

**Of Crabs and Starfish:  
Ancestral Knowledge and Collaborative Practices**

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*Abstract*

*This paper presents an overview of some of the practices in which the instituton Kanankil's work are inscribed: social construction, collaborative and dialogical practices, and ancestral knowledge.*

**Key Words:** *ancestral knowledge, collaborative practices, dialogical practice, socioconstructionism, just therapy, Mayan cosmovision*

Gregory Bateson in "Mind and Nature" asks us "What pattern connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all the four of them to me? And me to you?" (1980:8) And even if the answer to Bateson question might seem obvious at the end of the first decade of the XXI century, we would like to take this opportunity to invite all of you to reflect, not just on the interconnectedness of all living and non-living creatures of this planet, but also about the connections of our daily practices and those of our ancestors. In specific, we will like to reflect on the connections between collaborative practices and ancestral/indigenous/local knowledges.

As we talked about our ancestors, the Mayans, we would like to invite you to reflect on practices that are alive and present in the daily life of all of us. For some could be the Potlatch, the gift exchange among First Nations people of this region; for others could be the practices of the Sami people in the Northern regions of Finland, Norway and Sweden with a strong emphasis on the importance of personal spirituality and its interconnectivity with one's own daily life, and a deep connection between the natural and spiritual "worlds"; or for some of us, we might want to reflect on how the community accepts responsibility for the individuals acts of violence among the Samoans and Maoris.

Socio-constructionism and collaborative and dialogical practices, provide the context to understand how ancestral knowledge, and in specific, the Maya worldview, proposes a dialogical and collaborative vision of our daily walking on this earth.

So who are we and what do we do at the Kanankil Institute? Kanankil is an institute created to promote everything related to teaching, research and dissemination of collaborative and dialogic practices, in psychotherapy, addictions, education, community and organizational development, sexuality and gender, art and culture. This work is conceived through the formation of learning communities that encourage participation and curiosity. Our programs are divided into Master Degrees and postgraduate diplomas.

When we choose the word Kanankil to call our Institute, was because it is a Mayan word that has different meanings, depending on the context of its use, to explain our work. As Wittgenstein (2003) suggests that we cannot guess how a word functions. We need to observe its use and learn from it. Thus, over the 15 years of existence, we have built from our daily practice as psychotherapists, educators and community workers, at least four meanings that give sustenance to this Kanankilean way of walking.

The first meaning would be in conversation, in dialogue with others. When we talk about dialogue, we come close to what Janice DeFehr (2008) proposes in her doctoral dissertation: dialogue can be regarded as a conversation, a discursive way, joint action and a philosophy of life. Or as Harlene Anderson (1997) suggests: a way to find meaning and understanding which are constantly interpreted, re-interpreted, clarified and revised. In other words, dialog is a process and therefore a generator, of possibilities.

Another meaning is to accompany or walk alongside the other. This is very similar to the concept of 'witness' a concept that Lynn Hoffman and Shotter talk about. Witness refers to a dialogical activity in which we are spontaneously and relationally responsive to the other, rather than an observer interpreting and analyzing it from the outside looking in. This process is part of a philosophical stance that Harlene Anderson proposes that is less hierarchical and less dualistic. People participate on a more equitable basis and the relationship becomes more participatory and mutual, allowing for the individuals involved, the co-construction of shared meanings while maintaining their history, language and culture.

Generate knowledge with others, is another meaning of the word Kanankil. We depart from a "not knowing" position and therefore from uncertainty. We become conversational partners with our students and our clients. Each person participating in a conversation brings its history and linguistic practices; each person also contributes to the constructions of meaning within the conversation. As educators and psychotherapists, the only expertise we bring to our work, is the facilitation of a collaborative process between equals. We consider that maintaining the position of "not knowing" and uncertainty is fundamental and necessary for the co-generation of knowledge.

One last meaning, at least so far, is caring for each other; it invites us to direct our daily practice to social engagement, where the community makes their own decisions and we are facilitators of the process. One of the key elements is the concept of co-responsibility in which we are accountable to make public what we are doing and thinking with others. The work we do is similar to the practice of "Just Therapy" that invites us to consider talk as sacred. The therapeutic, educational and community practices, are conceived as a series of sacred conversations in which meanings are exchanged, in which the story shared is a gift. The sacred also refers to the spiritual conceived as everything and reaffirms the links between what we can see, touch, measure and what is beyond, between the tangible and the intangible. The spiritual dimension is of central importance because in this dimension, the Maya conceived the universe as relational, in which there

is unity between soul, body, community, plants, animals, land and those who have walked before us.

Our everyday language in Yucatan, is interwoven with Mayan words and therefore, this way of naming and seeing the world, is present in our daily work. The recognition of ancestral knowledge and its integration into collaborative and dialogic practices allows us to develop new ways of looking at our clients and ourselves.

But, what do we mean by ancestral knowledge? Ancestral knowledge is understood here as the set of experiences and daily practices of individuals and communities that have existed for thousands of years, still exist and are continually transformed. We presume that all traditions involve history, beliefs and ways of doing things, especially involving cultural meanings. As human beings we experience the most intimate events of our lives in the context of one or more cultures.

We have begun to integrate into our daily practices as therapists, educators and consultants, some of these concepts. Mayas have always been here and have not been extinguished. The Maya culture region covers the Yucatan Peninsula and Chiapas in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and Honduras. According to the latest census, Yucatan has about 2 million inhabitants, nearly 900,000 of them speak Maya in their daily life and a third of them are monolingual in Maya.

The Maya Worldview refers to 5 basic concepts, first of all, language. In the Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the Mayas, it is mentioned that the gods created humans with the ability to speak and understand their language, in order for humans to be able to name them. Therefore, the first way of relating to the world, is naming.

When Mayans talk about individuals and their bodies, they are described as a replica of the cosmos, and people are defined by their relationships; the *I* does not exist but in relation to the *you*, and the relationship between you and me, constructs the *us*; however *we* do not exist but in relation to *they*; it is a concept that we call “notrosidad” in Spanish or “usness” in English; therefore I/You/We/They only exist in relationship, and those relationships are constructed within a community (Lekensdorf, 2005).

Time: for the Mayas time does not exist in the same way as for the Western world, it is no linear. The past is in front of us and is all we know; the present does not exist because by the time we name something, the action already is in the past; the future is behind us because we do not know it.

Health is seen as an integrated whole consisting of body, mind, and spirit in balance. It can be affected by various forces divine, spiritual, natural phenomena, agricultural activities and, above all, relationships with others and the universe.

Disease: is conceived as a breakdown of the order and balance between the individual, the community and the deities. The task of the healer is to re-construct the order and

balance and acts as an intermediary for the three components because the human being is part of a whole in equilibrium. If the person feels sick, is because he or she has transgressed the local norms of reciprocity with the community or the deities, and such violation affects the entire family and other community members.

We hope that our invitation to reflect on the interconnectedness of ancestral knowledge and dialogical practices took you to a place where crabs and starfish are connected to you and me, and you, and you, and us and they; to the spirits of the birds, the spirits of the precious stones, the spirits of the carved stones, the spirits of the jaguars. They are the children of the waters, the children of the earth, the children of the skies.

Because as Mayan people say: “as it is above, it is below” or in the words of Nora Bateson in her film “An Ecology of Mind” What does it really mean to change the way we think?

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