red and black correspond to a vision and location in the cosmos. Regrettably, ignorance and religious fanaticism have led some people to justify repressive, destructive and murderous acts such as the one against Tat Domingo Choc Che, who for the Maya was the embodiment of a wise grandfather.

In Guatemala, religion constitutes a fundamental aspect of most people's lives. Religious trends have changed over time, and today the Catholic and Evangelical churches have the largest number of followers; consequently, they have the greatest responsibility to moderate the forces of sectarianism and transform the religious fanaticism in our society. We need beliefs that contribute to the common good.

IN THE FACE OF THIS MURDER, WE DEMAND:

That civil society organisations, both indigenous and non-indigenous, speak out and denounce this despicable act for what it is: a violation of human dignity and every basic principle of human rights. We must unite our voices to demand swift and complete justice, and commit to working together to eradicate discrimination, racism and xenophobia against indigenous peoples.

That communication and social media report the truth and contribute to stop the mounting persecution against the Aj Ilonel, Aj Iyom, Aj Q'ijab' and other knowledgeable grandmothers and grandfathers, specialists in the various fields of science that express the Mayan worldview.

That universities, research centres and other institutions recognise indigenous knowledge as science, and include it in their teaching programs with the participation of the Mayan wise elders – putting an end to the extractivism of Mayan ancestral knowledge. To the universities with which Tat Domingo Choc Che collaborated, we ask that they provide support with legal advice and other means within their reach, to safeguard the physical and spiritual integrity of the members of the Choc Che family.

WE FURTHER URGE:

That the government of Dr. Giammattei, with the participation of Ajq'ijab' organisations, develop and implement security policies to protect the free exercise of Mayan spirituality in any ceremonial centre, whether in private or public spaces.

That the justice system - MP, PNC and OJ - immediately carry out on-site investigations to collect evidence and initiate criminal proceedings to bring to justice those responsible for the murder of Tata Domingo Choc Che. We demand justice from the Guatemalan State Justice System so that our country's colonial heritage does not continue to harm our great Mayan civilisation.

That the Episcopal Conference of Guatemala, the Evangelical Alliance and the authorities of other Christian religious denominations take an active role: in press conferences or in other public spaces throughout the country, they must guide their parishioners to respect Mayan spiritual guides and their ceremonies. There must be no more attempts on the lives of Ajq'ijab' caused by religious fanaticism.

That the PNC enter the community immediately to provide protection for Tat Domingo's family members, in light of the fact that those responsible for his violent murder are from the same community and may threaten family members to intimidate them and keep them from seeking justice.

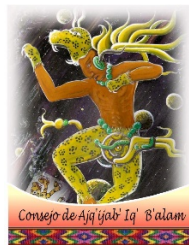
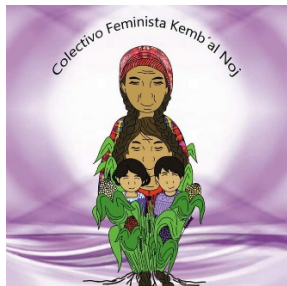
That the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman be included as an adherent plaintiff in the case, in order to guarantee the impartiality and objectivity of the application of justice, and to prevent the case from being stalled or abandoned. There must be no impunity.

ILONEL DOMINGO CHOC CHE VIVE!
WA 'MINGO, WANKAT SA' QACH'OOL, JUNELIK.

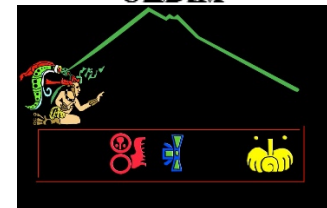
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