Editorial

This newsletter is mainly dedicated to the visit of a delegation of Maya Elders and Maya Healers in Switzerland. A full week allowed us to provide our partners from Guatemala with insights primarily into the Swiss health and science system, but it made them also familiar with our culture, our transportation system, our natural heritage, the mountains. This transdisciplinary project week served the exchange of knowledge, the learning, the inspiration for the further development of the project, the understanding of the different views and perspectives – knowledge has many facets.

The week was certainly demanding for the Mayas: it was packed with visits, meetings, presentations, interviews, events. The highlight was – not just figuratively speaking – the visit to the Mount Säntis (2'502 m.a.s.l.), on the very day and time window, when the (Föhn) weather allowed for a clear look into the far distance and gave us a virtuos Ceremony fire on the Schwägalp. It was an intense and busy week for all involved. Yet, we can be very satisfied with what has happened on this week! At this point I would like to thank ETH Global, the Cancer League (Krebsliga) and the Institute for Environmental Decisions at ETH Zurich for co-funding of this visit.

I thank everyone for its contribution to this newsletter. Monica Berger Gozalez, Thomas Kolly, Christoph Renner, Mario Lopez, Eduardo Gharzouzi, Sara Strauss, Ana Vides, Isabel Alvestegui, Martin Hitziger and Sandro Bösch for the layout.

Enjoy reading
Pius Krüttli

I.
Second intercultural transdisciplinary (Td) exchange, workshop held in Zurich: Maya practice meets Swiss medical system

Over a year ago the Maya Council of Elders of Guatemala was host to a group of visiting European scientists from ETH, ZUH, Swiss TPH and other institutions. The main goal was to experience first-hand aspects of the Maya medical system still present today in the daily practice of traditional health specialists. As a follow-up of the equal exchange of knowledge that has characterized the MACOCC project in its transdisciplinary nature, Zurich became host to a group of eight Maya representatives of the Council of Elders who visited us from the 12th to the 18th of May 2013. A rich schedule was prepared with the help of all the partners from the Scientific Advisory Board of the project to help reach the main objective of the visit: to present to the Mayas the basic epistemic principles of cancer conception in european science and the current treatment practices of modern oncology. This was a preliminary step towards having a rich discussion and exchange between both medical systems, aiming to identify future avenues for further cooperation and promising research lines.

The NSSI group at ETH welcomed the Guatemalan guests on Monday and offered a first glimpse into scientific-academic life by preparing brief presentations of the main research lines carried on by some of their PhDs. Lively discussions on behalf of the Maya elders showed a great interest on the natural-social science interface characteristic of this group. An interesting demonstration at Terra Focus on earthquake research and simulation followed the introduction to ‘modern science research’. At 6 pm, the Semper Aula at the ETH main building...
Almost three years ago the representatives of MACOCC asked me, then Ambassador of Switzerland in Guatemala, if the Embassy was ready to assume the patronage of the MACOCC project. I agreed with great pleasure. From the first moment on I was convinced that MACOCC was a very special, precious project. My first positive impression even grew more over the following months. I had the possibility to participate at Mayan ceremonies, to visit medicinal plant gardens and to listen to many different people involved in the project.

MACOCC successfully brings two worlds together which are too often separated: the Mayan world and the western world. I will never forget the evening, when Mayan healers, some after having traveled many hours by bus from remote places, and western cancer experts met in my residence in Guatemala City. It was touching to see how the two groups were slowly interconnecting. In the beginning very cautiously and then in more and more intensive discussions.

Throughout the project I saw a great mutual respect, the willingness to learn and to share knowledge. This openness and positive attitude without any doubt are key for the success of the project. MACOCC has the potential to serve as a model for enhanced partnership between the Mayan and the western world, not only for other medical branches but as well as for many other sectors. To name a few: adaptation to climate change, agriculture, management of natural resources, energy production, jurisprudence, welfare policy. However, almost more important than finding new scientific evidence by bringing together the Mayan and the western knowledge is the tearing down of walls between different cultures by working together in as many fields as possible. In Guatemala like in many other countries segregation between the different ethnic groups unfortunately is a common phenomenon. The big wall which exists between the different social groups is reflected by the fact that a large part of the population is excluded from basic services, including health services or education. If science can bring people closer together by increasing the mutual respect it has reached a noble goal. I have no doubts that MACOCC, apart from the precious scientific results it is producing, will serve as a model for increased cooperation between different cultures and thereby contribute to a better mutual understanding of different cultures and an increased respect between different cultures.
The visit followed attendance to the Department of Dermatology, University Hospital Zurich, where Prof. Günther Hofbauer explained and showed top applications of light therapy (Phototherapy, PDT) against cancer and other skin diseases such as Viteligo. The afternoon was completed by a visit to the UZH Ethnobotany garden and research center, hosted by Dr. Caroline Weckerle.

**Visit at the group of Prof. Caroline Maake at Zurich University**  
(Photo: Martin Hitziger).

Prof. Günther Hofbauer shows application of red light to a patient with skin cancer, demonstrating the principles of the technique (Photo: Martin Hitziger).

The group at the ethnobotany garden (Photo: Mónica Berger G.).

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### A view from the perspective of clinical oncology

**Dr. Christoph Renner, Hirslanden Clinic**

In May 2012, we had visited the members of the MACOCC project in Guatemala and got unprecedented insight into the way how they approach and treat cancer patients. The intense relationship between the Maya healer and the patient was impressive and for me the most remarkable experience. This year, it was our privilege to present what we call Western Medicine to the members of the Maya council. To cover the full spectrum of diagnostic and therapeutic aspects of oncology, we visited the Hirslanden Medical Center including the Division of Oncology and Radiotherapy, the Department of Pathology at the University Hospital Zurich and, finally, got a tour at Novartis being a large scale pharmaceutical company. Having done all these activities, the most lively and intense discussions started when a young cancer patient described his medical history and what he experienced to be a cancer patient receiving intensive chemo- and radiotherapy. As seen during the previous visit in Guatemala, the Maya healers very much focused on psychological aspects and wanted to get a deep understanding about the feelings of the patient, his family and the doctors treating him. The patient was very much encouraged by the discussion to describe his fears and expectations and we could realize again that medicine is not just about performing procedures and prescribing drugs but about a personal relationship between the patient and (at least) the treating physician.

On Wednesday, Prof. Dr. Christoph Renner led a visit to the Hirslanden Clinic, a top private hospital, where Dr. Stephan Pahls, deputy director of Hirslanden Clinic, presented the organization and operations of this type of specialized centers, providing great insight into the current tendencies in medical practice and service provision standards. The Maya Ajq’um and elders had the chance to interact with a patient having had intense chemotherapy, radiotherapy and even a successful bone-marrow transplant, which provided a wonderful opportunity to assess a real-life case from the perspective of the patient and his treating physicians. Assistant Professor Dr. G. Gruber went on to explain top technologies in cancer treatment focusing on radiotherapy. The afternoon continued by visiting the Department of Pathology at University Hospital Zurich (USZ) where Prof. Dr. H. Moch, head of the department, provided insight into the process of tissue acquisition and analysis. The afternoon tour culminated with a Public Lecture offered by the Maya Council and held at the main USZ auditorium, entitled “Principles of Maya Medical practice”, which focused on underlying principles of Maya cosmovision relevant to traditional maya medical practice.
On Thursday, the group visited the Novartis campus at Basel, where they had a chance to perceive the opulence of this industry and ask general questions on the marketing aspect of cancer drugs. In the afternoon the group visited the Swiss tropical and public health institute, hosted by Prof. Dr. Jakob Zinsstag and members of his team, where lively discussions followed aspects of the epidemic and public health components of cancer research and other types of infectious diseases. This interaction was referenced by the Maya Council as ‘a genuinely concerned group on health aspects at population levels, their commitment is refreshing and inspiring to see’. Monica Berger and Dr. Eduardo Gharzouzi, accompanying oncologist from the Guatemala Cancer Institute and hospital (INCAN), discussed with all present the potential of future research at the public health level in Guatemala.

**Impressions from a Maya perspective**

*Mario Lopez, Kiche’ Council*

As a part of the Maya Kiche’ people, it was a great satisfaction having been able to exchange experiences and knowledge from our maya medical practice, focusing on cancer. It is not the same to try and understand European life from afar, as it is to experience and live within it for a while. I was deeply impressed by the level of high technology and development reached in Switzerland, especially scientific development of their medical system in infrastructure, machinery and research for the treatment of cancer. However, I also observed that in spite of such technological medical development, the spiritual and emotional aspects are almost unaccounted for in treatments. The spiritual dimension is almost entirely off every treatment, meaning not an anthropocentric dimension but a cosmogonic-energetical one. I guess it is perhaps because modern western Science does not think it relevant, being something subjective and intangible. This is the opposite in Maya culture, where spiritual components are fundamental to good treatments. This is why it is so important to continue and strengthen this MACOCC exchange, as on the one side modern western science can really enrich millenary maya knowledge, while on the other side maya knowledge may have something to offer on the spiritual cosmogonic dimension of treatment. I see the first one is focused on treating the effects, cancer, while the second system focuses on understanding and treating causes, and preventing. We need to see the human being as integral, one more element in the Universe, and from there caring and nurturing for its spiritual, emotional and physical aspects. Ultimately, I feel extremely grateful to the Swiss doctors and scientist we visited from different institutions, as you all shared your knowledge with a great open-ness, sincerity and honesty.
On Friday, the SAB members met with the Maya representatives and all research staff of the MACOCC project to have a full day workshop. The exchange focused on understanding basic maya conceptions of cancer based on preliminary data of the two previous years, presented entirely from an ‘emic’ Maya perspective. The second part of the workshop focused on identifying future research lines of interest to both sides, and on evaluating, even if superficially, the impressions of the Maya on the Swiss medical system for cancer treatment. The week’s events ended with an amazing visit to Mt. Säntis and a traditional Maya ceremony shared with the Naturärzte Vereinigung Schweiz, a group of Apenzell traditional healers. All in all, it was a wonderful experience that changed all of us who participated in it.

Public Health potentials in Guatemala
Dr. Eduardo Gharzouzi, INCAN

Most of us have had the opportunity to travel abroad and visit other countries, other cultures, other people. I honestly cannot reflect on my first trip outside my country when I was just a child. We constantly take for granted things or experiences in our lives that become a frequent occurrence or a habit. Traveling with the Maya elders, on their first trip outside Guatemala (for all except Tata Sim-eon) was an incredible experience! To watch their amazement at the advanced transportation system, the incredible punctuality, the ancient buildings, the history, the contrast; was extremely gratifying. They were met and treated as equals; something that does not happen in their own country. They were heard, they were listened to, they were admired, they were important; something they can only dream about in Guatemala. They were afraid, they were skeptical, but they overcame that! Their lives have been changed forever. For me, it made me appreciate even more and be thankful for the blessings we take for granted.

I had not realized the full scope and the full potential of the MACOCC Project until this trip. It is broadening in scope. I am personally very excited to start the education/integration process with the elders. We will be programming visits to INCAN for the elders, as well as going to their communities to educate them on basic oncological concepts so that they can identify better a disease that could be cancer. We hope to learn a lot back.

Also because of MACOCC, a serious initiative has been born to develop a National Cancer Registry in Guatemala. Talks have begun with members of the Health Ministry, the major hospitals of Guatemala City, WHO (IARC) representatives, Universidad del Valle de Guatemala, ETH, TPH, and other organizations, to create a platform that will allow us to build a reliable Cancer Registry in our country. The importance of this cannot be overemphasized.

Again I thank you all for making a difference on the lives of our friends the Maya elders. I am convinced we are doing very significant work here!
II. Fourth Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) Meeting

Following the exchange with Maya elders, on the 21st of March the MACOCC SAB members attended an important meeting to clarify and discuss current content of research lines in the four PhDs currently active in the project, as well as to identify preliminary avenues for further cooperation into the coming years. Thank’s to all of you who participated in the lively discussions: Dr. Gharzouzi, Dr. Renner, Dr. Zinsstag, Dr. Krüti, Dr. Stauffacher, Dr. Edwards, Dr. Weckerle, Dr. Becker, Dr. Füchslin, Dr. Walt, Dr. Heinrich, and Dr. Strauss.

III. Fieldwork in psicosocial and medical anthropology aspects of Maya medicine contracted, welcoming partners from Wyoming University and Universidad del Valle de Guatemala

In 2013, we welcome to the MACOCC team Prof. Dr. Sara Strauss and PhD candidate Ana Vides, from the Anthropology Department at Wyoming University. Ana’s PhD research will cover important aspects of the therapeutic alliance in doctor-patient relationships in Maya treatment, as well as other family and community relational aspects that provide the most relevant context for Maya treatment. Links to the public health domain and the decision factors in choosing particular health provision systems, will be jointly explored by Licenciatura Anthropology student Andrea Aguilar, from Universidad del Valle de Guatemala (UVG). Also from this group, we welcome to the team Ana Isabel Enriquez, who will support Martin Hitziger in reconstructing plant therapy components in the first confirmed cancer cases co-identified with INCAN.

IV. Notes from the field

Ethnobotanical research
Marie Isabel Alvestegui-Müller

Since June 3rd, I have stayed with “Nana Panchita”/Gloria Francisca Salazar Guarán in San Antonio Aguas Calientes Guatemala. Ana Vides Porras from the University of Wyoming joined me one week later.

San Antonio is a small town close to Antigua. It has a beautiful center with a little park and a small market with traditional handicrafts, as well as a “laguna” and little crop fields.
I would like to shortly introduce Nana Panchita for those who didn’t have the luck to meet her during the MACOCC Meeting in Zürich in March 2013. Nana Panchita is 38 years old, lives with her family (5 children and her husband) close to the center of the town. Her call to become a Mayan healer showed quite early in life but it took her many years to find her path. Luckily she could learn from her uncle and later with other Aj’qij’ (Time keeper/Spiritual leaders). She has a very friendly, loving character and laughs a lot.

Officially Nana Panchita attends patients on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays afternoons, but due to spontaneous visits, as well as ceremonies and phone calls from around the world, she is quite busy all week.

Ana and I accompany Nana Panchita during patient visits as well as ceremonies and private conversations. During the past 4 weeks she has treated about 35 direct patients revisiting once or twice per week, not including the non-present relatives and friends that are treated additionally during one session (up to 9 persons per session).

While Ana observes the healer-patient interaction, the focus of my work is the spiritual relationship of plants and treatment. So far we have collected an important amount of data, including patients’ problems, applied plants, relationships/social structure and related spiritual convictions.

Working with Nana Panchita is a wonderful experience, she and her family welcomed us into their home as if we where two new daughters. She freely talks about her precious knowledge, revealing a complete new world to us and helping us to perceive „healing” in a new light.

Ethnobotanical fieldwork started with exploratory focus group sessions

Martin Hitziger

During April, a series of three 1.5 day focus groups took place in the Q’eqchi’, Mopán and Kaqchikel areas. The main intention was to test whether this interactive method would be more suitable than face-to-face interviews for eliciting implicit knowledge, to prepare an interview guide for in-depth exploration during the main ethnobotanical fieldwork (to be conducted in autumn 2013–14), and to find the limits of knowledge that the Maya healers are currently willing to share.

The first of these goals could not be reached, however the sessions resulted in extensive lists of issues to delve in during later stages of the fieldwork, provided a first, tentative data collection on preparation and application of plants, and also gave me some hints on how to dig deeper...

Media reports concerning the exchange visit

ETH life online »» http://www.ethlife.ethz.ch
NZZ online »» http://www.nzz.ch
SRF online »» http://www.srf.ch

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