

Introduction

On March 18, 2011, between five and seven hundred soldiers and policemen, accompanied by helicopters, invaded the community of San Felipe Chenlá, located in Cotzal, Guatemala, to end an over two-month blockade and peaceful protest against the construction of a hydroelectric plant. The presence of the armed forces was viewed by the communities of Cotzal as an explicit display of the Guatemalan state's support for the company's building of the Palo Viejo hydroelectric plant and as psychological warfare against a people who were defending their rights to live with dignity and respect. The arrival of armed forces occurred thirty years after the Ixil Region suffered the worst violence since Spanish colonization at the hands of the military during the civil war, which was characterized by genocide, massacres, disappearances, forced labor, sexual violence, torture, and displacement.

There was confusion and a general sense of fear. Members of the armed forces marched down a paved dirt road toward San Felipe Chenlá, armed with automatic rifles, batons, tear gas, shields, and helmets. Military members with ski masks entered from all sides of the community, intimidating people and scaring children. A woman fainted upon looking outside her house to see the military surrounding the community; a survivor of the violence and massacres of the 1980s, she suffered a nervous breakdown. The police and military approached the protesters, determined to end the blockade. When it became clear after a two-hour standoff that the armed forces were ready to arrest the leaders of the movement, the community began to peacefully walk forward and thus pushed them back (figure 2). At the forefront were mostly women. One participant later remembered that the women gathered together and decided to confront the police and defend their community.



FIGURE 2. Moments before the armed forces retreat from San Felipe Chenlá, Cotzal, March 18, 2011. Courtesy of B'òq'ol Q'esal Tenam K'usal / Alcaldía Indígena de Cotzal.

The armed forces began to walk backwards, and their retreat was an impressive and powerful sight, given that in other parts of Guatemala many of these situations had ended in violence and bloodshed. As they left, people were heard yelling and cheering. A young boy was heard screaming “¡Afuera! ¡Retireense!” (Get out! Retreat!). An individual filming a video said in Ixil that it was sad knowing that the government sent the military to repress its people instead of protecting them. The aftermath involved another person who fainted and was rushed to the hospital in an ambulance. Young children were seen crying from *el susto* (fright). A man asked why the president had sent the military to scare people: “Does he want the war to start over again? . . . We don’t want war, we want peace!”¹ While the protesters were able to stand their ground and defend their community without any incidents of physical violence, the psychological ramifications would take their toll, as many were reminded of the terror of the civil war. Another war survivor highlighted the impact this had on children: “The children screamed from fear. My children told me, ‘Mami, the violence you told me about is coming back!’”

Two months later, Enel Green Power, the Italian-based company building the Palo Viejo hydroelectric plant on the Finca (plantation) San Francisco, began a dialogue with the communities of Cotzal who had been arguing that the mega-project had been approved and being built without consultation or their consent. Yet community leaders called this a “forced dialogue,” since they were pressured to accept the terms of dialogue under threat of further military intervention. The

dialogue would end when Enel abandoned talks and secretly created a new deal with a newly elected municipal mayor.

This book examines the movement in Cotzal against the construction of the Palo Viejo hydroelectric plant from 2008 to 2012.² Palo Viejo includes four separate concrete diversion dams, concrete canals, a powerhouse, and a reservoir. It is one of the largest hydroelectric plants in Central America and has eighty-seven megawatts of installed capacity, “generating 386.95GW per year, equivalent to energy required by 133,920 homes in Guatemala” (Enel Américas 2022, 157). In 2018, the national census reported that there were about 5,624 homes in Cotzal (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Guatemala 2018). In other words, the hydroelectric facility could power all the homes in Cotzal almost twenty-four times over, but the electricity is sent outside the municipality. Enel makes an estimated profit of over \$30 million a year from Palo Viejo, but their annual contribution to the municipal government is \$294,871, or less than 1 percent of their earnings (see chapter 6 below; Enel Green Power 2014a, 10). In 2010, Cotzal’s Municipal Council of Development reported that only ten communities had access to electricity, and the other “twenty-nine communities use traditional ways to get lighting, such as *ocote*, candles, and kerosene lamps, [some of which can] cause serious problems to people’s health. Public lighting covers only 18 percent of the municipality and the majority of it is concentrated in the urban area” (COMUDE del Municipio de San Juan Cotzal 2010, 30). During my fieldwork in Cotzal, I found that approximately 37 percent of the population of Cotzal had access to electricity, further underscoring the disparities between the discourses of development and local realities.

In Cotzal, the arrival of these foreign companies and megaprojects was referred to as the “new invasion” or “fourth invasion,” which is distinguished from three previous invasions: first, the Spanish invasion and colonization; second, the creation of the plantation economy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and, third, the state-sponsored genocide that occurred during the Guatemalan Civil War (1960–96) (figure 3).³ The Ixil Region has a history of foreign intervention and extraction, externally imposed forms of development, state-sponsored violence, and resistance (Batz 2020). During a dialogue meeting between Enel and the communities of Cotzal, an Ixil leader recognized these cyclical forms of invasion, drawing parallels between Enel’s arrival and the Spanish invasion:

There is no recognition here of Indigenous Peoples, because you [Enel] come like the god, you act like the god among our communities, because you are the ones who will give gifts. . . . Five hundred years ago you came with a mirror . . . now you want to give away other things. . . . You always want to be above the Indigenous; if you have your say, the Indigenous have to accept what comes from above, that’s racism, *hermanos*, I don’t know what you can call it, but for me it’s racism. That’s how I feel it, because

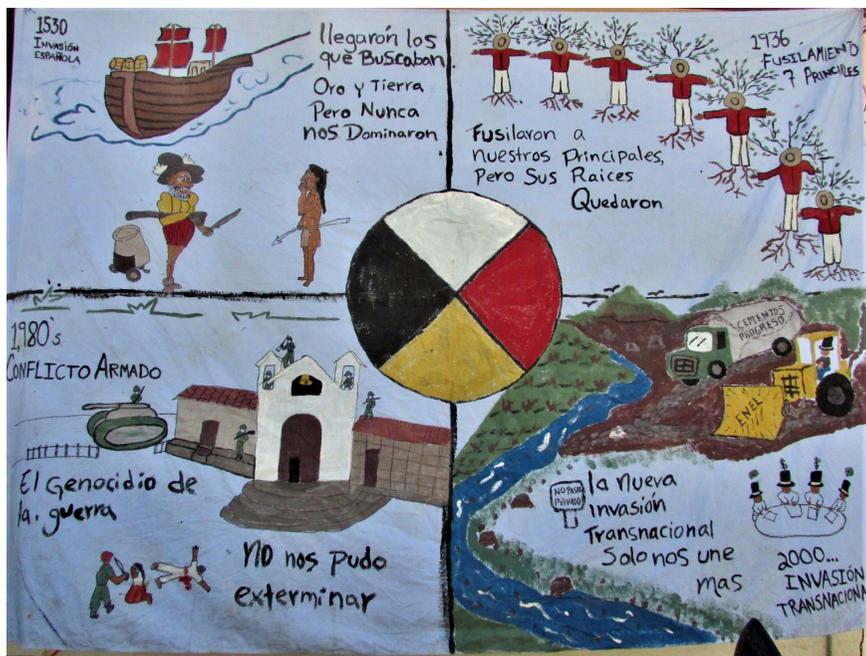


FIGURE 3. Banner and drawing of the invasions and history of the Ixil Region by Chemol Tumb'al, 2015. Photo by author.

I'm Indigenous and I feel it that way. . . . You continue to view us like you are used to seeing us, as *indios*.⁴

The *alcalde indígena* (ancestral authority) of Cotzal Concepción Santay Gómez compares the arrival of Enel to the arrival of the Brol family, who displaced the Ixil over a century ago to create the Finca San Francisco: “The arrival of the Brol is like the arrival of Enel now: they arrived offering things to our people. Our grandfathers and grandmothers had to leave their lands back then, look for another place, so that Brol could make his finca. [Now Enel is] constructing their [hydroelectric plant], it is the land where grandfathers and grandmothers were dispossessed.” While discussing the fifty-year state-issued license given to the company for Palo Viejo to operate, he says: “According to what we have heard, when Enel ends its operations after fifty years, it will remain in the hands of the Brols, so the Brols will make more money for another one hundred years—in other words, our future generations, the children who are not born yet, and the children who were born, their children, their grandchildren, they already have their *patrones* [bosses], that is to say, we will never come out from under the pressure of these landowners, the invaders [unless we resist].” The Ixil’s cyclical understanding of space, time, and history allows them to view their past as their future and to receive the lessons needed to prepare for the present. Through the use of the four invasions, I argue

that megaprojects are a continuation of a colonial logic of extraction based on the displacement and destruction of Indigenous Peoples and territories. Thus this book presents a historical account of land struggles and resistance during the four invasions with an emphasis on the arrival of megaprojects to Guatemala that have threatened the lives and self-determination of the Ixil.

COTZAL

Cotzal is in the department of El Quiché and forms part of the Ixil Region along with the municipalities of Chajul and Nebaj. The residents of the three municipalities are mainly Ixil with a significant presence of K'iche' and ladinos (non-Indigenous) and a smaller presence of other Mayas. Each town is distinct in their cultural practices, dress, and the variant of Ixil that they speak. Of the three Ixil groups, Cotzal's variant of Ixil is the most distinct in comparison to Chajul and Nebaj (Romero 2017). According to the 2018 Census, there were 133,329 Ixil in Guatemala, or 2 percent of the Maya population. There were approximately 31,532 people in Cotzal, of whom 23,940 were Ixil and 6,171 K'iche', with a smaller presence of other Maya groups such as the Achí (41), Q'anjob'al (7), Q'eqchi' (23), Mam (21), and Kaqchikel (14). There were also 1,108 ladinos or non-Indigenous people and 8 foreigners (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Guatemala 2018).

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the K'iche', who were being displaced from their lands, came in large numbers to the Ixil Region seeking refuge and fleeing forced labor (De León Cael 2014). The Ixil refer to other Ixil as *Kumol*, and sometimes call the K'iche' *ula*, which means “visitor.” Today, the K'iche' consist of nearly a fifth of the population in Cotzal (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Guatemala 2018). There are also several mixed families of Ixil and K'iche' heritage, Ixil and ladino, and K'iche' and ladino, among others. For instance, Concepción Santay Gómez's mother was Ixil, and his father was a K'iche' who served as a municipal mayor in Cotzal.

Non-Indigenous peoples are commonly known as ladinos or *kaxlan* (in various Maya languages)—an ambiguous identity, since there is no clear definition or characteristic surrounding this ethnic group beyond its being recognized as non-Indigenous (Hale 2006; González-Ponciano 2005). Ladinos are also referred to as *mu's* in Ixil and K'iche', and *mo's* in Mam. Maya and ladino relationships are complicated. Colby and Van den Berghe (1969) report that significant ladino settlement began toward the end of the nineteenth century. Who is determined to be ladino depends on a variety of factors. There are several mixed families where children are Ixil and ladino. In some cases, children are encouraged not to speak or dress as Ixil and are raised as ladinos. Most ladinos live in Nebaj and the town centers of the three Ixil municipalities, as well as communities such as Chichel (Tzi'ché) in Cotzal. Ladinos and non-Indigenous peoples use racist terms to insult the Ixil and Indigenous Peoples, such as *indio* (Indian), or “Maria” to refer to any

Indigenous women (independent of their actual names) (Cumes 2012). Ladinization has affected the Ixil much as it has affected other Indigenous Peoples elsewhere in Guatemala; it includes forcing them to stop wearing their Maya dress, speaking their languages in favor of Spanish, and practicing *costumbre* or Maya spirituality, as well as engaging in other ladino cultural practices. These violent efforts of ladinization have manifested throughout the four invasions.

Foreigners visiting and living in the Ixil Region are racialized in various manners. While the term *gringo* historically refers to Euro-Americans from the US, the term has been applied to white Europeans and to Euro-descendants from other countries. US gringos living in Guatemala often refer to themselves, especially in the presence of other gringos, as “expats,” possibly in an attempt to distinguish themselves as superior, special, and privileged, or to avoid being categorized as “immigrants,” “settlers,” “colonizers,” “imperialists,” or simply gringos. The Ixil of Chajul refer to gringos as *vir*.⁵ In some instances, light-skinned Guatemalan ladinos can be racialized as gringos. The term for the United States is *vatzoka*, which means “across the sea” and possibly originally references those coming from Europe and the land of the colonizers. The many foreigners who visit or live in the Ixil Region come for a variety of reasons and include nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers, tourists, academics, international observers, journalists, and missionaries, among others.⁶

The majority of people in Cotzal are agricultural workers, and people earn between 30 to Q35 a day (approximately \$3.98 to \$4.65), which is less than half of the minimum wage of the country (MINTRAB 2021). Cotzal is known for its temperate climate, where rains allow for lush trees and agriculture to flourish year-round. Much of the population engages in subsistence agriculture, growing their own maize, beans, and a variety of squashes such as chilacayote and güisquil. There are two milpa harvests in June and December. The largest cash crop is coffee, with the Finca San Francisco being the largest producer and exporter in Cotzal.

Of the three towns, Cotzal is the smallest in area (182 km²) and the highest in population density (153.5 inhabitants per km²) (COMUDE del Municipio de San Juan Cotzal 2010, 56). In 2010, those living in poverty were 92.75 percent of the population in Chajul, 83.4 percent in Cotzal, and 85.5 percent in Nebaj, with those in extreme poverty at 40.60 percent, 29.1 percent, and 29.5 percent, respectively (COMUDE del Municipio de Chajul 2010; COMUDE del Municipio de San Juan Cotzal 2010, 46; COMUDE del Municipio de Nebaj 2010, 50). In Chajul 35.53 percent of those above the age of fifteen were illiterate, while this figure was 37.85 percent in Cotzal and 38.11 percent in Nebaj (COMUDE del Municipio de Chajul 2010, 35; COMUDE del Municipio de San Juan Cotzal 2010, 29; COMUDE del Municipio de Nebaj 2010, 29). In Cotzal, 37 percent of the population have access to electricity, but provision is of low quality, with blackouts being a common occurrence. The more prosperous families have houses made of concrete blocks,

TABLE 1 Microregions in Cotzal

Location	Communities	Characteristics
Microregion 1	Cotzal (town center), Pulay, Tixelap, Los Ángeles	40% of the population
Microregion 2	Asich, Ojo de Agua, San Nicolás, Q'anel, La Esperanza	4% of the population
Microregion 3	Santa Avelina, Chichel, Vichivalá, San Felipe Chenlá, La Bendición, Kuul, Jacvintab, Vichemal	Noted for growing coffee; 28% of population
Microregion 4	Belén, Namá, Xolcó, Chinimaquin, Xolbalpe, Cajixay, Tzinimcím	3% of the population
Microregion 5	Chisés, Quisis, Titzach	2% of the population
Microregion 6	San Francisco, Sajubal, El Pinal, Tzibanay	Produce coffee; 10% of population
Microregion 7	Pamaxán, Buenos Aires, Villa Hortensia Antigua, Villa Hortensia I, Villa Hortensia II	Produce coffee; 10% of population
Microregion 8	Xeputul I, Xeputul II, San Marcos Cumlá	3% of the population

SOURCE: For communities, Mazariegos Cuyuch (2010, 8–9). For characteristics, COMUDE del Municipio de San Juan Cotzal (2010).

while those with less resources live in houses made of wood and adobe. Recent migrations to the United States and remittances have enabled some families to renovate or build their houses.

The municipal government officially divides up Cotzal into eight microregions consisting of thirty-nine communities: the town center (further divided into fifty-three *cantones*); twenty-four *aldeas* (villages); four *agro aldeas* (agro villages); nine *caseríos*; and one finca (see table 1; COMUDE del Municipio de San Juan Cotzal 2010, 10). The town center is the most heavily populated; it has more access to government institutions and social services and has the biggest market in Cotzal on Saturdays. The second-largest community is Santa Avelina, which has a weekly market, a festival every January, and a cooperative.

Some communities in Cotzal have existed for thousands of years, such as Cajixay (Kajixay) and Titzach, which have archaeological sites (Linares 2021, 50, 67–68). According to oral histories, Cajixay was one of the first settlements in Cotzal after the Ixil left their birthplace in Ilom, Chajul. Many of these archaeological sites have been looted. According to researcher Adriana Linares (2021), there are “26 ceremonial centers . . . registered in the Ixil Region for the Classic period (300–1000 CE),” eleven of which are found in Cotzal (55–56).⁷

The communities of Cotzal can also be categorized by their recent social political histories, such as being former model villages, *agro aldeas*, communities formed by the Communities of Population in Resistance (CPR) and refugees, communities

surrounding the finca, and predominately K'iche' communities bordering the neighboring municipalities of Uspantán and Cunén. The four model villages formed during the war in Cotzal were San Felipe Chenlá, Vichivalá (Vi'chib'al a'), Santa Avelina, and Ojo de Agua, with the first three being heavily involved and at the forefront of resistance against Enel. *Agro aldeas*, which include La Bendición, Los Ángeles, and Belén, are those that were created in the Ixil Region by the US-based Fundación Agros (Elliott 2021, 130). The term *agro aldea* originates from Fundación Agros, which is led by Alfred Antonio Kaltschmitt Lujan, a Costa Rican right-wing conservative who was aligned with the Guatemalan military government during the war, was a defense witness in the General Efraín Ríos Montt genocide trial, and supported the construction of Palo Viejo (Gutiérrez Valdizán 2013; Kaltschmitt 2011). There are communities that were once part of the Finca San Francisco, or whose residents heavily rely on the finca for employment or to borrow land to plant, such as Xeputul I, Xeputul II, San Marcos Cumlá (K'umla), Sajubal, El Pinal, Tzibanay, Pamaxan, and Buenos Aires. Communities can also be divided up by the different land tenure systems that exist there, such as *ejido* (communal land), *patrimonio agrario colectivo*, *empresa campesina asociativa*, and *agro aldea*.

With the exception of the town center, some streets in Santa Avelina, and the road to Nebaj and Chajul, asphalt paved roads do not exist in Cotzal. There is public transportation between the town centers of Cotzal and Nebaj, and most recently from Cotzal and Chajul. Communities along the main road that connects Nebaj to the Finca San Francisco have better access to Ixil town centers. Outlying communities such as Chichel, Namá, and Cajixay have dirt roads that allow buses, *micros* (minivans), motorcycles, or *tuk tuks* (auto rickshaws) to access these communities, depending on the road conditions and the season. Communities at farther distances from the town center, such as Villa Hortensia II and Vichemal, have ill-maintained dirt roads and rely on one bus (if functioning and in service) that makes one round trip to town on market days. Other communities such as Xeputul I do not have adequate roads for public transportation, and still others like San Marcos Cumlá are accessible only on foot. While there is a road extending to the Finca San Francisco, once you enter the finca, you are stopped at a checkpoint, where you are received by armed guards who begin to interrogate you as to where you are headed. They can deny your entry and in the past they have charged vehicles for using the road.

Of the three towns in the Ixil Region, Cotzal has been the least studied, as many researchers, NGOs, and state institutions have concentrated their work in Nebaj. This has to do with Nebaj being perceived as more “comfortable” and more “accessible” to outsiders, and today it has many hotels, pharmacies, and other amenities. Previous researchers and travelers from the late nineteenth century up to the present mention how they spent more time in Nebaj and only made short visits to Cotzal to visit either the Finca San Francisco and the Brol family, or to the town

center, where they met with the Catholic priest or the municipal mayor. In other words, for researchers traveling to Cotzal, it was a matter of visiting and accessing spaces of colonial and repressive powers and their agents.⁸

AUTHORITIES IN THE IXIL REGION

The various types of authorities in the Ixil Region include, but are not limited to, state/government, community/traditional, religious/spiritual, and ancestral authorities, some of which overlap with each other. State and government authorities include the municipal government (municipal mayor, municipal councils), and other municipal bodies such as the Community Councils of Development (COCODE) and the Municipal Councils of Urban and Rural Development (COMUDE). They also consist of other state agents linked to security and policing such as the National Civil Police (PNC), the Municipal Police of Transit (PMT), and the military. State/government authorities include judicial entities such as the Public Ministry (MP), which has its office in Nebaj, and the Justice of the Peace, located in the town center of Cotzal. There are also other government officials such as the governor and department deputies.

Community, traditional, and ancestral authorities include community leaders, spiritual guides, *curanderos* (healers), *comadronas* (midwives), bone healers, and elders, among others. Every year, communities in Cotzal hold community assemblies where they select leaders to form part of the COCODEs and other *cargos* through consensus. The selected person then has to accept or deny the *cargo*. The highest position is the *alcalde auxiliar/comunitario* (auxiliary mayor/community mayor). A community leader who has passed through various *cargos* such as secretary, *aguacil* (sheriff), and more importantly *alcalde auxiliar/comunitario*, is then recognized by the community as a *paxato*. Most communities have a council of elders who guide the community.

Religious/spiritual authorities include Catholic priests, catechists, pastors, and *guias espirituales* (spiritual guides). Before the war, Catholicism was widespread, with many participating in *cofradías*, which safeguard Catholic saint figures (Lincoln 1945, 127–42). During the war, Catholics and catechists were persecuted, and evangelical churches proliferated under General Ríos Montt (1982–83). Maya spiritual guides, commonly known among various Maya groups as *ajq'ij*, and in Ixil by various names, are essential to Maya spirituality (Firmino Castillo et al. 2014). In Nebaj they are known as *b'aał vatz ttiixh*, in Cotzal *cumpare*, and in Chajul *mama'*. Maya spiritual guides were heavily persecuted during the Spanish invasion and most recently during the civil armed conflict. According to sociologist Eglá Martínez Salazar (2012), the military viewed spiritual guides as “communist sorcerers”; it “publicly tortured and executed” them as a form of “cultural-political punishment, in that they represented more clearly the capacity of Mayas to be producers of autonomous epistemologies, and because these spiritual teachers made possible

the survival of Maya spirituality, a key component of the Maya Cosmovision” (115). The persecution of spiritual guides and their prevention from practicing ceremonies and rituals continues today in Guatemala.⁹

The ancestral authorities, who can also be considered as community/traditional authorities, are known by various names, including *principales*, and the Alcaldía Indígena or B'oq'ol Q'esal Tenam in Ixil. A principal or ancestral authority who is an elder and who has served his or her people through various *cargos* is also recognized as a *principal de principales*, a very distinguished honor. The Alcaldías Indígenas in Guatemala were created during the colonial era as a form of governance among the Mayas under ladino control. According to Lina Barrios (2001), the Alcaldías Indígenas were a colonial institution used to administer the distribution of labor and tribute. At the same time, they preserved Indigenous culture and practices and maintained a certain degree of autonomy. The Alcaldía Indígena in Cotzal was revived and strengthened in 2008 in response to the growing threat of multinational companies in the area and the need to promote Indigenous rights (B'oq'ol Q'esal Tenam 2014). The ancestral authorities consist of elders, *comadronas*, spiritual guides, and community leaders. *Comadrona* and elder Txutx Ni'l, or doña Inés Chamay Poma, is recognized as one of the leaders who aided in reviving the ancestral authorities in Cotzal. She was a *principal de principales* and passed away in February 2011 (B'oq'ol Q'esal Tenam 2014, 1). The Indigenous Authorities/Alcaldía Indígena/B'oq'ol Q'esal Tenam of Cotzal were at the forefront of the movement against the Palo Viejo project. Other Alcaldías Indígenas in the Ixil Region, including those of Nebaj, Chajul, Ilom, and Chel, have resisted megaprojects as well.

During much of my fieldwork, the Alcaldía Indígena of Cotzal was not recognized by the municipality or by state/government authorities. Ixil municipal mayors have questioned the legitimacy of ancestral authorities, arguing that since there are elected Indigenous officials, there is no reason for the existence of the Alcaldía Indígena. Although Article 55 of the Municipal Code (Decree Number 12-2002) reads, “The municipal government must recognize, respect and promote the Alcaldía Indígenas when they exist, including their own forms of administrative operations” (Congreso de la República de Guatemala 2002). Despite this, the Alcaldía Indígena of Cotzal were denied, unrecognized, and rejected by the municipal administrations of Baltazar Toma Sambrano (2000–2008) and José Pérez Chen (2008–11). In 2007, “A group of midwives headed by doña Inés Chamay Poma structured the ancestral authority of the municipality of Cotzal” and met with then municipal mayor Toma Sambrano to “ask for recognition.” He responded that it was “impossible that there should be another Indigenous authority in the municipality if everyone knows that San Juan Cotzal is governed by an Indigenous person, at which the Alcaldía Indígena was dissatisfied, [perceiving his response to be] very racist, arrogant, and paternalistic” (B'oq'ol Q'esal Tenam

2014, 5). In 2008, after “the Alcaldía Indígena of Cotzal made themselves known publicly in the municipality through a Maya ceremony on January 8, 2008,” they were once again rejected by Pérez Chen (5–6). The municipal mayor Baltazar Cruz Torres also did not recognize the Alcaldía Indígena during his first term (2012–16) and part of his second term (2016–19). In April 2019, through a Municipal Act, Cruz Torres did recognize the Alcaldía Indígena, but this decision was a result of the effort and struggle of the ancestral authorities (Municipalidad de San Juan Cotzal 2019).

In Cotzal, the Alcaldía Indígena is made up of twenty core members, along with supporting advisers, and is headed by a *primer alcalde* (first mayor) who serves every year of the Maya calendar as opposed to the Gregorian calendar. Four members have been selected by the communities to serve as *primer alcaldes*, and another four as *segundo alcaldes* (second mayors). Each member serves in a rotative manner every other four years for life. Each of the *primer alcaldes* represents one of the four year bearers of the Maya solar calendar: No’j, Iq’, Chee, Ee. The alcaldes alternate their positions during the Ixil Maya New Year under the solar calendar, which takes place after the *O’ Qii* (the five sacred days), or approximately every year in late February in the Gregorian calendar. The Alcaldía Indígena of Cotzal demonstrates the way that spirituality and the Ixil calendar influence governance and decision-making.¹⁰

The communities of Cotzal have moved toward establishing themselves as *Comunidades Indígenas* (Indigenous Communities) as a means of gaining greater autonomy from the municipality and Guatemalan state. The Alcaldía Indígena has extended recognition to the *Comunidades Indígenas* and their *libros de actas* (registry books that contain meeting notes and community decisions and rulings); the municipal government has not. The importance of the recognition of *libros de actas* is to ensure that decision-making by the communities is respected by the municipal government and the state.

On July 2, 2011, San Felipe Chenlá became the first *aldea* in Cotzal to declare itself as a *Comunidad Indígena*. With the support of the *alcalde auxiliar* and the COCODE, the community placed “all authority over their lives to [the] Q’èsal Tenam Tu Poj (Consejo de Principales) of the Comunidad Indígena Tu Poj” (Tu Poj 2011, 2). These efforts are meant to give formal and ultimate authority to community leaders (Q’èsal Tenam in Ixil) over the state’s representatives (*alcalde auxiliar* and the COCODE). In declaring themselves a *Comunidad Indígena*, the people also renamed their community from San Felipe Chenlá to Tu Poj as a form of recovering Ixil place-names. *Tu Poj* means “within the sand” (*tu* = in, *poj* = sand). At the time of this writing (September 2023), there are nineteen *Comunidades Indígenas*: Pulay Cotzal, Asich, San Nicolás, Xob’alpe, Cajixay, La Bendición, Quisis, Villa Hortensia I, San Marcos Cumlá, Vichemal, Los Ángeles, La Esperanza, Belén, Namá, San Felipe Chenlá, San Antonio Titzach, Villa Hortensia II, Buenos

Aires, and Xeputul II. For communities that are majority K'iche', such as Villa Hor-tensia II, the *Comunidad Indígena* is known in K'iche' as *K'amalbé*.

METHODOLOGY AND SHAPING OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Academia is often considered a pillar of colonialism in monopolizing the production of knowledge (Restrepo 2007). There have been a range of critiques and proposed solutions to confront these problems and challenges so as to best rethink our roles and relationships as educators and researchers with the communities we work with. These proposals include, among others, decolonization of academia and the use of critical Indigenous methodologies (Harrison 1991; L. Smith 1999), pedagogies of the oppressed (Freire 2000), activist anthropology (Hale 2008; Speed 2006), black feminist thought (Collins 1991), and Chicx personal narratives and storytelling (Aguirre 2005). Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999) demonstrates the ways research and Western academia are tied to European imperialism and colonialism and thus are negatively viewed by many indigenous communities across the world. "Research" in these cases is not limited to academia and also includes journalistic and amateur works. Anthropologists are among the most visible actors in these critiques because of the ethnographic nature of their research and anthropology's violent history as a discipline, which found its origins in dedicating itself to the study of non-European "Others." Indigenous Peoples, scholars, and activists from all over the world have criticized academics, particularly anthropologists, for their role in working alongside and in collaboration with colonial structures of power, and for appropriating, stealing, looting, extracting, and benefiting from Indigenous cultures, identities, knowledges, and peoples in ways that contribute to their oppression (Deloria 1969; Gibbings 2020; Restrepo 2007; Speed 2019).

While many works have been written about the Ixil and Maya peoples, it is likely that most of them have never read or are unfamiliar with these works. Despite calls to decolonize knowledge and make our research more accessible, the general sense I have from various communities and people in Guatemala, in both academic and nonacademic spaces, is that this does not happen in practice. Books are usually relatively expensive and inaccessible to people outside urban spaces; electronic versions of these works are not translated into the language where research was conducted and assume that people have access to the internet, a computer, and electricity. Academic conferences typically take place in very expensive hotels, in very expensive cities, in very expensive countries that require visas, with expensive membership and conference registration fees, and are mostly attended by professional academics. Overtheorizing concepts and events without providing solutions to problems is at times not useful on a practical and material level for frontline communities and people on the ground (these sentiments were

captured by an Ixil who stated, “You can’t eat theory”). This is not an antitheory position but another call to find balance in making our research not just more accessible but more applicable and useful to the communities we are working with. Some Ixil have pointed to how irrelevant some academic research is to the real world, have highlighted its extractivist nature, and have expressed the need for Ixil to conduct their own research and not rely on outsiders such as anthropologists to do this work, who “solo sacan información, y se van” (only take out information and leave).¹¹ Whether one agrees with these sentiments or not, they are indicative of a very serious problem. The violent history of the Western education system against Indigenous Peoples contributed to the 2011 foundation of the Ixil University (Batz 2018).

At the same time, there are efforts to rectify some of the inequalities between academia and Indigenous communities. Currently, there are several studies and books researched and written by Ixil on the Ixil Region on topics such as spirituality and history (Asociación de la Mujer Maya Ixil 2000; B'oq'ol Q'ésal Tenam 2014; Reyna Caba 2001; De León Ceto 2013; Firmino Castillo et al. 2014; Rodríguez López 2005; To'm, Tzima, and Met 2014). The theses produced out of the Ixil University by Ixil and K'iche' since 2013 are also a source of works produced from an Indigenous, community, and local perspective (Batz 2018). There are also bilingual dictionaries and books written by the Ixil from the three towns (Asicona Ramírez, Méndez Rivera, and Xinic Bop 1998; Cedillo Chel and Ramírez 1999; Comunidad Lingüística Ixil 2018a; Poma Sambrano and Castro Osorio 1994, 1995). In Cotzal, Maximiliano Poma Sambrano, who is the *primer alcalde* of the Alcaldía Indígena for the year Chee, coordinated the first Ixil-produced bilingual book (Ixil-Spanish) (Poma Sambrano and Castro Osorio 1994). There are several publications of the Ixil Linguistic Community, Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala (ALMG), written and researched by Ixil, including books on Ixil Mayan medicine, literary texts, history, and culture (Comunidad Lingüística Ixil n.d.-a, n.d.-b, 2004, 2008, 2018a, 2018b). There are some examples of anthropologists whose research promotes human rights and Indigenous rights, such as Myrna Mack, Ricardo Falla, and Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj (AVANCSO 1992; Falla 1992; Velásquez Nimatuj 2019). Mack's 1990 assassination by the Guatemalan military was attributed to her human rights-based research on internally displaced Maya communities during the war (Oglesby 1995). In addition, several scholars have recently collaborated with Ixil ancestral authorities, community leaders, and the Ixil University (Banach and Brito Herrera 2021; Batz 2022b; Hernández Alarcón et al. 2008; A. Flores 2017; Linares 2021).

Academia is an extractivist industry. As a researcher examining extractivist industries, I was presented with the challenge of mitigating the potential consequences of my work in the Ixil Region. Hence, for this research I used and was inspired by the methods and ethics of critical Indigenous methodologies and activist anthropology/research. These methods and vision are based on collaboration,

reciprocity, and respect and address the historical inequalities that exist between researchers and marginalized communities. Apart from my initial arrival in 2011, during each step of my research project, from forming my research questions, to disseminating and sharing my work, to applying my research to support social movements in the area, to my dissertation defense, I have consulted various ancestral authorities and groups in Cotzal to best ensure transparency, reciprocity, and respect. This included having periodic meetings with various authorities and community members to provide updates and written works, as well as to receive feedback. I produced community publications on multiple occasions to distribute my work so people would be aware of the research I was conducting. On March 19, 2017, I presented my dissertation to the ancestral authorities, the community authorities of San Felipe Chenlá, and members of the Ixil University. I was also able to invite two ancestral authorities of Cotzal to be present for and to participate in my dissertation defense at the University of Texas at Austin in April 2017 and to form part of the de facto committee.

The framework for this book was influenced by Florencia Mallon's edited volume *Decolonizing Native Histories* (2012), which argues that there is a need to decolonize Indigenous histories and create alternative narratives focusing on local and community-based histories that recognize difference and avoid essentializing these communities. Some scholars have called for the need to avoid portraying and/or romanticizing marginalized peoples as always being victims since it denies their political subjectivity, as well as disregarding the complex relationships involved within these communities. In shaping the research project, community leaders asked that I focus on their history. The use of the local concept of "four invasions" seeks to privilege local Ixil narratives and cyclical interpretations of history and time.

I position myself in my research as the son of working-class Guatemalan immigrants, and I identify as a K'iche' Maya who was born and raised in Los Angeles, California, in the mid-1980s. Since 2011, I have been able to work with and accompany various groups and organizations in the Ixil Region. I had close contact with the Alcaldía Indígena of Cotzal and supported their efforts in various forms such as accompaniment, documentation of their work at their request (photographs, recordings), and editing of their collective work on the struggle against Enel (B'oq'ol Q'esal Tenam 2014). I accompanied and organized various visits of Ixil leaders to California, Texas, Ohio, Arizona, and New Mexico, in order for them to spread awareness and garner international support for their movement. I was able to travel to Guatemala City with the ancestral authorities from the Ixil Region on various occasions to press releases, conferences, protests, and meetings with government officials. I had close contact with local leaders in various communities throughout the region, especially with leaders in San Felipe Chenlá since that is where I resided during my research. I was present for the inauguration of the Ixil University in 2011, where I served as a tutor, taught courses, and served as a

thesis adviser for students between 2013 and 2015. It was in the Ixil Region that I also learned to ride a motorcycle, which allowed me to travel to communities, as well as experience firsthand the difficulties and dangers of bad roads for vehicles and public safety.

I first came to Cotzal in June 2011 and conducted two months of research on the conflict surrounding Palo Viejo, which included attending two dialogue meetings. I returned in 2012 to present my findings, as well as asking and consulting community leaders and the ancestral authorities for permission to conduct my doctoral research in Cotzal. These meetings involved having community leaders shape my research questions and topics, which I would come to understand as consisting of two parts. The first investigated the history of Cotzal through the four invasions. The second examined the case of Palo Viejo. These two overall themes would guide my research and eventually form the two parts of the book presented here.

The majority of my ethnography and archival research collection occurred between 2013 and 2015, when I conducted twenty-six months of field research. I returned in 2016, 2017, 2019, 2022, and 2023 for shorter visits that ranged between one to three months. In total, I conducted over one hundred individual formal interviews and ten group interviews (with the number of participants ranging from three to twelve people), and had countless informal conversations. Interviewees included community leaders and residents, teachers, students and staff of the Ixil University, municipal mayors, members of the *Alcaldía Indígena* from Cotzal, Ilom, Chel, and Nebaj, migrants, ex-combatants, and ex-gang members, among others. These conversations gave me a deeper understanding of Ixil and K'iche' culture, history, identity, spirituality, archaeological sites, and the movement against megaprojects.

My first book published in Spanish based on my research was peer-reviewed by the ancestral authorities of Cotzal to ensure transparency and dissemination of my work (figure 4). As a scholar on the job market (2016–21) I was expected to publish my first book in English, preferably with a US-based university press, to have a more competitive application. But while I was in contact with a US university press to publish my work in English, I decided that I had to publish my work first in Spanish and with a Guatemalan press to make it accessible to the communities and people in Cotzal, Guatemala, Latin America, and elsewhere. I was fortunate to work with and publish with the *Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales en Guatemala* (Association for the Advancement of the Social Sciences in Guatemala, AVANCSO), cofounded by Myrna Mack, in both print and digital open access. As mentioned in the Foreword, the book was presented over three days in Guatemala (figure 5).

In this book, uncited quotations can be assumed to come from fieldwork interviews or video recordings. Additionally, not all interviewees are named in full or at all out of respect for privacy and security. In some cases, some interviewees



FIGURE 4. Author (top row, fourth from left) with members of the Alcaldía Indígena de Cotzal, 2022.

asked me to include their full names, for which permission was obtained before the publication of the book. I conducted extensive archival research in the Archivo General de Centro America (AGCA) in Guatemala City and Segundo Registro de la Propiedad (SRP) in Quetzaltenango, as well as accessing other documents at the Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional (AHPN). I also reviewed declassified US documents from US agencies such as the Embassy to Guatemala, the State Department, and the Central Intelligence Agency. Last, I had access to video recordings and testimonies from the 2011 blockade and dialogue meetings, open letters, and press releases from both Enel and the communities of Cotzal.

For over a year (starting in 2014), Enel Green Power through their external relations representative denied my various requests for a formal interview regarding Palo Viejo. The two main reasons they gave me for denying me an interview were that employees involved in the conflict in Cotzal no longer worked with the company and later that 2015 was an election year and Enel reserved the right to withhold opinions and perspectives on the matter, which might be “extremely sensitive for the country” (personal communication, April 9, 2015). In my attempts to obtain an interview, Enel’s external relations representative requested that I submit another formal, written request in a Word document regarding the topics I wanted to cover via email, which I did. In response, I was denied an in-person interview, but Enel’s representative did respond in writing to the five topics that I wanted to inquire about (although this was not as valuable as an interview) and sent me a report that discussed the impact of the 2013 agreement between the municipality and the company.



FIGURE 5. Presentation of research in Cotzal during Maya ceremony, January 2023. Photo by author.

Similarly, the administration of the Finca San Francisco never responded to a written request for an interview in 2014, which I was instructed to draft by the administrator of the finca after I verbally requested an interview with him in the town center of Cotzal.¹² Instead, I was required to leave my written request with armed men at their gate when I arrived, and I never received a response. I had

previously visited the finca with two journalists in 2012, but this was a very intimidating experience in which a helicopter circled our car when we asked to talk to Pedro Brol (the owner of the finca), while four heavily armed men surrounded the vehicle. We were later received by Brol's son, who said an interview would not be possible. I did not pursue an interview with the Finca San Francisco after I submitted my 2014 request out of concerns for my personal safety.

VIOLENCE DURING MY FIELDWORK

I saw don Sebastian Sajic Córdova in Nebaj the day before he was brutally murdered on September 11, 2015. I was heading out to Xela to do archival work and he was selling his handmade nets at the bus stop. He was there for a *mandado* (errand) since he was the representative of the Committee of Victims in his community of San Antonio Titzach, Cotzal. I told him I would visit him soon. Don Sebastián was a sixty-eight-year-old *cumpare* (spiritual guide), a community leader, a survivor of massacres, a preliminary witness for the Lucas Garcia genocide trial, and a well-respected and beloved friend of many. He was a *principal* of the Alcaldía Indígena of Cotzal. His death brought his family, his community, the people of Cotzal, and myself great pain.

Leaders were threatened with violence, some with death threats, during and after I conducted fieldwork. In May 2015, Baltazar de la Cruz Rodríguez, a member of the Alcaldía Indígena of Cotzal, received two death threats and two assassination attempts. On March 19, 2016, another ancestral authority, Concepción Santay Gómez, was attacked with a machete and wounded in an attempt on his life in San Felipe Chenlá. On July 28, 2018, Juana Raymundo, a twenty-five-year-old activist, community leader in Nebaj, and nurse, was brutally murdered. Soon after, on the night of September 21, 2018, Juana Ramírez Santiago, a fifty-five-year-old midwife from Qambalam, Nebaj, was murdered on her way home. Juana was a member of the Red de Mujeres Ixiles (Network of Ixil Women) and had received various death threats for her work related to women and human rights, which she testified about at the Attorney General's Office. This was followed by the death of twenty-one-year-old Jacinto David Mendoza, an Ixil University student and human rights defender from Cotzal, who died on September 6, 2018, after sustaining injuries from being attacked by unknown assailants. Benoit Pierre Amedee María, known as Benito María, a French national who worked with the Ixil and Q'eq'chi for over twenty years, was ambushed and gunned down inside his truck in Pacam, San Antonio Ilotenango, El Quiché, on the morning of August 10, 2020, when he was on his way to visit a community. Those responsible for many of these attacks remain free, symbolizing the high level of impunity that characterizes the Guatemalan political and social situation, particularly regarding violence against community leaders, women, and Indigenous and human rights activists, who have been historically persecuted in the country. Crimes and threats

often go unreported because of mistrust and corruption in the police and judicial system. According to an Ixil leader, when Indigenous Peoples demand and fight for their rights, they are persecuted and labeled as terrorists, savages, and delinquents. There are others not mentioned here who have also experienced persecution and threats in Cotzal. The violence in “postwar” Guatemala continues to escalate to alarming levels.

While conducting fieldwork in Cotzal, I never felt that my life was in danger, but I was always careful of my surroundings, as the threat of a threat always loomed in the back of my mind. In July 2011, one of the *orejas* (informants) of the Finca San Francisco and store owners that catered to Enel’s employees came up to me half-drunk, and while firmly shaking my hand one early morning said, “Vos sos el enemigo de la empresa” (You are the enemy of the company). In another instance in June 2015, somebody threatened myself and another person with physical violence while we were talking inside a store and criticized us for “being against Enel” and collaborating with the Alcaldía Indígena and “guerrillas,” as well as insulting me directly for doing my research and living in Cotzal. In April 2015, the brake lights on my motorcycle were intentionally cut, and to this day I do not know the motives behind this (whether it was politically motivated or random delinquency). Guatemala remains a dangerous place for Indigenous leaders, environmentalists, human rights activists, and journalists, and in recent years an increasing number have had to flee into exile (Taracena 2023).

EXTRACTIVISM AND THE FOUR INVASIONS

Literature on extractivism in Latin America has increased because of the growing global demands for raw materials and energy. It addresses topics including mega-projects’ operation under settler colonial logics and extractivist violence, which has negatively harmed mainly Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities (AVANCSO 2016; Johnston 2010; Nolin and Russell 2021; Sawyer 2004; Svampa 2019); the concept of extractivism and the different types (Gudynas 2018); land enclosures and conflict (Grandia 2012; Ybarra 2017); government policies to address extractivism’s ill effects, such as mining bans (Broad and Fischer-Mackey 2017); the role of international law and domestic courts (Imai, Mehranvar, and Sander 2013); and academic extractivism (Batz 2018). Detailed ethnographies demonstrate historical, social and political lineages of social movements and are needed to understand the overlapping power relations between affected communities, foreign entities, and national governments.

Indigenous struggles for plurinationalism, autonomy, and alternative paths of development are critical in addressing the global crisis of capitalism (AVANCSO 2020; Copeland 2019; Escobar 2020; Gudynas 2016; Shiva 2002; Velásquez 2022). Extractivist violence is fueling displacement and political terror, while simultaneously destroying the environment. Researchers from AVANCSO use Q’eqchi’ Maya

concepts and histories to argue that the Guatemalan state's support for megaprojects, which generates violence and displacement against Indigenous communities, is "an undeclared extractivist war" ("Jun nimla rahilal li ma junwa xwank resilal" in Q'eqchi' Maya) (AVANCSO 2020, 286).

The use of Ixil Maya theoretical concepts provides a grassroots historical Indigenous perspective on political and social struggles that views extractivism as a continuous and cyclical form of colonialism. The concept of "four invasions" is used in an active way to illustrate the ongoing occupation by colonial powers of ancestral Indigenous territories. In this way, dominant narratives of Indigenous Peoples being "conquered" are refuted, as historical memories of ongoing resistance are evidenced by community-based political lineages and organizing. As each chapter shows, each invasion is characterized by agents of oppression (fincas, the Guatemalan state, the military), and agents of resistance (Indigenous communities). Moreover, the use of *tiichajil* and *txaa* provides the reader with a window to pluriversal imaginaries and ontological understandings of lived Ixil realities. *Tiichajil* is often described as balance, well-being, and good health within the community. *Txaa* are community norms and values of how to live a good life. These two concepts could be understood as standing in contrast to capitalist logics of individualism, excess, and consumerism. Both are explored a bit further in chapter 4, and while they are not mentioned outright in each chapter, these concepts and others have guided Ixil communities for centuries.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into two parts, with six chapters and a conclusion. The first part of the book traces cyclical waves of invasions and resistance to demonstrate how current movements are rooted in a continuous history. This part mainly focuses on Cotzal, but I present regional context with examples from Chajul and Nebaj since their histories are interconnected. Chapter 1 focuses on examining the first Spanish/European invasion of the Ixil Region and the subsequent colonial institutions that were established. Despite the end of Spanish colonialism in the nineteenth century, these colonial institutions continued to shape and influence power relationships between the Ixil, the Guatemalan state, and foreigners.

Chapter 2 explores the second invasion, characterized by the plantation-based economy and the ideology of the "Indian Problem," which views Indigenous Peoples as a roadblock to progress, development, and civilization. By the mid-twentieth century, an estimated 45 percent or almost half of the *ejido* (communal land) of Cotzal had been converted into private fincas by ladino and Euro-descendant *finqueros* (plantation landowners) (González S. 2011, 178; Stoll 1993, 35–37). I then shift my focus to plantation owners and Euro-American academics and highlight how foreigners and non-Indigenous Peoples began to settle and extract natural resources and knowledges from the Ixil Region. This includes the Brol family, who

created the Finca San Francisco, where Palo Viejo was constructed. The chapter ends with the Ixil's expropriation of plantations through the 1952 Agrarian Reform and the subsequent 1954 US-backed coup against the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz. The coup further gestated territorial conflict and contributed to the outbreak of the armed conflict.

Chapter 3 provides a summary of the civil war in the Ixil Region. It describes the relationship that *finqueros* had with the military government during the implementation of genocidal scorched-earth policies against the Ixil and Indigenous Peoples. The chapter provides two oral histories that show the complexities and legacies of the war. The first is that of don Nicolás, a former mayoral candidate, who lost the 1968 elections to alleged fraud. He was subsequently persecuted, captured, and tortured by the army. When he was about to be executed, he managed to escape, recovered, and joined the guerrillas. The second story is that of doña María, daughter of a well-known Ixil organizer who was captured by the military and rumored to be tortured and murdered by the Brol family on the Finca San Francisco. She narrates her life as a girl who grew up without a father during the war and had to take refuge in the mountains. Today, doña María, who lost most of her family during the war, is an ancestral authority in Nebaj. These two oral histories provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the consequences of war for contemporary everyday life.

The second part of the book examines the fourth invasion. Chapter 4 surveys postwar Cotzal to provide the cultural, social, and political context for the arrival of megaprojects. This chapter also introduces contemporary Ixil culture, worldviews, and spirituality through the use of the local concepts of *tiichajil* (good life/well-being) and *txaa* (recommendations on how to live a balanced life). I also explore the postwar climate, which includes the rise of gangs, the adoption of neoliberal policies that support extractivist industries, and the role of the international legal principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) in conflicts between Indigenous communities, the state, and multinational corporations.

Chapter 5 traces Enel's arrival to Cotzal and its relationship with the municipal government, the Finca San Francisco, and local communities. The chapter focuses on the resistance efforts of the communities of Cotzal since 2008 and the persecution of local leaders, land defenders, and activists, which led them to carry out a road blockade as a means to stop construction of Palo Viejo. Chapter 6 explores the dialogue between the communities of Cotzal and Enel that ended the blockade and attempted to rectify the damages caused by Enel. This is followed by a discussion of Enel's decision to end dialogue and begin a campaign of defaming local leaders after the hydroelectric became operational in 2012. I then analyze Enel's talking points regarding the Palo Viejo conflict and compare them to local realities. Last, the chapter examines a historic 2015 Constitutional Court ruling favoring the communities of Cotzal in a case against the Transnova company (subsidiary of Enel), which built electrical towers. The Court found that the company

had violated the Ixil's right to consultation, making it the first time a court recognized these rights in Guatemala.

A NOTE TO THE READER ON TERMS, TRANSLATIONS,
PLACE-NAMES, AND LAND MEASUREMENTS

Throughout the book I use extensive quotations from primary sources and interviews whenever I feel that my interpretation of them would not do justice to the words, knowledges, and the wisdom that they carry. Translations of documents, interviews, speeches, and published Spanish-language sources are my own. I give words in Ixil and Spanish whenever I feel that their English translations would not capture their meaning adequately. After much consideration, I decided to use the government and Spanish names of geographical places in Cotzal to avoid confusion for the reader, since these names appear several times in historical and state documents, books, and Enel's reports, among other places. In some places, Ixil names appear in parentheses. The reader can also refer to the book *B'iichit Unq'a Jejleb'al Na'ytzan Mayab' Ixil, Toponimias Maya Ixil*, from the Ixil Linguistic Community (ALMG), for a thorough list of Ixil names and their etymology from the three towns of Chajul, Cotzal and Nebaj (Comunidad Lingüística Ixil 2004).

I use surface measurements that are used in Guatemala: one *caballería* is equivalent to approximately 110 acres, 64.58 *manzanas*, 45.13 hectares, or 451,256.54 square meters; one *manzana* is approximately 1.7 acres, or 10,000 *varas cuadradas*; and one *cuerda* is approximately 0.3 acres (Aguilar P. 1928, 17–19; Handy 1994, 245).

My expectation is that a wide range of audiences can access this book in discussing issues related to historical displacement, settler colonialism, environmental justice, social movements, and extractivist industries.