


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Becoming a Maya Woman: Beauty Pageants at the Intersection of Indigeneity, Gender and Class in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala

Elisabet Dueholm Rasch* 

Elisabet Dueholm Rasch is Associate Professor at Wageningen University and Research.

*Corresponding author. Email: elisabet.rasch@wur.nl.

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Abstract

Indigenous beauty pageants can be seen as a way of re-appropriating indigenous identity. This article approaches beauty pageants as being situated in multiple systems of power at four levels of contestation: (1) reproducing gender relations and creating new professional and political opportunities; (2) constituting a site for cultural and political agency and delimiting the ways to 'be a Maya woman'; (3) reproducing class relations in terms of access to the event and contributing to social awareness of beauty queens; (4) as a social event consolidating (gender) relations within the family. The findings are based on longitudinal (2002–14) ethnographic fieldwork in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala.

Keywords: indigenous identity; beauty pageants; Guatemala; agency; gender

Introduction

In this article I analyse how young Maya women in Guatemala navigate the social categories that are constituted at the intersections of gender, indigeneity and class. My main argument is that intersectionality is not only negotiated along different axes of domination (gender, class, ethnicity) and embedded in history, but also produces and becomes manifest in dynamic, hybrid forms of agency. My analysis follows a case-study: the election of the 'Umial Tinimit Re Xelajuj Noj' ('Daughter of the People of Quetzaltenango', hereafter 'Umial Tinimit'), the indigenous beauty pageant of Guatemala's second city. Beauty pageants reflect how women are expected by cultural norms to be 'bearers of culture' and to physically and culturally reproduce ethnic groups and nations.¹ As such, they represent and (re)produce not only gender values and norms, but also ethnic and class ideologies. This domain therefore helps illuminate how intersections of such ordering mechanisms work out in practice.

¹Oluwakemi M. Balogun, 'Cultural and Cosmopolitan: Idealized Femininity and Embodied Nationalism in Nigerian Beauty Pageants', *Gender and Society*, 26: 3 (2012), pp. 357–81.

The argument that I present in this article consists of four interrelated claims. First, beauty pageants constitute a site where gender relations are (re)produced. At the same time, they provide new professional and political opportunities for young women, making it possible for them to transform gender relations on a personal level. Second, indigenous beauty pageants function as a site for cultural appropriation and political agency of indigenous peoples, but at the same time delimit the ways of being an indigenous woman. That is, the young women's political agency as *indigenous* might be enhanced, rather than their personal agency as indigenous *women*. Third, beauty pageants reproduce socio-economic relations because of the way they are organised. Indigenous beauty queens, however, often gain social awareness about class relations and poverty. Fourth, indigenous beauty pageants are not only sites where meanings of gender, indigeneity and class are constructed, they are also social events that provide a setting for changes in (gender) relations within and between families.

These four claims come together to demonstrate how intersectionality is negotiated along the lines of gender, class and indigeneity and how contestations of such steering mechanisms produce and become manifest in the construction of agency. My analysis of becoming and being a beauty queen is rooted in the assumption that the meanings of 'being a woman' and 'agency' are embedded in culture and history. The room for manoeuvre for beauty contestants to deploy agency is transformed during the different phases of becoming a beauty queen. This approach towards beauty pageants allows us to take into account the transformative character of intersections of gender, indigeneity and class, as well as to explore the tension between intersecting axes of oppression and intersectionality as a lived experience. While exploring these tensions, I consider beauty pageants as performances that serve to transmit memory and a sense of identity.²

Mayas and (Indigenous) Beauty Pageants in Guatemala

Guatemala is inhabited by 17 million people, of whom 40–60 per cent identify as indigenous Maya. Exclusion of the indigenous population started during the Spanish colonisation that forced indigenous peoples into a global commercial system.³ After independence in 1821, the Guatemalan state started to frame the indigenous population in Guatemala as 'the Indian problem'.⁴ The existence of indigenous communities was considered to be an obstacle to development.⁵ Militarisation and violence resulted in a 36-year armed conflict (1960–96). The confluence of counterinsurgency and racism led to a brutal military campaign of genocide against the indigenous population between 1978

²Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 2.

³Nancy M. Farriss, *Maya Society under Colonial Rule: The Collective Enterprise of Survival* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁴Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala. A History of Race and Nation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 71.

⁵Elisabet Dueholm Rasch, 'Representing Mayas: Indigenous Authorities and the Local Politics of Identity', unpubl. PhD diss., Utrecht University, 2008.

and 1983.⁶ During this conflict, Maya women were special targets of governmental military violence.⁷

The return to civilian rule in 1986 paved the way for peace negotiations, during which the Maya Movement started to challenge the idea of the homogeneous nation-state.⁸ By mobilising common elements of indigenous culture (language, dress, spirituality), the Maya Movement claims access to economic and political institutions on the one hand, and specific indigenous rights on the other.⁹ An important point of reference for the Maya Movement is the 'Accord on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples' that was signed on 31 March 1995 as part of the general peace accords. This emphasises gender equality as well as explicitly recognising the multi-ethnic nature of Guatemalan society.¹⁰ Also providing momentum for the Maya Movement was the 1996 ratification of the International Labour Organization's Convention 169,¹¹ which recognises the rights and identity of indigenous peoples, and contains important references to gender equality. Nevertheless, 75 per cent of the indigenous population continues to live in (extreme) poverty.

The processes described above are, of course, gendered. During colonialism the Western ideology that a person's race, class, and culture are thought to be more clearly inherited from women than from men¹² became institutionalised, and Maya women were seen to be reproducers of the Maya community, both culturally and biologically.¹³ Some feminist scholars¹⁴ have critiqued this role, suggesting that these are traditional gender roles that represent the subordination of women. In line with more essentialist notions of indigenous identity, it was assumed, in Guatemalan society as well as in the academic literature, that when indigenous women left their rural communities they would stop identifying with their role as reproducers of Maya identity.¹⁵ However, being held responsible for cultural reproduction is not necessarily experienced as 'subordination' by Maya women

⁶Robert M. Carmack (ed.), *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988).

⁷Linda Green, *Fear as a Way of Life: Mayan Widows in Rural Guatemala* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁸Santiago Bastos and Manuela Camus, *Entre el mecapan y el cielo: Desarrollo del movimiento maya en Guatemala* (Guatemala City: FLACSO, 2003).

⁹Edward F. Fischer and R. McKenna Brown (eds.), *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996).

¹⁰Rachel Sieder, 'Reframing Citizenship: Indigenous Rights, Local Power and the Peace Process in Guatemala', in Richard Wilson and Rachel Sieder (eds.), *Negotiating Rights: The Guatemalan Peace Process* (London: Conciliation Resources, 1997), pp. 66–73.

¹¹See https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_008061/lang-en/index.htm, last access 22 April 2019.

¹²Carol A. Smith, 'Race-Class-Gender Ideology in Guatemala: Modern and Anti-Modern Forms', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37: 4 (1995), pp. 723–49.

¹³Diane M. Nelson, 'Stumped Identities: Body Image, Bodies Politics, and the *Mujer Maya* as Prosthetic', *Cultural Anthropology*, 16: 3 (2001), pp. 314–53; Smith, 'Race-Class-Gender'.

¹⁴Angela Meentzen, *Estrategias de desarrollo culturalmente adecuadas para mujeres indígenas* (Washington, DC: Departamento de Desarrollo Sostenible, 2001); Morna MacLeod, *Nietas del Fuego, Creadoras del Alma: Luchas político-culturales de mujeres mayas* (Guatemala City: FLACSO, 2011).

¹⁵See also: Rubén Narciso, Elizabeth Quiroa *et al.* (eds.), *Guatemala. Indicadores de género: 2013* (Guatemala City: INE and SEPREM, 2013).

themselves.¹⁶ Maya women often continue to identify with this role parallel to access to education¹⁷ and working in human rights organisations, amongst other roles. Transforming gender relations in terms of work and education has not resulted in Maya women rejecting their identity.

The organisation of beauty pageants often reflects ethnic relations, and the specific meanings of gender that become manifest through beauty pageants often serve as (ethnic) identity markers.¹⁸ This is also the case in Guatemala. In an election parallel to that of Miss Guatemala, the Rabin Ajaw ('Daughter of the King') is chosen at the national indigenous beauty pageant, part of the National Folklore Festival in Cobán.¹⁹ The participants in this event represent different municipalities, and are evaluated on the basis of their expression of their cultural identity. The first time it took place, in 1971, the event was called the 'Concurso de Reina de la Belleza Indígena Nacional' ('National Indigenous Beauty Queen Contest'); a year later the name was changed.²⁰ The Rabin Ajaw contest is not a competition of indigenous versus ladino (non-indigenous) beauty; it represents Guatemala's folkloric past and present.²¹ However, in 1978 22 indigenous beauty queens critiqued the organisation of the contest. They linked its static, folkloric image of the indigenous population to the massacres of indigenous population that were taking place at the same time.²² Both the beauty contest and the massacres demonstrated that the Guatemalan state did not take the indigenous population into account as fully-fledged citizens.

Whereas the Rabin Ajaw was organised by non-indigenous peoples as part of the folklore festival in Cobán, local indigenous beauty pageants emerged from the 1930s onwards as a stage of indigenous re-appropriation of indigenous culture

¹⁶Smith, 'Race-Class-Gender'.

¹⁷The rate of illiteracy among indigenous women is 52 per cent, although some have started to study at university.

¹⁸See, among others, Daniel M. Goldstein, 'Names, Places, and Power: Collective Identity in the Miss Oruro Pageant, Cochabamba, Bolivia', *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 23: 1 (2000), pp. 1–24; Jon Schackt, 'Mayahood through Beauty: Indian Beauty Pageants in Guatemala', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 24: 3 (2005), pp. 269–87; Michael Wroblewski, 'Public Indigeneity, Language Revitalization, and Intercultural Planning in a Native Amazonian Beauty Pageant', *American Anthropologist*, 116: 1 (2014), pp. 65–80; M. Rogers, 'Spectacular Bodies: Folklorization and the Politics of Identity in Ecuadorian Beauty Pageants', *Journal of Latin American Anthropology*, 3: 2 (1998), pp. 54–85.

¹⁹The winner of the Miss Guatemala competition, which took place for the first time in 1955, participates in the Miss World beauty contest. See Schackt, 'Mayahood', p. 278.

²⁰Deyvid Molina, 'Apuntes históricos sobre los certámenes de elección y coronación de representativas indígenas en Guatemala', *Tradiciones de Guatemala*, 78 (2012), pp. 91–130; Gemma Celigueta, '¿Unas elecciones de verdad? Autenticidad, representación y conflicto en los concursos de Reinas Indígenas de Guatemala', *Journal de la Société des Américanistes*, 103: 1 (2017), pp. 27–49.

²¹Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk and Beverly Stoeltje (eds.), *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1996). It is important to note here that ladino identity is by no means a fixed or static identity category. See Charles R. Hale, *Más que un indio (More than an Indian): Racial Ambivalence and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Guatemala* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2006) for an excellent analysis.

²²Betsy Konefal, 'Subverting Authenticity: *Reinas Indígenas* and the Guatemalan State, 1978', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 89: 1 (2009), pp. 41–72.

and identity in the absence of the state.²³ In predominantly indigenous municipalities, parallel to state institutions such as the municipal council, there often existed (and continues to exist) an elaborate system of related indigenous authorities, organised in the cargo system,²⁴ giving the indigenous population some space for independent agency. In this context of relative autonomy, indigenous beauty pageants were organised as part of the festivities for a town's patron saint's day. The format of the elections copied ladino pageants. The victor would win the same crown, and wear high collars and flowing capes, but her prize money would be only half that awarded to the ladino queen.²⁵ From the 1970s on, indigenous people – often leftist activists and community organisers – started to use the local beauty pageant to contest meanings of indigeneity. They demanded equality: the same amount of prize money and a change of names. Until then, the winners of most indigenous pageants were called 'Beautiful Indian Girl' or 'Little Princess', in contrast to those who won the ladino pageants, who were called 'Queen'.

By the end of the 1970s, the emphasis of 'beauty pageant activism' began to change towards re-appropriating what was happening on stage, representing what Mayas themselves thought of as part of their identity. Local indigenous beauty pageants evolved into a domain of Maya identity construction with an emphasis on a glorious past and political engagement at the same time. Beauty pageants became a stage on which a political message could be conveyed; at that time of armed conflict this was one of the few more or less safe spaces of social mobilisation.²⁶ This cultural and political re-appropriation of beauty pageants as a stage where gender, ethnic and class ideologies are performed and (re)produced remains an important aspect of contemporary indigenous pageants, resonating with the aims of the Maya Movement to regain control over the constitution of Maya identity.

Back-/On-/Off-Stage Intersections

How women experience and practise their assigned roles depends on how gender intersects with class and ethnicity and as such constitute social categories.²⁷ Intersectionality, as a concept that accepts the existence of overlapping systems of oppression, opens up avenues for analysing how gender gains specific meanings at intersections of social ordering mechanisms, as well as how lived experiences and identity construction from below are embedded in such processes. Intersectionality as an analytical paradigm emerged from the experiences of

²³Complicating gender as well as ethnic dichotomies, the first election of the 'Reina Indígena Trans' (Indigenous Trans Queen) took place in 2017; see <http://nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/guatemala-s-trans-indigenous-beauty-pageant-about-more-just-pretty-n830201>, last access 21 April 2019.

²⁴The cargo system is a hierarchical system of services that combines administrative offices of civil and religious life: Rasch, 'Representing Mayas', n. 13.

²⁵Lina E. Barrios, *Tras las huellas del poder local: La alcaldía indígena en Guatemala del siglo XVI al siglo XX* (Guatemala City: Universidad Rafael Landívar, Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales, 2001), p. 286.

²⁶Konefal, 'Subverting Authenticity'.

²⁷Éléonore Lépinard, 'Doing Intersectionality: Repertoires of Feminist Practices in France and Canada', *Gender and Society*, 28: 6 (2014), pp. 877–903; Karen D. Pyke and Denise L. Johnson, 'Asian American Women and Racialized Femininities: "Doing" Gender across Cultural Worlds', *Gender and Society*, 17: 1 (2003), pp. 33–53.

African-American women and questions essentialist social categories, such as 'woman' or 'black', as a guide for understanding people's life circumstances.²⁸ Studies on intersectionality in Latin America demonstrate the importance of colonial categories for understanding forms of exclusion, domination and resistance.²⁹ Struggles against racism, sexism and poverty are seen to be complementary and simultaneous.³⁰

As a site where cultural meanings are represented and (re)produced at the same time, beauty pageants host complex struggles over power and representation.³¹ National and international beauty pageants (Miss America, Miss World) are often contested by feminist groups (pointing at the objectification of women's bodies)³² as well as conservative Church groups (considering beauty pageants indecent).³³ Studies have drawn attention to the importance of understanding beauty pageants as sites that (re)produce dominant discourses of white beauty and commodify women's bodies.³⁴ The less studied ethnic³⁵ or indigenous pageants articulate alternative cultural practices. In countries with indigenous populations, indigenous beauty pageants have been analysed as spaces of ethnic revitalisation.³⁶ Beauty pageants then become sites where 'authentic' culture is revalued, often in combination with the definition of new spaces for political expression by indigenous women.³⁷ Language, as well as customs, is an important element of such beauty pageants. Yet these studies, important as they are for providing insights into processes of ethnic revitalisation and indigenous identity construction, neither question nor describe the gender dimensions of such pageants.

²⁸Rachel Sieder and Anna Barrera, 'Women and Legal Pluralism: Lessons from Indigenous Governance Systems in the Andes', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 49: 3 (2017), pp. 633–58; Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1 (1989), pp. 139–67; María Lugones, 'Colonialidad y género', *Tabula Rasa*, 9 (2008), pp. 73–101.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰R. Aída Hernández Castillo, 'The Emergence of Indigenous Feminism in Latin America', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 35: 3 (2010), pp. 539–45; Shannon Speed, R. Aída Hernández Castillo and Lynn M. Stephen (eds.), *Dissident Women: Gender and Cultural Politics in Chiapas* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006).

³¹Nhi T. Lieu, 'Remembering "The Nation" through Pageantry: Femininity and the Politics of Vietnamese Womanhood in the "Hoa Hau Ao Dai" Contest', *Frontiers*, 21: 1/2 (2000), pp. 127–51; Rebecca Chiyoko King-O'Riain, 'Making the Perfect Queen: The Cultural Production of Identities in Beauty Pageants', *Sociology Compass*, 2: 1 (2008), pp. 74–83.

³²Neville Hoad, 'World Piece: What the Miss World Pageant Can Teach about Globalization', *Cultural Critique*, 58: 1 (2004), pp. 56–81.

³³Mary Crawford, Gregory Kerwin, Alka Gurung, Deepti Khatri, Pinky Jha and Anjana Chalise Regmi, 'Globalizing Beauty: Attitudes toward Beauty Pageants among Nepali Women', *Feminism and Psychology*, 18: 1 (2008), pp. 61–86.

³⁴See Bonnie J. Dow, 'Feminism, Miss America, and Media Mythology', *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 6: 1 (2003), pp. 127–49; Jean Muteba Rahier, 'Blackness, the Racial/Spatial Order, Migrations, and Miss Ecuador 1995–96', *American Anthropologist*, 100: 2 (1998), pp. 421–30.

³⁵See for example Lieu, 'Remembering "The Nation"'; Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, "'Loveliest Daughter of Our Ancient Cathay!': Representations of Ethnic and Gender Identity in the Miss Chinatown USA Beauty Pageant', *Journal of Social History*, 31: 1 (1997), pp. 5–31.

³⁶Goldstein, 'Names, Place and Power'; Schackt, 'Mayahood'; Wroblewski, 'Public Indigeneity'; Rogers, 'Spectacular Bodies'.

³⁷King-O'Riain, 'Making the Perfect Queen'.

Agency – personal and political – is a recurrent theme in the beauty pageant literature discussed above. In the discourse of beauty pageants as an example of personal agency, which is constructed around the idea of free choice and individual freedom of beauty contestants,³⁸ the benefits of being a beauty queen – such as job opportunities and access to social networks – are seen to broaden beauty queens' personal agency.³⁹ This discourse is critiqued by feminists because it does not question the patriarchal system;⁴⁰ acts of objectification of female bodies remain unchallenged.⁴¹ The literature on indigenous beauty pageants⁴² centres around the notion of (indigenous) political agency of indigenous peoples, rather than that of individual indigenous women. The focus of study is then on how these pageants are spaces where political agency is deployed and how the young women 'become political actors themselves, socially mobile defenders of indigenous culture who also spread modern political ideologies'.⁴³ In this strand of literature beauty pageants are analysed as disrupting traditional images of indigenous women as passive bearers of traditions. In this article, I bring these two perspectives on beauty pageants together by looking into how indigenous beauty queens produce new, hybrid forms of agency that are deployed not only through the individual (the indigenous *woman*) or the political collective (*indigenous* peoples), but also through the family. Although beauty queens might add a political element to their enhanced personal agency and might contest ethnicity as an ordering mechanism, they do not challenge the patriarchal system. The political element that might be added to, or become part of, a new, hybrid form of agency, remains personal.

In this article, I analyse these dynamics as they play out in one specific indigenous beauty pageant, the Umial Tinimit. In Quetzaltenango the first indigenous queen was elected in 1934. Quetzaltenango is Guatemala's second largest city and the unofficial Maya capital of the western highlands. Roughly 50 per cent of its 250,000 inhabitants identify as indigenous, as Maya K'iche'. There is a small, vibrant 'Maya K'iche' bourgeoisie'⁴⁴ that actively engages in the formulation of political proposals for an intercultural future. This Maya K'iche' bourgeoisie lives in the city and belongs to the (upper) middle class that consists of entrepreneurs, dentists, lawyers and the like. The rural areas of the municipality,⁴⁵ however, are inhabited by generally poor people who also identify as indigenous, but not with the Maya-K'iche' elite of the city. Maya K'iche' identity is expressed and constructed

³⁸Dow, 'Feminism'.

³⁹Wu, 'Loveliest Daughter'.

⁴⁰Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

⁴¹Nhi T. Lieu, 'Beauty Queens Behaving Badly: Gender, Global Competition, and the Making of Post-Refugee Neoliberal Vietnamese Subjects', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 34: 1 (2013), pp. 25–57; Dow, 'Feminism'.

⁴²Goldstein, 'Names, Place and Power'; Schackt, 'Mayahood'; Wroblewski, 'Public Indigeneity'; Rogers, 'Spectacular Bodies', Schackt, 'Mayahood'.

⁴³Wroblewski, 'Public Indigeneity', p. 75.

⁴⁴Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj, *La pequeña burguesía indígena comercial de Guatemala: Desigualdades de clase, raza y género* (Guatemala City: AVANCSO, 2002).

⁴⁵Quetzaltenango municipality is composed of the urban centre, two *aldeas* and 22 *cantones*, which are administrative units presided over by a communal authority, the community mayor.

mostly through the female Quetzaltenango *traje* (which, despite being a Spanish word, is used to designate indigenous dress), Maya spirituality and social as well as political belonging. At the same time, the Maya K'iche' urban population also experiences racism and exclusion from dominant social, political and economic domains.⁴⁶ Although the K'iche' language is considered an important marker of K'iche' identity, the maternal language of most inhabitants of urban Quetzaltenango is Spanish.

Quetzaltenango's first indigenous mayor, Rigoberto Quemé Chay, governed from 1994 to 2002. His involvement in local politics from 1978 was important for the way the Umial Tinimit evolved. As a member of the beauty pageant's organising commission in 1979, when he was a councillor, he 'Mayanised' the event. Its name was changed to 'Umial Tinimit': queens did not exist in Maya culture and there is no K'iche' word for the concept. Crowning the winner of an indigenous pageant as an 'indigenous queen', as had been done for a number of years, did not represent Maya culture, according to Quemé. Several elements, such as the '*ixcap*' (the traditional ceremonial headdress, discussed further in the following sections), replaced ladino ones. The election of the Umial Tinimit in Quetzaltenango also became a platform for political messages.

Today, the event is best described as a political and cultural articulation of Maya identity. As it mirrors the way the Maya K'iche' of Quetzaltenango want to be represented, and at the same time questions non-indigenous hegemonic beauty ideals, it resonates with the general conceptualisations of (indigenous) beauty pageants in the literature.⁴⁷ The first indigenous beauty pageant was held in the municipality (in 1934) because the indigenous population demanded its own beauty pageant alongside the ladino one. Today, the contestants in the Umial Tinimit themselves approach the event as a beauty pageant, by continuously pointing out its differences from the ladino variant (the 'Señorita de Quetzaltenango'), and although the criteria used to decide who wins the title of Umial Tinimit differ widely from the beauty standards that are used in Western or ladino beauty pageants, I too nevertheless analyse the event as a beauty pageant. In tune with the self-identifications of the young women, I will from here on refer to winners of the Umial Tinimit as 'Umiales'.

Methodology

This article is the result of a long interest in the Umial Tinimit. In 2002 I explored the election of the Umial Tinimit as part of my research into how indigenous people in Guatemala enacted themselves as indigenous political subjects in the aftermath of the armed conflict,⁴⁸ analysing it within municipal politics. Between 2001 and 2007, I interviewed and interacted informally with over 50 people who were directly or indirectly involved in local government issues. Many of these

⁴⁶Velásquez, *La pequeña burguesía*.

⁴⁷Goldstein, 'Names, Place and Power'; Schackt, 'Mayahood'; Wroblewski, 'Public Indigeneity'; Rogers, 'Spectacular Bodies'.

⁴⁸Rasch, 'Representing Mayas'.

were involved or had been involved in different phases of the election of the Umial Tinimit, and I talked with all of them about their participation in the event – if applicable – and about how they perceived the Umial Tinimit as a municipal event and as a representation of Maya K'iche' identity in Quetzaltenango. I interviewed two former winners of the Umial Tinimit and attended two elections, two coronations, one election of the Señorita de Quetzaltenango, and one election of the Rabin Ajaw. In November 2014, I interviewed another seven Umiales, elected between 1978 and 2013, and several other people involved in the event. The sample of former Umiales grew according to the snowball technique. During the interviews with the young women, I would take the chronology of the event as a point of departure. We would talk about the concrete steps that were taken in the whole process towards becoming elected, the course of the election itself, the year as an Umial Tinimit and the activities that the women participated in afterwards. We would also talk about how they experienced this process. Often we also took time to discuss pictures and newspaper clippings.

Most former Umiales live in fairly big, upper-middle class houses in Zone 1, the historic centre of Quetzaltenango, and belong to families that can be considered to be part of the Maya K'iche' bourgeoisie in Quetzaltenango. They always received me in their indigenous Quetzaltenango dress, often in a lounge with pictures on the wall of them in the process of becoming and being an Umial. I have changed the names of the Umiales when they recount personal incidents that have not been made public. This is also the reason why I do not give the exact years of their reign. Finally, I studied flyers and posters advertising the event, as well as two documents that were produced celebrating the 50th and 75th anniversaries of indigenous beauty pageants in Quetzaltenango. These documents provide insights into how the event is represented to the public. I also analysed local news coverage, again looking into how the Umial Tinimit was represented, often in relation to the ladino pageant. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, as this is the usual mother tongue of the Umiales.

The data were analysed through a process of thematic analysis, i.e. all data were reviewed, coded and reviewed again. The themes that emerge from this analysis tell the story of becoming a Maya woman and show clear differences between the different phases of becoming and being a beauty queen. Following this storyline, three sections follow: 'Back stage', the period during which the young women become representative Maya women; 'On stage', when what a Maya woman should be like is displayed on stage; and 'Off stage', in which I describe the year that the young women spend as Umiales, and present their more general reflections about their participation. These three sections each narrate how Umiales deploy personal and political agency whilst navigating different axes of social ordering. Through these sections, this case study shows how intersectionality is practised 'from below'. Rather than focusing on the intersecting structures of gender, ethnicity and class, I explore the ways indigenous young women act along these intersections; that is, I focus on their agency⁴⁹ and not on beauty pageants as sites of oppression.

⁴⁹Juliet Gilbert, "'Be Graceful, Patient, Ever Prayerful": Negotiating Femininity, Respect and the Religious Self in a Nigerian Beauty Pageant', *Africa*, 85: 3 (2015), pp. 501–20.

Back stage: Becoming Maya

The actual process of being elected Umial starts with an invitation to participate from a cultural group. (Cultural groups promote indigenous culture and identity.) Although some of the young women were involved in traditional indigenous dancing groups before being asked, the invitation generally came as a surprise. Candidates are only 15 or 16 years old and still in secondary school. They generally live in the central part of the city and are from well-to-do, socially active and well-respected families. The decision whether or not to participate is always the result of discussions within the family, and deliberations can take up to two weeks. Mothers, aunts and grandmothers often fear gossip about the contestants and the impact it might have on the girls' lives. Fathers are generally proud to get the chance to fulfil a representative role in Maya K'iche' society through their daughters. Umial Tinimit candidates are thus expected to represent and protect their own family's name and respectability and that of the broader Maya K'iche' ethnic group. Participation is 'classed': only well-to-do Maya K'iche' families from the urban centre are asked to participate. The decision whether or not to participate is a process that overall is safeguarded by male Maya K'iche': they play an important part in defining how Maya femininity is to be represented on stage.

Once the candidacy has been accepted, the process of 'becoming Maya' begins. This process, mainly organised by indigenous men, guides the girls towards becoming representative of the Maya K'iche' as an ethnic group. Before being asked to participate, the candidates might not have had much engagement with Maya culture and would therefore consider themselves insufficiently 'Maya' to participate. Mirna (a candidate in the early 1990s) had never worn the *traje* before she was invited, nor did she speak K'iche': 'How was I to represent the indigenous race?', she wondered during the interview. This is a recurrent theme through all the generations of Umiales I talked with. Ana, for example, felt extremely humiliated when a woman called in and asked her to do a greeting in K'iche' during a radio interview, and she had to admit she couldn't. Judith had also been mocked by other candidates at the election of the Rabin Ajaw because she did not speak K'iche'.

The cultural groups, the young women's family and sometimes the municipality are important actors in preparing the young women for the contest. In some years the municipality organised workshops for the young women as part of the preparation process, but this is not standard. Preparation is focused not only on teaching the young women how to 'become Maya', how to speak in public and how to dress in 'the style that was used before', in Astrid's words,⁵⁰ but also on creating Maya political awareness, disrupting the image of indigenous women as passive representatives of culture. This involves reading of materials provided to them by the cultural groups. The young women remember how they spent a lot of time shut up in their rooms reading about the Guatemalan peace process and Maya culture and from the Pop Wuj (the Maya sacred text) and ILO Convention 169.⁵¹ In addition to knowledge about indigenous identity and rights, these readings – despite the texts concerned being provided by men – provide for stories about gender equality.

⁵⁰Interview with Astrid, Nov. 2014.

⁵¹See note 11 above.

The reading process is supervised intensively. Gladys remembers vividly how her mentor would arrive unexpectedly at her house, almost every day, asking her questions about the material she had read, telling her again and again that she should be prepared to improvise and answer difficult questions about Maya culture and identity that would be asked of her by the media and the jury that decides who will be the new Umial. It was a process, Gladys says, that brought her a lot: 'I matured rapidly. Until then my life consisted of going to school and sports ... I learned a lot about culture, I really asked myself where had I been until then ... When you start to make progress, you really wonder where you'd been until then.' The mentors are mostly men; only in Judith's case was it a woman (Alma López, member of the municipal council). Consequently, ideas of how to become representatives of the Maya K'iche' are often reproductions of male versions of what this means.

The time running up towards the actual event is marked by different occasions in the process of becoming a Maya woman, which serve as moments of media exposure when the young women start to articulate their Maya identity, often vis-à-vis the ladino contestants who simultaneously participate in the Señorita de Quetzaltenango beauty pageant. Registration provides the first key moment when the young women gain attention from the public and the media. Registration itself is a formality: the candidates state their willingness to participate, their age, their school and their neighbourhood of origin.

The second moment is the official presentation of the candidates to the members of the municipal council and the media in the town hall. When Quemé was mayor this event was organised at the Cerro de Baúl, a Maya sacred place near the city, to emphasise the Maya character of the event. However, as they had to walk there – travelling by car was not considered Maya – neither the young women nor their parents liked this venue. During this presentation, the candidates speak in public for the first time, touching on themes related to indigenous identity and politics. Their speeches are prepared by the – mostly male – members of the cultural group, again reproducing a predominantly male version of Maya K'iche' identity.

The third moment is the 'caravan'. All of Quetzaltenango's indigenous Maya put on their fanciest traditional clothing and gather in the central square to watch the candidates – and each other – parade through the streets of the historical centre. Accompanied by small boys dressed in white trousers and shirts – regarded by the Maya as their authentic male clothing – and by the sound of the *chirimia* and the *tum* (instruments used by the ancient Maya to summon the people), the candidates share traditional snacks with the people in the street who watch the caravan while they walk from one park to the other. In accordance with the contest guidelines, there is no glitz or glamour: no high heels, no make-up. The candidates wear Quetzaltenango indigenous clothing that is as 'authentic' as possible, with sandals on their feet and their hair worn in long, straight braids. For the candidates, this is an important difference between the election of the Umial and the ladino pageant. The latter is, according to them, only about appearances, whereas the election of the Umial Tinimit is about culture and identity. All the young women find it important to emphasise that the Umial Tinimit is 'something completely different', as Estér put it.⁵² While indigenous men have a great say in how the young Maya

⁵²Interview with Estér, Nov. 2014.

women should fulfil their representative role at this point, the caravan is an important way for the women to identify themselves vis-à-vis the ladino pageant and is part of their own identification as Maya K'iche'.

The final preparatory event is the reception. Although this event displays elements such as 'Opening the *son*', which are considered 'authentic', it is not so much about delineating the boundaries between Maya and ladinos, but about marking in- and out-groups in Maya K'iche' society. The *son* is a dance performed to music, also called *son*, played on the marimba. Both the *son* (music and dance) and the marimba are considered as key elements of Maya K'iche' culture in Quetzaltenango. The invitation to the reception comes from the municipal commission organising the event as a token of appreciation towards the candidates and their families; it provides a marker of which families are seen as part of the Maya K'iche' bourgeoisie, and clearly demarcates the line between the richer, urban Maya K'iche' community and the poorer indigenous people from the surrounding rural communities. The young women represent not only their families and the Maya K'iche', but also the specific economic position of the group they belong to, keeping intact the idea of an elite.⁵³

The young women are extremely nervous the day before the election. They are stressed because they have to memorise their speeches and participate in press conferences, Maya ceremonies and the final rehearsal in the theatre. The evening before the election, the house often fills up with family and friends. At this moment the young women are brought face to face with all the efforts the family and cultural groups have put into their candidacies, something they feel great gratitude for. Gladys, for example, could not stop thinking about her mother, who had cooked all the ceremonial meals during the preparation phase, and her father, who had invested in the expensive indigenous clothing she had to wear at every occasion. It made her feel responsible ... and nervous. The other young women also express how important their family was during this preparatory phase in terms of financial contributions, being chaperoned to events, and providing moral support and psychological care.

Female family members play an important role in controlling the nerves before the candidates go on stage, taking on a more traditional, caring gender role. For Estér, for example, the presence of one of her favourite aunts was crucial: she helped her prepare her speech and went with her to the church when, despite being unwell with a fever and sore throat, Estér's cultural group had taken her to a Maya ceremony. After that her family took her to the psychologist and gave her medication, because she was so stressed. When yet another relative – her mother's niece – came to help her with her plaits and clothes, she was still nervous and this feeling wouldn't go away until she entered the theatre. At that moment it left her; everything came together. She could smile and knew exactly what to do. This moment of relief is something that is mentioned by the other young women as well.

Which young women can represent Quetzaltenango Maya K'iche' is determined not only by ethnicity, but also by class and family. How indigeneity is reproduced through the Umial Tinimit is to a great extent supervised by male family and cultural group members who belong to the Maya K'iche' bourgeoisie. They safeguard

⁵³See Marta Elena Casaús Arzú, *Guatemala: Linaje y racismo* (San José: FLACSO, 1992).

the young women's process of becoming Maya. Notwithstanding sore throats, the mind going blank and panic attacks, and possibly thanks to their thorough preparation, the presence of family, attendance at Maya ceremonies, sauna visits, medication, and more, the moment the young women come on stage they all know how to be a Maya woman and, as I will demonstrate later, they will incorporate several elements of this performed Mayanness in their everyday lives afterwards. The passive role of women as representatives of indigenous culture, and their active role in political and cultural engagement, are both part of how Mayanness is rehearsed back stage.

The interlockings of gender, class, indigeneity and family structures are constantly transformed during this process. The young women gradually change from representatives of their family and cultural group into bearers of Maya K'iche' culture and representatives of local economic and political interests of the Maya K'iche' bourgeoisie; from 'insufficiently Maya' into being ready to deploy (Maya) political agency on stage. They become responsible for the reproduction of Maya K'iche' identity, and politically and culturally engaged through reading documents that are key in the construction of a broader Maya identity. Safeguarded by mainly male Maya K'iche', these might not question patriarchal structures and transform the young women's agency as indigenous *women*, but, through the process of reading and learning about indigenous rights and culture, the young women's political awareness as Maya K'iche' is enhanced.

On Stage: Re-appropriating Maya Identity

As we enter the theatre,⁵⁴ I spot some of my Xel-jú⁵⁵ acquaintances and members of the municipal council. All middle- to upper-class Maya K'iche' who could afford to pay 300Q for a ticket.⁵⁶ The female members of the public are dressed in their elegant indigenous *trajes*. As we sit down, men in Maya clothing start playing the marimba, an instrument associated with Maya *usos y costumbres*. Then the female heads of the indigenous religious brotherhood arrive and take the seats reserved for them at the front. The contestants are announced as 'young women with many talents, leadership qualities, and the ability to promote our identity, our culture and traditions'. The candidates enter amid the cheering of the cultural groups, friends and families. Some are accompanied by the sound of *chirimia* and *tum* and the odour of *copal*, an incense used at Maya ceremonies. Others bow formally towards the four cardinal points that are central to Maya spirituality on their way to the stage, which mimics the impressive Maya ruins of Tikal.⁵⁷

The election night of the Umial, as well as the coronation a few weeks later, is characterised by an abundant use of symbols, ceremonial formalities and strict protocols. This is the moment when the public is shown what a Maya (woman)

⁵⁴The municipal theatre of Quetzaltenango was inaugurated in 1895.

⁵⁵Xel-jú is an indigenous civic, cultural and political association.

⁵⁶300 Quetzales is roughly equivalent to US\$40.

⁵⁷Author's fieldnotes, Aug. 2003.

should be like. The candidates perform their role as reproducers of Maya culture on stage, claiming space as Maya K'iche' in relation to ladinos – specifically in relation to the Señorita de Quetzaltenango. How they do this is, in the main, defined by indigenous men. However, as Morna MacLeod and Carol A. Smith exemplify in their work,⁵⁸ the women do not consider this as a constraint, but rather as an honour and a form of personal development. As we will see, these processes produce hybrid forms of agency that are best described as personal agency with a political element.

The points of evaluation used to select the Umial mark important differences between Maya K'iche' and ladino culture and were defined by the predominantly male indigenous members of the commission which reorganised the event under Quemé, as explained above. The three most important elements of evaluation are: 'dancing the *son*' in an authentic and 'humble' (*humilde*) way, the speech and the question. The speeches are mostly written by male members of the cultural groups and cover issues such as Maya worldview, racism, peace accords and political participation. For example, the winner of the 2004 contest focused on the Maya worldview concept of *kabawil*. This term means 'double vision', in the sense of being able to look at yourself and the world around you, and the combination of these views in order to create a better world. This could, according to the winning speech, serve as a point of departure for a more just society.

The candidates do not deliver their speeches in K'iche', but they sometimes utter one or two sentences in the language. Whereas in many other cases the indigenous beauty pageant is used as a stage for cultural and linguistic practices,⁵⁹ K'iche' has a purely symbolic function in Quetzaltenango as almost nobody speaks the language. The way of 'performing' the speech is important; Estér thinks she won because she delivered her speech (which touched on the theme of how indigenous women relate to nature) 'like a prayer' and because of the quality of her K'iche' (she had been exposed to the language as a child, as is explained below). This made her presentation more convincing, more authentic, in her view.

The question is the part of the election that makes the young women most nervous, because they cannot prepare for it beforehand. It can cover almost anything. Gladys' question, for example, was about the role and participation of indigenous women in society; Estér was asked about the relation between indigenous women and nature in the past and in the present. Both topics reflect important elements of a broader Maya identity and political empowerment, issues important for the Maya Movement at the time.

It is worth a small digression here to narrate how Fabiana, candidate in 1978, prepared for her speech: this was a completely different experience from Estér's as it took place in the midst of violence. In the run-up to the event, the Panzós massacre occurred, in which between 30 and 100 (estimates vary) people were killed by the Guatemalan army. This caused a heated discussion within the cultural group she represented: should they make reference to it? In the end it was decided to change Fabiana's speech and incorporate her cultural group's outrage at the recent

⁵⁸MacLeod, *Nietas del fuego*; Smith, 'Race-Class-Gender'.

⁵⁹Sabrina Billings, 'Speaking Beauties: Linguistic Posturing, Language Inequality, and the Construction of a Tanzanian Beauty Queen', *Language in Society*, 38: 5 (2009), pp. 581–606.

massacre. It frightened Fabiana quite a bit, and she felt that she had not had a say in it – but in the end, that was how it had to be, so 15-year-old Fabiana stood on stage and denounced the massacre. This is an example of how indigenous pageants became a relatively safe environment amidst violence in which political issues and violence could be and were talked about, and of how indigenous men would decide on the Umial's role in doing so. Later, when Fabiana worked for the municipality as an adult, she got the chance to look at the municipal archives. Going through the minutes of the jury's deliberations she had the slight feeling that it was because of the political character of her speech that she hadn't won. Today, Fabiana is married to a former prominent Xel-jú member, who now works at the office of the Human Rights Ombudsman following posts at the Ministry of Culture, and she and her family are respected members of upper-middle-class Maya K'iche' society in Quetzaltenango.

The young women often mention the speech and the question as a way of emphasising the difference of the Umial Tinimit from the Señorita de Quetzaltenango pageant. According to the young women, the Umial Tinimit is about 'how you express yourself, how you think ... your qualities, your identity and your culture, not about appearances', whereas the Señorita de Quetzaltenango is only about physical appearances. This also comes to the fore in the importance placed on the 'dancing of the *son*' as part of the election process, and on the authenticity of the indigenous clothing the young women wear. This should be as close as possible to the 'original' and 'authentic' dress of Quetzaltenango. The women do not wear high heels, make-up nor jewellery and there is no bikini element involved in the pageant. Instead, the young women often refer to Maya spirituality and its 'humility' – these are the characteristics that are seen to represent the Maya K'iche' as an ethnic group in a beauty pageant. In this way, the young women mark the boundary between Maya K'iche' and ladino, between Umial Tinimit and Señorita de Quetzaltenango, deploying political agency as representatives of the Maya K'iche' of Quetzaltenango.

These elements of Maya beauty are also emphasised at the coronation, two weeks after the election. In this event the differences between Maya K'iche' and ladino society are also clearly demarcated. The evening is abundant in Maya symbolism and all the Maya K'iche' luminaries attend. The elected Umial Tinimit is usually accompanied by the *chirimia* and the *tum*, with small boys dressed in white dancing around her and carrying *copal* as she enters the stage. The cultural groups perform dances that narrate imaginative re-creations of the origins of the Maya K'iche' people. The elected Umial Tinimit receives the *ixcap* and the *chacal*, a traditional chain, instead of a glittering princess' crown. The *nim po't*, the ceremonial blouse, replaces the queen's cape. Finally, she receives a copy of the Pop Wuj instead of the Christian Bible. The winners of two more contests – 'most beautiful *son*' ('*son*' in the sense of a traditional marimba piece) and 'most beautiful poem' dedicated to the Umial Tinimit – are also announced during the evening. The submitted poems celebrate Maya culture, often using key words such as 'maize', 'harmony', 'wisdom' and 'respect', as in this prize-winning poem from the 2005 event written by Oscar Boj:

Calling to the four cardinal points
 The fire begins to speak
 Little by little, the sacred *tz'ite*⁶⁰ forms your name
 With kernels of maize and seeds of the pine tree
 The *Ajq'ij*⁶¹ hears, sees, smells
 Shades of the primordial colours of the primordial maize
 Those counting time reunited forever
 An unbroken chain of purest blood
 The indomitable presence of a proud and enduring race
 Man, nature, cosmos
 A balance of knowledge, harmony and respect
*Xmukané*⁶² present in grandfather moon
 Living brother in vivid *guipiles*⁶³
 Values that dance, sacred customs
 Those who surround you bless your name:
 EVELIN CATALINA.

Afterwards there is a social gathering in the house of the new Umial and people drink and dance; often a marimba is brought out to play some traditional music, again, as 'everybody wants to celebrate this [...] it is a party that entails a lot of respect, and it is a party of everyone, it is a party of the people!', in Estér's words. Winning is not only an expression of indigeneity, of reproducing Maya K'iche' culture through the young women's bodies. It is also sociable and celebrated as a 'family achievement' right after the election. Estér remembers: 'the house was full of people [...] there were people with fireworks, and (lowering voice) bottles, because in these circumstances you usually drink liquor'. Through these social gatherings, the families can further secure their social status within Quetzaltenango Maya K'iche' society.

The cases in which the audience does not agree with the jury's verdict are also instantiations of the importance of the family. For example, Mirna still seems sad when she remembers how a lot of people shouted 'It must have been fraud!' the moment that it was announced that she'd won. She was accused of knowing the jurors, of being too rich, of her father not being from Quetzaltenango. The fuss was rooted in the contested status of her family in Quetzaltenango, not in her performance. It is not only the young woman who wins the election, but also the family the girl represents.

Through the use of symbols, values and ceremony, candidates construct a shared Maya identity on stage vis-à-vis the ladino pageant. How this works is defined by the indigenous peoples themselves; they have set the markers for Mayanness on stage. At the same time, the on-stage event marks the urban-rural socio-economic divide; very few inhabitants from the rural areas would attend the staged

⁶⁰ A *tz'ite* is a bean that is used in Maya ceremonies.

⁶¹ *Ajq'ij* is a day keeper, a Maya spiritual guide.

⁶² *Xmukané* is the ancestral grandmother of time and appears as a central figure in the Pop Wuj.

⁶³ The *guipil* is an embroidered blouse worn by indigenous women. It is an important element of the *traje*.

performance of indigeneity, let alone participate in the election. The young women, thus, also protect the interests of an indigenous economic, political elite.

However, the candidates cannot be considered passive representatives of indigenous culture forced on them by men. The Umiales have come to identify as Maya and emphasise the importance of political engagement. In that sense they break through traditional structures of power as indigenous (as opposed to the non-indigenous population), rather than as (indigenous) women. They do not do this alone, but with the support of cultural groups and the family; becoming the Daughter of the People of Quetzaltenango is a family affair, not an individual achievement. As we saw in the previous section, representing and being supported by the family is seen not as a constraint, but as a crucial resource for becoming a Maya K'iche' representative.

Off Stage: Being the Daughter of the People of Quetzaltenango

As we order another coffee, Gladys continues to recount 'her year as an Umial'. She seems sad when she recounts how her father accompanied her on her trips throughout Guatemala and encountered difficulties when he tried to get some expenses back from the municipality, whereas 'the Señorita Quetzaltenango was driven around in the official car!' She gets even more emotional when she tells about her participation in the Rabin Ajaw. She had travelled to Cobán with her father, where they had had to sleep in a gym, on useless mattresses. The Rabin Ajaw Hotel, where they were taken to the next day, hadn't been much better. During the elections they were served tea that made them sick and there were persistent rumours that the winner had already been chosen before the event had even started. The event had ended in a fight between the parties and nobody [none of the contestants or their families] had gone to the festive lunch they'd been invited to the next day. Her story about the Rabin Ajaw contrasts with the enthusiasm she shows when she talks about how she loved organising activities related to Maya culture and, as such, contributing to knowledge about indigenous clothing, language and culture.⁶⁴

When I ask her what she did as an Umial Tinimit, Judith enthusiastically starts off: 'As for the toys that we give out to children when it is Christmas, I went directly to the shops to ask for toys, together with my boyfriend, and we collected up to 700 toys. We didn't distribute them in Llanos de Pinal [a rural area within the municipality], like everyone else does, but among children who live and work on the streets. That was my first project. A more important project for me was when we collected supplies for schools in the rural areas. That was really important.' When I ask her whether being an Umial Tinimit had opened doors for her personally, she shows the same passion; she tells how she built up an extensive network of people in NGOs that work with children. She was also contacted by a female indigenous congress member and worked a few months for her in the capital. 'So, yes', she concludes, 'it brought me quite some possibilities'.⁶⁵

⁶⁴Based on interview with Gladys, Nov. 2014.

⁶⁵Interview with Judith, Nov. 2014.

Gladys' and Judith's stories touch on different aspects of 'being Umial': their role as representatives of Quetzaltenango, the projects they carry out, their personal development and, related to this, their engagement with Maya culture. Judith's project shows how being Umial reproduces traditional gender roles, and at the same time provides for personal development that opens up future possibilities. In this off-stage phase they act as representatives of the Maya K'iche' following logics that mimic family relations and to a certain extent reproduce traditional gender relations. Activities are supervised by affluent fathers. At the same time Umiales develop personally and see it as important to their lives that they have become aware of their Maya K'iche' identity. Whereas they take on the more traditional role of handing toys out to children and develop activities that are not related to their being *indigenous* representatives, they do start to integrate cultural and political elements in their personal agency and to identify with a broader Maya identity⁶⁶ whilst in post.

We can see clearly how ethnicity, gender and class are interlocked when we consider one of the key tasks of the Umial Tinimit: attending a country-wide variety of events, including elections of other indigenous representatives, parades, conferences and the inauguration of projects. During such events the Umiales, dressed in indigenous Quetzaltenango clothing, have an exclusively representative role: they sit quietly in the front row, together with other beauty queens, without participating actively. Carrying out this role is possible only with the support of the family. Fathers play an important role here: they travel with their daughters throughout the country, often without being reimbursed for their expenses. At the same time, travelling to different places in many cases opens the young women's eyes to ethnic diversity and makes them reflect on class differences within Guatemala. One of the most important tasks for the Umiales is participation in the Rabin Ajaw, of which they have quite divergent memories; some tell stories about manipulation and discrimination, others about friendship and solidarity.

The other key function of an Umial Tinimit is to organise projects and raise money for the most marginalised groups in society, in line with traditional, caring, gender roles. All of the Umiales I talked to, except for Gladys, focused on projects for mothers and children: Estér collected toys for children who are in jail with their mothers, and for children living in the poorest communities in Quetzaltenango. Mirna considered this the most important part of being an Umial Tinimit. She focused on projects that supported schools and collected toys and school equipment for children. Apart from these more material projects, time is dedicated to cultural issues. Estér, for example, dedicated herself to getting the election of the Umial Tinimit recognised as part of the nation's cultural patrimony,⁶⁷ in which she succeeded, and Gladys was interested in indigenous cultural activities. She

⁶⁶See Kay B. Warren, *Indigenous Movements and their Critics, Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998) for an excellent analysis of the construction of a pan-Mayan identity.

⁶⁷In 2017 the election of the Umial Tinimit was declared part of Guatemala's cultural patrimony, because it is considered as the highest expression of Maya K'iche' identity. See Municipalidad de Quetzaltenango, 'Certamen Umial Tinimit Re Xelajuj No'j 2017. Bases del Certamen Umial Tinimit Re Xelajuj No'j 2017', available at https://issuu.com/georgearriola/docs/bases_certamen_umial_tinimit_2017, last access 25 June 2019.

organised and engaged in educational activities about Maya spirituality and political participation in Quetzaltenango. She finds it important that she now knows more about Maya ceremonies, for example, although she has not participated in any since her year as Umial. These activities reflect the cultural and political engagement of the young women and their identification with a broader Maya identity; it shows that they dedicate their time to issues other than the reproductive gender role. This produces a hybrid form of agency, wherein the young women add cultural and political engagement or awareness to their personal development.

Whereas back-stage activities can be characterised as a process of creating Maya awareness, and the on-stage event portrays the contestants as cultural and political agents representative of the Maya K'iche' of Quetzaltenango, many off-stage activities relate to the traditional role of women in society: cultural and traditional gender roles. However, in their personal reflections on this period, the young women focus on the personal growth they have experienced, how being an Umial made them feel 'capable' and gave them space for deploying personal agency. The way Mirna frames this is exemplary: 'There is always also something negative, but in the end, it was a great experience, I got to know many people, to speak in public, to express myself and develop a network. This, in the end, makes you stronger.' Soon after finishing 'her year' she married someone she met during her time in office and decided to dedicate herself to her home.⁶⁸

This idea of personal growth is shared by all the young women. Sometime a political or cultural element is added as part of this personal growth. Building up a network and experiencing sisterhood is an important element of this; this can be with other (indigenous) beauty queens or with NGOs, companies and political parties. In some cases, young women indicate that their service as an Umial has resulted in practical follow-ups such as job offers or invitations to join political parties, as was the case for Judith (quoted at the beginning of this section), who took on a job in the capital working for a congress member. Gladys was invited to participate in the local elections as a candidate for Xel-jú, and Raquel too became politically active in this political organisation. For some young women, such as Ana, the calls from NGOs came too early; they were still in secondary school and the contacts could not be developed further. Other young women have assumed functions in academic realms (Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj), political activism (Ana Liseth Picuiy Soch) and different political offices within political parties (María Elisa López Ixtabalán), among others.⁶⁹ It is, of course, not possible to establish a causal relation between election as Umial and the assumption of political and cultural functions. However, the young women all say that their year as Umial opened up such doors for them. Through their participation in these political and economic domains, gender roles for some of them are partly transformed.

Closely connected to this personal growth is the specific impact of engaging with Maya culture and identifying with a broader Maya identity off stage. Elements of Maya identity, such as the *traje* and spirituality, are rehearsed and internalised

⁶⁸Interview with Mirna, Nov. 2014.

⁶⁹José Ignacio Eduardo Camey Barrios and Ulises Ubaldo Quijivix Yax, *Memoria histórica de la centenario sociedad Maya K'iche' 'El Adelanto'* (Guatemala City: ADESCA, 2013).

during the 'back-stage' period, performed on stage, and to differing extents stay important in 'off-stage daily life'. Raquel's story exemplifies this:

[She] remembers vividly the preparation phase, a period during which she had studied a lot and done a lot of research into Maya culture. She and her group had deepened their knowledge about the peace process, about the problems surrounding water scarcity [in the municipality's poorer rural communities], about Xel-jú. Spirituality was an important element during the preparations. They had to learn about the Maya calendar and they also went to see a spiritual guide to ask for their *Nawal*⁷⁰ and ask if what they were doing was the right thing. It was the first time that she had participated in a Maya ceremony. She laughs when she thinks back on it: 'we really didn't know anything'. Now she is married to a Maya priest and every now and then climbs the Santa María volcano to take part in a Maya ceremony.⁷¹

Only Estér, who was raised by her grandmother, thanks to whom she wore indigenous dress and spoke K'iche', considers participation in the Umial Tinimit as a continuation of how she was raised. Maya spirituality has always been part of her life; it was not new for her, unlike for many of the others, who had never participated in an indigenous ceremony before. For the other young women, the back-stage period was their first profound engagement with Maya culture. For Raquel and Ana, Maya spirituality as well as the *traje* became important. Mirna had not worn the dress before her participation, but she 'never took it off again' after the election. This is not to say that they feel 'more' Maya than young women who have not participated as Umial Tinimit; they rather see their participation as a platform for giving expression to Maya culture and identity, and as a starting point for themselves to become acquainted with some of its important 'building blocks'. Some of these elements continue to play an important role in their daily life, whereas other disappear from it.

When the young women fulfil their year as Umial, however, Maya identity is less important than the election and is mainly expressed through its representational role. In public meetings they fulfil a representative role and the projects they develop are often focused on mothers and children. They depend on their family, mainly their fathers, to enable them to fulfil this representative task. This dependence highlights the assumption of a natural, essential connection between women and children;⁷² it affirms the importance of male family members in safeguarding and protecting the young women and the role of women in representing Maya K'iche' culture at the level of the family and the ethnic group. At the same time, in line with the discourse of liberal feminists who have argued that beauty pageants are instantiations of women's progress,⁷³ the former Umiales all consider the process of becoming and being Umial as important for their personal development. It

⁷⁰Nawal is a day-sign in the Maya calendar and is typically associated with an animal or natural element.

⁷¹Interview with Raquel (Umial in the first half of the 1990s), Nov. 2007.

⁷²Rupal Oza, 'Showcasing India: Gender, Geography, and Globalization', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 26: 4 (2001), pp. 1067–95.

⁷³Dow, 'Feminism'.

has provided them with skills and opportunities in political and economic domains. Engagement with Maya culture is part of this personal agency, rather than a way of deploying political agency.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has explored the lived experiences of Umiales along the axes of gender, indigeneity and class. I have considered beauty pageants as a process of becoming, in which gender, class and indigeneity intersect and transform over time. The stories of the contestants during the different phases – back stage, on stage and off stage – that together constitute the experience of becoming and being an Umial disclose how intersections of these axes of domination change over time and how the young women develop and deploy personal as well as political agency during this process. On a broader level, this case study has shown that indigenous women play an important role in representing and reproducing the ethnic group: they experience this role not as a constraint or form of control but as a form of support and an excellent chance to develop themselves, combining personal agency and (indigenous) political engagement. The Umial Tinimit represents how the Maya K'iche' want to be remembered through women, and it also shows how young Maya women make these representations their own. The way indigenous women navigate and experience the interlockings of gender, indigeneity and class is embedded their identity as Maya K'iche'. Experiences of intersectionality are, thus, not only experiences of oppression, but also experiences of navigating difference and deploying agency in and through a process of 'becoming': in this case, becoming a Maya woman.

The ethnographic description of becoming and being Umial Tinimit has shown an interplay between personal and political agency on the one hand, and a questioning of ethnicity as an ordering mechanism on the other; but it is evident that there is no contestation of the patriarchal system. Back stage the focus is the political and cultural awareness of the beauty contestants: Umiales adopt cultural and political ideas of how to be a Maya woman as their own, and as such break with the traditional role of indigenous women as passive bearers of tradition. On stage, the contestants for the title represent and (re)produce cultural meanings at the same time, actively deploying political agency by negotiating the role of indigenous women in society and vis-à-vis the ladino pageant. Off stage, when they fulfil the role of their office, and after they have finished their term, Umiales often act according to their traditional gender roles, and use their networks and contacts for personal development, resonating with what Dow calls liberal feminist narratives.⁷⁴ At the same time, the political agency that they deployed back stage and on stage becomes more personal, but it also informs political participation. They negotiate their right to culture as well as their individual rights as women.

The way (future) Umiales deploy agency is shaped by gender, indigeneity, class and the family. The election of the Umial Tinimit constitutes a site where gender relations are reproduced: norms about what a Maya woman is are determined by indigenous men. Men play an important role in the whole process of becoming

⁷⁴*Ibid.*

and being Umial Tinimit: they set the rules, are active back stage, are members of the jury. At the same time, beauty pageants provide new professional and political opportunities for young women, making it possible for them to transform gender relations on different levels. They develop themselves personally, gain access to professional and political networks and give their political and cultural awareness a place in daily life and, at times, through political participation. Indigenous beauty pageants also function as a site for cultural appropriation and political agency of indigenous peoples. Umiales become aware of their political rights and cultural identity as Maya women, and express this in the media and on stage. As such, they actively play a role in the cultural and political representation of indigenous peoples. Although this is a process that is guided mostly by indigenous men, with their strict ideas of Mayanness, young women do make it their own.

Whereas the election of the Umial Tinimit as an indigenous beauty pageant can be considered a form of resistance, as a way of constructing counterhegemonic ideas of beauty in contradistinction to the ladino population, it is also, in terms of socio-economic relations, an elite enterprise that mirrors the way the Maya K'iche' bourgeois nation wants to be seen, remembered and represented.⁷⁵ All Umiales are from upper-middle class families. This is necessarily so because of the many costs that are involved in all stages of becoming and being an Umial Tinimit. In addition, even the cost of buying a ticket to attend the crowning of the Umial is too high for people from the municipality's rural areas, nor do they possess the fine and expensive dress that people wear to this event. As such, class is an exclusionary mechanism for preventing participation in the indigenous beauty pageant. At the same time, for most young women being an indigenous beauty queen involves a process of gaining social awareness about class relations and poverty. They not only engage with many other indigenous young women during their travels in the country, they also are confronted with poverty in other parts of the country and in their own municipality.

The family, neglected in most beauty pageant literature, has appeared as an important figure in the whole process of becoming and being an Umial Tinimit. One of the determinants of which young women are invited to participate is the families that they are from: these should be 'respectable' families. The decision as to whether or not to participate is a family affair: not only is the status of the family at stake; participation involves expense, and winning involves more expense. Back stage the family is crucial for moral support and for organising social gatherings in the house during the process and just before the election, which reaffirm social relations. Winning is not an individual success, it is a family affair and a people's celebration: the new Umial Tinimit is, after all, to serve as 'the daughter of the people of Quetzaltenango'. Off stage, the family continues to be extremely important in terms of financing travel and accompanying the young women to events. This is, again, gendered: fathers supervise and control the representative role of their daughter, (grand)mothers and aunts are involved in taking care of her personal wellbeing. This role of the family complicates a strict, dichotomist distinction between personal and political agency.

⁷⁵Casaús Arzú, *Guatemala*.

Combining intersectionality with different perspectives from the (indigenous) beauty pageant literature, I have added to the existing literature about the interlockings of gender, indigeneity and class by telling the stories of indigenous beauty contestants, and their lived experiences of deploying personal and political agency. My analysis of the three phases of the election has revealed that whereas indigenous beauty queens primarily question ethnicity as an ordering mechanism in society and that the event is focused on the revaluation of indigeneity, the Umiales themselves consider their participation as a crucial phase in their personal development, not only because of the skills and networks they have acquired, but also because of their engagement with Maya culture and politics. Although indigenous beauty pageants may be considered as a form of group resistance towards ladino notions of physical beauty, it is in their personal life that the Umiales transform gender relations. In doing so, they often integrate an element of new, indigenous awareness.

On a broader level, the case study showed that indigenous women play an important role in representing and reproducing indigeneity, and that they generally consider this as a chance to develop themselves, combining personal agency and (indigenous) political engagement. New, hybrid forms of agency not only become manifest in the negotiations of gender, indigeneity and class, but also are produced through these contestations.

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Spanish abstract

Los concursos de belleza indígena pueden ser vistos como una forma de reapropiación de la identidad indígena. Este artículo ve a los concursos de belleza como situados en múltiples sistemas de poder repartidos en cuatro niveles de contestación: (1) al reproducir las relaciones de género y crear nuevas oportunidades profesionales y políticas; (2) al constituir un sitio para la agencia cultural y política y delimitar las formas de 'ser mujer maya'; (3) al reproducir las relaciones de clase al tener acceso al evento y contribuir a la conciencia social de las reinas de belleza; (4) como un evento social que consolida relaciones (de género) al interior de la familia. Los hallazgos se basan en un trabajo etnográfico longitudinal en Quetzaltenango, Guatemala (2002–14).

Spanish keywords: identidad indígena; concursos de belleza; Guatemala; agencia; género

Portuguese abstract

Concursos de beleza indígena podem ser vistos como uma maneira de reapropriação da identidade indígena. Este artigo vê concursos de beleza situados em sistemas de poder a quatro níveis de contestação: (1) reproduzindo relações de gênero e criando novas oportunidades políticas e profissionais; (2) estabelecendo um lugar de agência política e cultural e delimitando maneiras de 'ser uma mulher Maya'; (3) reproduzindo relações de classe no que diz respeito ao acesso ao evento e contribuindo para uma consciência social

das 'misses'; (4) funcionando como um evento social que visa consolidar relações (de gênero) no núcleo familiar. As descobertas são baseadas em trabalho de campo de etnografia longitudinal (2002–14) em Quetzaltenango, Guatemala.

Portuguese keywords: identidade indígena; concursos de beleza; Guatemala; agência; gênero

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