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# Laja'b'kanal yet' ko' q'in, the Lasting Dances of Our Fiestas: Music Embodiment as a Collective Memory of the Maya Diaspora

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**Abstract:** Music embodiment, or dance, has long been practiced by the ancient Mayas for religious purposes and, since the Spanish Inquisition, their descendants have maintained and reinvented their dances during the patron saint fiestas. Yet, little is mentioned about the collective, music embodiment of the Maya Diaspora. The purpose of this article is to shed light on the music embodiment and collective memory of the Maya Diaspora, focusing on the Maya Q'anjob'al communities in the United States. Such participant-observations have, however, been largely derived from research conducted in rural Alamosa, Colorado and urban Los Angeles, California along with attending the annual National Pastoral Maya Conferences for the past decade. This research reveals that the Maya Q'anjob'al Diaspora often manifest their social dances at the latter-part of their fiestas, which embodies the collective memory of the homeland. The sustainability of the marimba's music embodiment as a collective memory demonstrates perseverance, and nostalgia for the Maya Q'anjob'al Homeland. I give special thanks to Virves Garcia for his interviews, collaborations, and lessons on cultural, religious, musical, historical, and dance issues in diaspora.

*Chon kanalwi ko toj ko sataq  
kax chi joyon tzalojk'ulal.  
Suytoq ti' jeq' axka yib'an q'inal  
kay chi yun b'eyik' ko q'inal*

We dance moving forward  
and encircle happiness.  
We revolve like the earth;  
this is how our life walks.

—Virves Garcia

The Maya Q'anjob'al communities reminisce their autochthonous *q'in* (a fiesta) in diaspora by evoking the sonority of the marimba with nostalgic melodies, as they, one by one, part-take in their *kanal*—a type of socio-participatory dance. Drawing from the lyrics of *xal chikay* (Grandmother) by Maya Q'anjob'al composer, Virves Garcia, the stanza above elaborately portrays the motion of the *kanal*, where couples dance in a large, counter-clockwise circle, as they sway side-to-side and forward and backward to the vibrating pulse of the marimba. Additionally, Garcia's text not only visualizes a Maya cosmological concept of time and space; it also manifests in the repeated rhythmic movement of the *kanal*. Throughout the numerous Maya diasporic communities in the United States, the Maya people come together for their hometown's annual patron saint fiesta, where they embody the *kanal*, not only as a way to celebrate and pay homage to the saint, but also to maintain their cultural, religious, and musical heritage in the diaspora.

Music embodiment, also known as dance, has long been practiced by the ancient Mayas for religious purposes and, since the Spanish Inquisition, their descendants have maintained and reinvented their dances during patron saint fiestas (Looper, 2009). The purpose of this article is to shed light on the collective music embodiment and memory of the Maya Diaspora, specifically, focusing on the Q'anjob'al community and fiesta. Not only do I explore the relationship between traditional music and its embodiment, but I also explore the historical, musical, and ontological significances of their fiesta and social dance. The ancient Maya danced as a medium to evoke their ancient deities. Over the course the history of the *kanal*, it has attained specific Maya cosmological and ontological significance that pertains to ancient ideology and rituals, along with the transplantation of colonial music and dances, and the cultural and social values of Q'anjob'al heritage.

Various scholars from interdisciplinary fields have explored the concept of memory and its relationship with music embodiment. In the article "Embodying Music: Matching Music and Dance in Memory," Robert W. Mitchell and Matthew Gallaher (2001) claim that musical memory uses auditory, emotional, visual, and kinesthetic representations of the elements of music that have been internalized, memorized, and manifested in different perceptions (p. 69). Furthermore, I draw from renowned dance scholar and ethnomusicologist, Adrienne L Kaeppler (1991), who explores "Memory and Knowledge

in the Production of Dance,” emphasizing the social construct of movement, motifs, and memory of dance as a collective memory that results in the process and product of music embodiment through the motion of the human body (p. 190). The Diasporic Maya Q'anjob'al musical and cultural manifestations are markers that contribute to how Q'anjob'al people construct and sustain their Maya identity in the diaspora. Additionally, the sustainability of music embodiment as a collective memory demonstrates perseverance of heritage and nostalgia for the homeland.

## Methodology

During my time with the Q'anjob'al communities in Alamosa, Colorado (Espiritu Maya) and Los Angeles, California (Association Q'anjob'al Ewulense)—both well-established and organized cultural, musical, and resource associations—I studied the history and practice of their music and dances. My research relies on anthropological and ethnomusicological research methods, with emphasis in participant-observation, audio and visual recording of interviews and the fiestas, and most importantly, the enculturation of the people's music through “bi-musicality” (Hood, 1960). Additionally, I include my own musical and identity enculturation and experience as a Maya Q'anjob'al American. Although raised in Southern Colorado, my parents were able to teach me my ancestral language, Q'anjob'al, which enabled me to communicate with the elders in Colorado and Los Angeles throughout my participant observation, interviews, and ethnomusicological lessons. Furthermore, I will be incorporating various Q'anjob'al terms to identify essential concepts. Lastly, I include my experience of attending the annual National Pastoral Maya Conferences for the past decade.

Since my arrival in Los Angeles at the latter-part of 2016—to attend graduate school at UCLA—I have collaborated with the Association Q'anjob'al Ewulense in organizing the community's main cultural and patron saint fiesta of Santa Eulalia (*Jolom Konob*)<sup>1</sup>, where I took part as a master of ceremony along with dancing the *kanal*. I also interviewed various community members who maintain and practice the *kanal* as well as those who continue to practice the *tx'aj* (Maya rituals) and follow the *Txol'qin*<sup>2</sup> (the Maya Divinatory Calendar). My main interlocutors from both places consisted of the following individuals: Virves Garcia, Q'anjob'al music composer in Los Angeles; Francisco Lucas,

1        Literal translation: “Head of the Village”. The Q'anjob'al name of Santa Eulalia not only refers to the name of the village (LaFarge, 1947) but has taken the name of where the Maya tribal council in Santa Eulalia meet (a place where the Q'anjob'al gather for discussion and preform *miman txaj* [big Maya ritual]) (Deuss, 2009).

2        “Sequence of Life”; Q'anjob'al translation by Virves Garcia. One of three Mayan Calendars used among the Highland Mayas. It is a 260-day cycle used by Mayan shamans and chief praysayers. Q'anjob'al traditionalists use this calendar for religious and personal divination and celebration (Deuss, 2007, p. 31-2).

Alamosa's Maya community leader and *aj'tx'aj* (chief praysayer) and an ambassador to the *Pat'qum Mayab'* (Maya Parliament of Jolom Konob); Lucia Nicolas, wife of Francisco Lucas and an advocate for cultural and spiritual heritage; *Matkax* (his Maya name), an *aj'tx'aj*, an ambassador, and leader in the *Q'anjob'al tx'aj* in Los Angeles; and other various Maya Americans who grew up immersed in the culture and musical practice of the *kanal*.

In my participant-observation of the *kanal*, I used both audio and visual recordings to capture the music of the marimba, while at the same time, recorded the embodied movements of the *kanalwom* (participatory dancers). I took part in the *kanal* to further conceptualize the music embodiment and aesthetic of the *kanal*, and while I was not dancing, I observed the *kanalwom*, recorded various marimba performances, and collaborated with the *aj'sonlom* (the marimbists) in accompanying the *kanal* with music. As for the several *tx'aj* that I had witnessed, I was not able to make any audiovisual recordings due to its strict religious and sacred context. Through the courtesy of the members of the *aj'tx'aj*, I attained insight into the Maya *Q'anjob'al* ancestral, religious and ontological cultural practices and heritage.

Mantle Hood (1960) has emphasized "bi-musicality," which refers to the comprehension of the people's music and its aesthetic through mastery of performance. In my early studies of music, not only have I been enculturated with the aural and rhythms of the traditional marimba at an early age, I began my training of the marimba as an adolescent where I eventually learned all the voicing of the marimba. In other words, I learned how to play, harmonize, and accompany the melodies along with the traditional marimba techniques that are essential to making music. With the transplantation of Iberian music during the colonial period, there remains a musical commonality that has been reinvented by the Maya people, which plays an essential role in how the *Q'anjob'al* musicians make and conceptualize the autochthonous music.

### A Collective Memory of the Maya *Q'anjob'al* People

The Maya-*Q'anjob'al* people lived in their homeland long before the Spanish set foot in the New World. Nestled in the northern Cuchumatán Highlands of Huehuetenango in western Guatemala, the Maya *Q'anjob'al* people currently inhabit the four municipalities of San Juan Ixcoy (*yichkox*), San Pedro Soloma (*tz'ulumá'*), Santa Eulalia (*jolom konob*), and Santa Cruz Barillas (*yal imox*), along with San Miguel (Acatán) and San Rafael (La Independencia), which form the boundaries and settlements of the *Q'anjob'al* people. The *Q'anjob'al* language is one of twenty-one official Mayan languages spoken throughout Guatemala, ranking it as the fifth highest in a number of speakers (Clark, 2017). Although

various scholars of different fields have conducted studies on the Q'anjob'al people, some of the earliest discovered documents and manuscripts come from the local Maya tribal council's Ordenanza, or community box, containing some of the earliest known colonial documents. Other important scholarly works come from the early 20th-century ethnography of two early scholars by the names of Oliver LaFarge and Douglas Byers, who documented the memories, practices, and knowledge of the Maya *Pop'al Ti* (Jacaltec), *Chuj*, and *Q'anjob'al* people. Their important observations recount the retention and practice of the Ancient Maya sacred long count of day and life (*txolilal ku yetoq txol'kin*) and the traditional patron saint fiestas (*k'in*) (La Farge and Byers, 1931). Eventually, La Farge would journey solo to Santa Eulalia in 1932, revealing the remaining memories of the Ancient Maya *tx'aj* (prayers or rituals), the autochthonous music and dance-dramas of the Catholic saint fiestas, and their sociocultural practice (La Farge, 1947).

Around the mid-1900s, the Maryknoll Order reintroduced Catholicism to the northern Cuchumatán Highlands. This led to a decrease in the practice of Maya-Q'anjob'al *tx'aj* among the chief praysayers and the ordinary people. During this intense period of re-evangelization, Maryknoll Father Daniel Jensen led the conversion in Santa Eulalia through several methods, with music being one of the main tools (O'Brien-Rothe, 2015). Father Jensen had discovered several Colonial music manuscripts—within the Colonial documents held by the Maya Ordenanza in the region—revealing one special music homage to Sancta Olaya (Santa Eulalia). This alternative name is as expressed in the lyrics of the music, which ethnomusicologist Linda O'Brien-Rothe transcribed into modern notation, so that Jensen's congregation could sing it (see endnote 15 of introduction in O'Brien-Rothe, 2015, p. 202). Ultimately, Father Jensen would play a significant role in this process to increase the number of Maya Catholic converts in the region.

These colonial music manuscripts from the region have been extensively studied by musicologists, revealing some of the earliest Catholic music enculturation and doctrines in the region (Borg, 1985; Girard, 1981; Stevenson, 1964). Musicologist Robert Stevenson (1951, 1964, 1968, 1970) documented several of these Q'anjob'al music manuscripts. From my personal examination of Stevenson's work and analyzing some of his transcribed music, I infer that these music manuscripts were, perhaps, once commissioned for the patron saint fiestas during the early years of the church in Santa Eulalia and the nearby vicinities.

In recent years, the Maya *txol'kin* and its practical philosophy, count, and enculturation have experienced revitalization among the Maya people in the homeland and the diaspora. One community member, while explaining the ancient Maya people's wisdom of and respect for the land, water, and natural surroundings, said: "it is necessary

to pray to both God and the land. First comes God, who represents the soul of our body as he is our boss and savior. Moreover, afterward, we have to mention the land . . . because it is from the land that we eat, and we sleep and walk on the land . . . We must discuss the sacred nature of the land...because the land gives us life” (Popkin, 2005, p. 693). Although the Maya Q’anjob’al tribal councils and elders are at the forefront of the revitalization movement in Guatemala, a few of the diasporic community members in the U.S. continue to conserve and practice the sacred Maya *txol’kin* and traditional *tx’aj*.

Components that Eric Popkin describes of the *tx’aj*, (which I have also witnessed) includes burning pine splits, copal incense, wax candles before cross shrines, and counting the sacred *txol’kin* (Popkin, 1999, p. 270). During the 2017 gathering of the four Q’anjob’al *aj’tx’aj* for their annual *Patq’um Mayab’* (council discussion) in Los Angeles—who are the ambassadors of the chief elders in *jolom konob’* to the Diaspora—I had the opportunity to join them where they also performed several *tx’aj* throughout the few days. This religious-political practice and memory represent the continuity of the *cabildo* and *cofradías* during Colonial Guatemala. Their effort in sustaining this autochthonous and sacred heritage shows the revitalization of such ancient memory and practice, which has traveled from the homeland and blossomed in the diaspora. However, this traditional practice remains threatened by encroaching religious denominations; but with resilience and unity among the diasporic Maya people, such ancient practice can thrive in such a diverse and secular society as the United States.

### The Maya Q’anjob’al Diasporic Communities

In recent years, the Q’anjob’al Diaspora has been studied by various scholars from diverse fields like anthropology (Burns, 1993, 2000; Wellmeier, 1998a, 1998b, 2000; Loucky, 2000), sociology (Popkin, 1999, 2005); history (LeBaron, 2006, 2012); and even in ethnomusicology (Clark, 2017). Notably, the original roots of the Maya Q’anjob’al Diaspora in the United States can be traced back to the people of San Miguel Acatán, who first migrated in the early 1970s for labor opportunities, followed by the rest of the Q’anjob’al people from the nearby villages (Clark, 2017, p. 124). Many sought asylum in Los Angeles, while others found economic opportunity in other states. Those who settled in Los Angeles found residence in neighborhoods like Pico-Union, Westlake, and later in South Los Angeles (Clark, 2017; Hamilton & Chinchilla, 2001b, 2001a, 2011; Popkin, 1999, 2005). James Loucky acknowledges that one of the first Mayan organizations developed in Los Angeles in 1986 was under the name IXIM— “Corn” in most Mayan languages (Loucky, 2000, p. 220). Through this organization, other Mayan communities in Los

Angeles branched off and created their own “hometown associations”. Of the Q'anjob'al people in Los Angeles, they came from San Pedro Soloma, Santa Eulalia, and Santa Cruz Barillas. Clark (2017) reports that there is no organization from San Juan Ixcoy. People of Santa Eulalia make up the majority of the Q'anjob'al population.

Additionally, others have formed communities in states like Arizona (Wellmeier, 1998b), Colorado (O'Connor 2008, 2012; Ludwig 2012), Florida (Burns, 1993), Georgia (LeBaron, 2012; Lopez & LeBaron, 2012), Nebraska, Illinois, and Tennessee, just to name a few (Clark, 2017). Sister Nancy Wellmeier, an anthropologist, has conducted extensive research and humanitarian work with the Q'anjob'al migrants in several of the states mentioned earlier; she has made an impact in organizing several diasporic communities and developed local organizations, e.g. Los Angeles, California; Indiantown, Florida; Mesa, Arizona; and Alamosa, Colorado. Her fieldwork in Florida revolved around the patron saint festivals and the marimba, examining how these cultural markers aid in constructing identity (Wellmeier, 1998a). In 1991, with the help of Father David Lopez (2012), a Maya Pop'al Ti from Jacaltenango, who was once the pastor of the parish in Santa Eulalia, congregated the people of Santa Eulalia in Los Angeles to establish a formal confraternity previously known as *Fraternidad Ewulense Q'anjob'al* or simply as FEMAQ (Clark, 2017, p. 127). It was this confraternity that branched out into other Q'anjob'al communities in other states. Emphasis on religious and cultural practices encouraged the community to stick together; for example, the community would plan activities like sports tournaments, their annual patron saint celebrations, and other religious and cultural events and fundraising (Wellmeier, 1992b; Burns, 1993, 2000). Just a side note, I had met Wellmeier at a young age when she first visited Alamosa with Father David Lopez, in organizing the local community in the mid-1990s. Although I do not have a clear recollection of the visits, my parents have kept memories of their visit through oral stories, picture, and audiovisual recordings.

Sister Wellmeier and Father Lopez played a significant role in establishing the Maya Q'anjob'al community (*Espiritu Maya*) in Alamosa, Colorado. Early Maya migration to Alamosa began in the late 1970s, where agricultural employment could be found; specifically, Alamosa became the central hub for Maya migrants because of the mushroom farm—many of the elders can relate in picking mushrooms back in the homeland—where the majority of its employees are Q'anjob'al (Ludwig et al., 2012; O'Connor, 2008, 2012). Rural Alamosa is nestled at the center of the San Luis Valley, which is surrounded by the high-altitude peaks of the Colorado Rockies. Similar to Los Angeles the first people migrating to Alamosa came from San Miguel Acatán. According to Sheryl Ludwig (2012), the population of the Q'anjob'al community is roughly around



500, with the majority consisting of young and first generations who attend the local school and university (Ludwig, 2012, p. 32).

Eventually, with the help of Father David and Sister Nancy, Maya communities formed the National Pastoral Maya in 1997, with its mission aimed at preserving cultural as well as religious identity and practice within the Catholic Church (Wellmeier, 1992b; Clark, 2017). With funding from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Pastoral Maya has been able to uphold its mission as well as organizing its conference annually, which initially took place in Los Angeles in 1999 (LeBaron, 2012; Lopez & LeBaron, 2012). According to Alan LeBaron (2006, 2012), the lead founder of the Maya Heritage Community Project at Kennesaw State University in Georgia, the goals of the Pastoral Maya conference include spiritual and cultural sustainability. In my experience over the past decade in attending the conference, diasporic communal collaboration has increased with various states and continues to integrate new communities by hosting its annual conference. Just within the last five years, it has hosted the conference in communities like Greenville, South Carolina (2015 and 2016) and Cookeville, Tennessee (2017 and 2018), each having the opportunity to host it for two consecutive years. This upcoming year, it will be held for the first time in Seymour, Indiana, by the Maya Chuj community. In the beginning years, conference attendees were in the majority Q'anjob'al, but in recent years, several Maya Chuj communities have joined. During my first attendance of the conference in 2008, which took place in Villa Maria, Pennsylvania, community leaders from each state dominated the meeting, but since the 2009 Conference in Omaha, Nebraska, youth participation has increased. In Cookeville, Tennessee, the conference has seen a drastic increase in youth who come from various communities, but surprisingly, most of the local attendees consisted of Maya Chuj youths, aging from toddlers to young adults. What surprised me is how educated the youths are in their mother tongue, Maya Chuj. As more youths continue to attend the conference, the mission of Pastoral Maya looks towards the future of the Maya Americans who are growing up in the United States of America.

### **Marimba, Music Embodiment and Fiesta in the Maya Diaspora**

In the Guatemalan homeland, the Q'anjob'al people have maintained and continue to embody the *kanal*, during fiestas lasting several days while observing the patron saint of the town. Patron saint fiestas, throughout its history in the New World, draws pilgrimages of devoted followers from a nearby villages and afar. One of the several main attractions of the fiesta is the *kanal*, commonly performed in pairs forming concentric

circles and moving in a counter-clockwise motion, with the men grasping their hands together behind their backs, and the women grasping their dress with their fingertips. (Clark, 2017; Deuss, 2007; Looper, 2009; O'Brien-Rothe, 2015). In the nostalgic, collective memories of the Q'anjob'al diaspora, this music embodiment has made its way along the journey, manifesting in the various communities throughout the United States.

It is said to be that the kanal had been danced to the violin (*tx'ankan pay* or *tz'a'pay*) and the guitar (*te'chalbal waqab'*), leading to the argument that it may be a derivative of the colonial-era Iberian dance Zarabanda; even the term Zarabanda continues to roam among Q'anjob'al elders, especial among the musicians (Clark, 2017; O'Brien-Rothe, 2015). Over the centuries the dance has appeared during the fiestas and social events where it is danced in front of the marimba. In Q'anjob'al, the marimba is known as *te'son*, which has great significance in their identity since Santa Eulalia has been known for fabricating the marimba; currently known as *la cuna de la marimba* (cradle of the marimba) (Camposeco Mateo, 1992; Pellicer 2005:90; Clark 2017:41). My theory is that the Q'anjob'al name of the marimba, *te'son*, might reference the popular style of marimba music. The prefix *te'* translates to wooden, and the suffix *son* may be referring to the style of their repertoire that the marimba is known to play. The *son* style varies in Guatemala, as ladinos have incorporated the traditional *sónes* in their repertoire, which consists of *són típico*, *són chapín*, *són barreño*, *són ladino*, *són de Pascua* and folkloric *són* (Lehnhoff, 2005, p. 234). Among the Mayas, the marimba repertoire includes *tx'aj'ilal bit'* (ritual) music and *bit'al te'son*, Zarabanda, or traditional music, which is characterized by the melancholic melodies, the simple harmonies, and the *sesquialtera* (characterized by the rhythmic alternation 2:3 proportional value), which results in abundance of hemiola (Lehnhoff, 2005, p. 235). In other words, it can be defined by the prevalent ostinato, where the diminishing of two pulses into three pulses in the same time duration (Navarrete Pellicer, 2005, p. 79).

Today the marimba is an emblem of Guatemala as the national instrument politically and has become a musical marker of national and ethnic identity (Godinez, 2002; Lehnhoff, 2005; Navarrete Pellicer, 2005). In its history, it has evolved from its initial prototype, the marimba de *tecomaté* (gourd marimba) to the marimba *sencilla* (the diatonic marimba) to the contemporary marimba *doblé* (chromatic marimba) (Lehnhoff, 2005; Navarrete Pellicer, 2005; Clark, 2017, p. 42). Well near the end of the 20th century, the Q'anjob'al people were still using the marimba *sencilla*, along with either a trio or quartet of saxophone (i.e., two altos and a tenor, or two altos, a tenor, and baritone). Just recently in the last twenty years, the younger Q'anjob'al marimbist made the first transition to the marimba *doblé*. As a result of the Maya Diaspora, there has been a significant evolution on the instrumentation of the Q'anjob'al marimba ensemble with the first importation of

the keyboard synthesizer among the marimbist in Santa Eulalia and Barillas in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Clark, 2017). In its current stage of development, the marimba ensemble has taken up a technological and electronic aesthetic which Clark (2017) has described as a “marimba orquesta electronica” (an electronic marimba orchestra), consisting of the chromatic marimba, drum set, an electric bass, and several electronic keyboard synthesizers, becoming the popular instrumentation among the marimbists both in the homeland and in diaspora (p. 46).

Since the establishment of a community in diaspora, the Q’anjob’al people have maintained their *kanal* in diaspora. Some of the earliest mentions of the *kanal* and the marimba music in the diaspora have come from several scholars (Burns, 1993, 2000; Camposeco, 2000; Wellmeier, 1998a, 1998b). Alan Burns (1993) worked with Q’anjob’al migrants in southern Florida, investigating Maya migrant hardships while shedding light on the cultural and musical practices of the community. He has collaborated with Jeronimo Camposeco (2000), a Maya-Jakaletoko who immigrated to Florida. The Mayas of Indiantown, Florida have maintained their religious and cultural heritage, where the marimba and the *kanal* manifest during their social gatherings and religious fiestas. Burns (1993) observed “young people dance to the music while several hundred people stand around in a huge semicircle . . . sometimes held on Saturday night” (p. 54-55). Burns stressed the aesthetic of these occasions as a place of community socialization and enculturation:

Traditional clothing is worn, children are taught to dance to marimba music, and the queen of the fiesta [who represents the local diasporic community] work hard to prepare speeches in Maya, Spanish, and English. As the fiesta has evolved, the cultural activities have become more North American, with booths, raffle, and the incorporation of other ethnic groups in the events (1993, p. 139).

Traditional and folkloric regalia are worn by the women especially; the music embodiment is taught to the younger generation; a queen, a princess, *ix uninal* (the daughter of) or *ix xumakil* (she who blossoms) is crowned by her predecessor; the event fundraises; and, most importantly, the marimba and the *kanal* have remained the main attraction of social gatherings and celebration.

This attraction of learning to play the marimba has spread across the diasporic community from Los Angeles to Indiantown to Alamosa. In Los Angeles, Virves Garcia, marimba director of the Q’anjob’al marimba youth group “Marimba Juventud Maya”, enculturated

the young members who were interested in learning the marimba. The Association Q'anjob'al Ewulense organized the youth group, to maintain the music practice as a medium to celebrate the fiestas and to transmit the practice to the future generations. In Alamosa, Colorado, with the support of the local San Luis Valley Immigration Resource center and the music department at Adams State, Espiritu Maya was able to purchase a traditional marimba so that Q'anjob'al youth could learn to play the autochthonous instrument (Ludwig, 2012). Through this collaboration I learned to play the marimba. Currently in Alamosa, this marimba continues to be used for the community's many fiestas. In more recent studies, Logan Clark (2017) worked with the Q'anjob'al diaspora in Los Angeles, to include IXIM, the Asociación Q'anjob'al Ewulense, and their networks in the homeland. (Clark, 2017) Clark immersed herself in the music of the Q'anjob'al people, by experiencing, analyzing, and embodying their music and *kanal*, even learning the Q'anjob'al language. The *kanal*, as she points out, occurred at various religious and secular celebrations, but most importantly, during the annual patron saint fiestas (Clark, 2017, p. 134). During her three years of fieldwork with the community, she attended, observed and embodied the *kanal* in the diasporic community in Los Angeles and during her time in Santa Eulalia. Overall, her research points to how music constructs the Q'anjob'al identity and has emphasized the relationship of three fundamental features of the community: migration, music, and transnational networks.

### The Lasting Dance of a Fiesta

Since the organization of the Q'anjob'al diasporic communities in the 1990s, the Santa Eulalia community in Los Angeles has continued to manifest their main Fiesta of Santa Eulalia in early February. Since moving to Los Angeles, I have collaborated with the Association Q'anjob'al Ewulense in organizing their fiesta for the past three years, where several folkloric dances were prepared as well as the coronation of *Ix Xumakil Jolom Konob'* (the Floral Girl of Santa Eulalia) of Los Angeles. However, of all the fiestas and *kanal* that I have participated in, one stands out significantly during my fieldwork. As I mentioned earlier in this essay, in one particular gathering of the four *aj'txaj*, it so happened that their council meeting was scheduled the same time as the fundraising fiesta that has played a huge role in maintaining the communities transnational relationships with the homeland. The fund that had been collected at this particular fiesta aided towards the completion of the newly erected cathedral of *Tx'ajul Ewul* (Santa Eulalia) back in the homeland. For the Q'anjob'al community of Santa Eulalia, their patron saint continues to be an anchor for congregating the community to the fiestas. During the mid-2010s, the Santa Eulalia

community in Los Angeles received a newly constructed image of Santa Eulalia, held at the Holy Cross Church in South LA, where the Maya-Q'anjob'al community has the image on display (see figure 1). As a sacred and religious attraction, Santa Eulalia has aided the community in sustaining their Catholic faith and has become a religious marker in developing their religious, collective memory and Maya identity.



Figure 1: Statue of Santa Eulalia at Holy Cross Catholic Church in South LA. Both Santa Eulalia and the two women on the side wear the tradition white *Kolej* or *Hüipil* (Overall blouse) from *Jolom Konob*. (Photo by author)

During the night of this particular fiesta, we all expressed joy and excitement for the opportunity to dance our *kanal* and reunite with friends. Everyone was dressed for the occasion; the women wore their favorite traditional regalia, elaborated by the beautiful and colorful *kol* (Maya blouse) and *chan* (Maya dress) while the older gentleman wore their *ropil* (a Pancho made of thick wool felt). The fundraiser took place at the Holy Angels Church of the Deaf in Vernon, CA, where the *kanal* was danced. Surprisingly, as we entered the vicinity, the small, outdoor parking lot of the church had been transformed into the dance space. In my previous experiences of attending a *kanal*, they have all

occurred indoors; instead, the outdoor space provides the sufficient amount of space for the *kanal* to manifest for the anticipated *eb'kanalwom* (dancers). One of the directors of the Santa Eulalia community welcomed newcomers and visitors, as he announced the reason of the evening occasion: in part to celebrate the grand opening and completion of the new Catholic church in the homeland of Santa Eulalia, Guatemala. Community members in large numbers had already arrived, as many had attended early activities of the celebration. Rows of chairs surrounded the large dance space, except in one area, where a large mural stood, portraying a vivid illustration of the town of Santa Eulalia. As Wellmeier (1998b) observed during her early fieldwork with this community, she describes the same mural as:

One wall of the room was completely covered by a colorful painting of Santa Eulalia, the Guatemalan mountain village that once was home...with the whitewashed colonial church in the center, surrounded by the red-tiled and tin-roofed houses, the scene and the sound had transported the ten men (and me!) back into the Maya highlands, but it wasn't just a sensory illusion: these two focal points, the marimba and the parish church of Santa Eulalia, turned out to be key symbols for my understanding of the religiocultural association known as FEMAQ', the Fraternidad Ewulense Maya Q'anjob'al (p. 97).

Although the Colonial church in Santa Eulalia no longer stands, she presents an in-depth description of the early mural of the church, along with the parish and the marimba, which continues to have a significant effect on the confraternity and the contemporary community. What differentiates in my observation of the mural is that church's color; Wellmeier mentions a "whitewashed" Colonial structure, where I had observed a bright pink. This change could plausibly be the result of the blaze that scared the church in the past (Wellmeier, 1998b, p. 100). At the side of the mural stood five flag posts, on the right, the U.S. and Mayan flag; and on the left, the municipal flag of Santa Eulalia, the national flag of Guatemala, and the church flag of the Vatican. Towards the back of the venue, a vending area had been set-up where the congregation could purchase food and traditional beverages. The sales consisted of tacos, tamales, water, soda, and *uq'ejá'* or *atolé* (a maize drink). Among the audience and *kanalwom*, the women's colorful regalia pierced through the visual space and the large audience and dancers. The drastic, modern, and business-casual attire of the older men indicates the gradual decrease in use of the traditional *ropil*, whereas the three male *aj'tx'aj* ambassadors had worn the *ropil* for the occasion.

Nevertheless, those in attendance included the *Ix Xumakil Jolom Konob'* and the princess of the Maya Santa Eulalia community, and as the audience patiently waited for the next son to start up, they encouraged everyone to take part in the *kanal*, as the marimbist of Marimba Suspiro Q'anjob'ak prepares their next tune.

As one of several Q'anjob'al marimba ensembles in the Los Angeles area, Marimba Suspiro Q'anjob'al was booked for the evening. According to Clark (2017), this ensemble is known for performing the autochthonous Q'anjob'al *son* (p. 216). Their instrumentation consisted of a pair of chromatic marimba, four keyboard synthesizers, a drum set, a bass guitar, and several auxiliary percussions like the timbales used to compliment the main drum. The marimbas were stationed in an obtuse angle with the small tenor marimba on the left, the bass marimba on the right, facing towards the audience, and the keyboards standing at the vertex of the angle. The drum set was set-up in the middle-front of the marimbas, the bass guitarist stood beside the end of the "bass" marimba—as for the bass parts compliment and immitate each other—and the auxiliaries percussionist stood adjacent to the hi-hat. Clark considers the instrumentation as the "marimba orquesta electronica" (Clark, 2017, p. 46). Commonly, the range of their marimbas roughly covers the range of a grand piano, with the "tenor" marimba covering three octaves and a half, and the "bass" marimba covering just shy of five octaves. Hence, the group consists of seven marimbists, each designated with their voicing. The standard parts of the "tenor" marimba had consisted of the Tiple II, the Piccolo II, and the Tenor-Bass while the "bass" marimba consists of the Tiple I, the Piccolo I, the harmonic center, and the Bass (Lehnhoff, 2005, p. 228; Clark, 2017, p. 47-48). As for the Marimba Suspiro Q'anjob'al, they only consisted of six marimbists; the Tiple I of the "bass" marimba was missing. The essential tool to produce sound on the marimba requires the use of either two or three mallets. The five melodic parts use two mallets while the two harmonic accompaniments use three mallets. Overall, the harmonic center defines the rhythmic style of the accompaniment and the whole piece, with the bass aiding the center, and, similarly, the bass guitar reinforces the underlying base pulse. As for the other rhythmic accompaniment (the drum set and auxiliary percussion), they underlined the musical style that complements and reinforces the center. The role of the keyboardist is to reinforce the melody as a soloist; his part is performed in the B section of the form, where he has the freedom to improvise on the main melody.

Throughout the event and in between each tune, the reunion of friends never ends. The *aj'tx'aj* ambassadors reunited with old friends from their childhood, conversing and dancing. Their connection has remained stable over the years of being separated; they can easily recognize one another after all these years of living in the United States. During

the short period in between tunes, the audience waited for the next tune to begin. At the start of the melody, dancers—traditionally men—rushed in search of a partner as the dance space quickly accumulated with *kanalwom*. The *kanal* moved in a concentric counter-clockwise circle, with each adjacent partner having no contact with each other; traditionally, men would have their hand towards their back with the palm grasping together, and the women would have their hand down at their side, pinching the traditional *chan* (dress). Gender placement plays a crucial role and has its significance within each Q'anjob'al towns. For those who come from Santa Eulalia, they have the men dance inside the concentric circle, while the women would be on the outside. Clark (2017) emphasizes that the men from San Pedro Soloma dance in the opposite and outside of the circle. Whereas for the other Q'anjob'al towns, men traditionally danced on the inside of the circle (Clark, 2017, p. 49). As for the women, they dance on the opposite side of the men. The general body movement of the pair engaged in simultaneous forward momentum as the body energy sways side to side. The right foot leads towards the outside of the circle, as the left foot follows towards the inside of the circle. This energy, as Omofolabo Ajayi claims, depletes at one turning point and generates new energy going back (Ajayi, 1998, p. 18). At the turning points, a dancer may briefly rest to allow the dancer's weight to turn, inducing into a slow momentum. Each dancer's rhythm and tempo vary and may depend on the individual's inner trance or feeling. In analysing the rhythmic motion and pace, the dancer's turning point align the first count of music style of the 6/8 time meter in a slow tempo. As a faster tempo, it may align with each downbeat of the measure (i.e., count one and four in 6/8). The *kanal* continued well into the night and did not end until early next morning. Before departing, farewell send-off ended in emotions; at the same time, new friends and network had been established within the group. As we returned to our homes, everyone felt fatigued and all immediately went to rest.

### Brief Analysis of the *Kanal*

Drawing from Ajayi's (1998) work on the concept of dance formation, he explores the physical components of energy, space, and rhythm. In the concept of energy, the body's momentum is the source of movements. The forward motion of the counter-clockwise circle may seem very repetitive from the etic perspective, but within the emic, it has had great significance. This repetitive cyclical motion symbolizes Maya's concept of time. Their perspective of time is elaborated in their various sacred calendars like the *txolq'in* ("the counting order of days") and the *Habb'* (solar count). The development of these calendars are based on astronomical observation of the Sun, Moon, and Venus as well as the agrarian



cycle of sowing and harvesting the maize. From the short lyrical description I presented at the very beginning of this essay, Clark (2017) emphasizes that Garcia's famous tune, *Xal Chikay* (Grandma), refers to the cosmic order and time cycle as elaborated: "We dance moving forward, and encircling happiness, we circle like the earth around the sun; this is the rhythm of our life" (p. 65). The focus of swaying the body side-to-side may point to their concept of spatial dimensionality. In other words, the concept of the four cardinal directions and their centric conjunction plays a crucial role in conceptualizing space. The north is the forward momentum of the dance (it is what lies ahead of you); the east (right) is the first swaying momentum; the west (your left) is the next; and finally, the south is the backward momentum (what lies behind you) before repeating the sequence. As for the concurrent sync of the *kanalwom*, it evokes the Maya's concept of duality (Navarrete Pellicer, 2005, p. 52-68). In other words, this concept relates to that of the Yin and Yang, where the opposite attracts; in this matter of movement synchronization, male and female are the attractions, and to fulfill the *kanal* means that the *kanalwom* would need a partner to dance. However, as I have observed during my fieldwork, this traditional practice of the opposite gender dancing has changed over the past decades. As time has changed, commonly one can observe two females dancing with each other, but rarely two males.

In the second concept, space or spatial dimension is where the music embodiment take place, although meaningless until movement begins, then it creates meaning through the different productions of energy (Ajayi, 1998). In this case, the setting or venue is of the uttermost important. In this case, the *kanal* took place at a Catholic church in celebrating the grand opening and completion of the Cathedral of Txajul Ewul (Santa Eulalia) in the homeland. For the last decade, throughout the diasporic communities of Santa Eulalia, they strategically raised funds for the completion of the new modern cathedral. The new cathedral has replaced the ancient Colonial church of Santa Eulalia. This commemoration of the homeland solidifies not only their transnational communication but also affirms the diasporic identity.

The last concept is rhythm. It is the flow of time and movement, determined by the music style. As Ajayi (1998) points out, "It gives continuity and smoothness to the dancer's movements and allows the performer to concentrate more on honing the aesthetics of the dance and imparting fuller significance to the movements being performed" (p. 19). In this matter, rhythm derives from the music and, therefore, shares a similar relationship with dance. The *kanal*'s sway and turnarounds demonstrate the pulse of the underlined base of the son. Dance and music complement each other and requires the use of time, space, dynamic and the human body. At the same time, this relationship conveys a similar rhythmic pattern: the use of accents in emphasizing the turnarounds; the duration length

of the rests in between the turnarounds; the meter that determines the duration; and the tempo of momentums, which travels through the spatial dimension. Hence, the *kanal* not only manifests the embodiment of music, but also embodies their cosmology, their collective memory, and their traditional style of music-making. These all together contribute to how the diasporic communitites throughout the United States shape, practice, and construct their Q'anjob'al identity.

### The Future of the kanal and the Fiesta among the Upcoming Maya Americans

The Maya Q'anjob'al Diaspora has retained various cultural, religious, and musical memories of their homeland, along with myths and oral stories that continue to be passed down from generation to generation. Since the emergence of various Mayan organization like IXIM, Association Q'anjob'al Ewulense, the Maya Santa Eulalia Community of the Church, Espiritu Maya in Alamosa, and the National Pastoral Maya, the Q'anjob'al communities have committed to restore and maintain the prosperity of the homeland. Many have collaborated to aid the hometown parish. The milestone of the newly constructed Cathedral of Tx'ajul Ewul, in honor of Santa Eulalia of Barcelona, is evidence of transnational communication and collaboration. Through these organizations, many continue to advocate, encourage, retain, and practice their cultural and religious traditions during the fiestas. However, most importantly, the *kanal* has played a crucial role in maintaining musical practice and its embodiment, which draws and attracts the people to congregate, celebrate, and share their collective memory in the diaspora. Loucky (2000) points out that organizations play a significant part in re-creating the traditional "Maya modes of social organization" (p. 220). For examples, churches such as the Holy Cross in South LA or the Sacred Heart Church in Alamosa, Colorado have supported the Maya communities in hosting and celebrating the fiesta of Santa Eulalia. The Los Angeles community attained a statue of Santa Eulalia, which aids them in maintaining religious activities and cultural practice (Clark, 2017, p. 125-26). The Statue of Santa Eulalia symbolizes not only the hometown of the Maya-Q'anjob'al people, but she also affirms their Catholic identity, which is very strong among the diasporic communities.

Maya diaspora studies continue to question the long-term process of settlement, assimilation, integration, and sustainability as the contemporary diaspora continues to grow. At the same time, the question of returning to their homeland is uncertain. It has come up in my discussions with many community members. Many have settled down, adapted, and assimilated into American life and as for the next generation growing up in America, how will they maintain the Maya cultural practice, music embodiment,

and construct their identity? What future waits for the Q'anjob'al kanal and its music? How will the ancient Maya religious practice (*tx'aj*) be maintained and practiced by the Maya Americans? The first Maya generations have endured the hardship of leaving their homeland, migrating through a harsh environment, and settling in an unknown world, having no clue on what to expect. For the upcoming generation who are born in the U.S., they attend school to learn the English language, as U.S. citizens, giving them leverage. These factors will contribute to how they construct their identity and will compose and inscribe their footprints in the history of the United States. They are not alone; as Montejo (1999) emphasize, the "revitalization of Maya culture is a collective effort and reinforces pride in being Maya" (p. 215-216). The Maya heritage has endured its hardship in the extensive history of colonization, which has resulted in reconceptualizing and reinventing through the encounter of different cultural interactions. Through their collective memories and shared experience, the future of the Maya Diaspora will prosper in reconstruing the new Maya Identity as American.

## Conclusion

In the beginning, the means of embodying sound and music in ancient times for the Mayas had been to invoke, worship the creator, communicate with the environmental deities, and give reverence to their ancestors through various musical and ceremonial performances. The relationship between dance and music complements each other, like that of the duality of how two opposites attract each other. Dance and music are very distinct in purpose, where dance is the embodiment of music and music is the product of sound. The *kanal* developed throughout the colonial epoch, tracing its history to the early Zarabanda, and attained mixed elements known as the son style of today. I have questioned whether the Q'anjob'al name of the marimba, *te'son*, could be a derivative of the musical style that its name implies. It remains unclear on how the marimba received its Q'anjob'al name but has been coined as it is now. Through the *kanal*, the communities congregate for socialization and other beneficial aid. By exploring Ajayi's work (1998) on the semiotic of dance, I have explored various symbolism, the relationship of music and dance that make up the *kanal*. As for any diasporic group, assimilating to the cultural and ecological surrounding is inevitable. For the Q'anjob'al diaspora, whether rural or urban, the *kanal* is a musical and traditional embodiment that continues to thrive within a secular and religious context. This traditional dance practice in diaspora has become a cultural inheritance for the next generation, a collective memory they share in aiding them in how they will construct their identity in the diaspora. It is in these settings that the upcoming

generation can experience the musical and cultural aesthetic of their ancestral heritage and memory. The *kanal* has taken part in the social fabric that expresses individual and social identity in the diaspora, and at the same time, it has reinforced social solidarity. It has become an essential medium in articulating religious and cultural concepts. Thus it has taken an aesthetic art form as music embodiment and collective memory of the Q'anjob'al Diaspora.

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