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*Lekil Kuxlejal - an alternative to development?*

*A field study in Chiapas, Mexico*

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Abstract
The development ideals of linear progress, modernization and economic growth are based on one worldview among many, but have nonetheless been able to dominate global politics. Critical development literature has shown how indigenous peoples’ cosmologies have been pushed aside since colonialism, deemed traditional and backwards. There is a growing interest in searching for alternatives to the development paradigm in non-Western cosmologies, for example represented by the Bolivian and Ecuadorian notion of Buen Vivir, meaning ’good living’. In Chiapas, Mexico, the Mayan concept Lekil Kuxlejal, translates to something similar. With the message ”Another world is possible”, the indigenous movement in Chiapas, has become known for its autonomy project and resistance towards neoliberalism. This thesis aims to explore how the concept of lekil kuxlejal forms part of this political struggle and the ways in which it provides an alternative to neoliberal development discourse.

Keywords: Social anthropology, development, Buen Vivir, indigenous movements, autonomy
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1. Introduction

The Western development discourse, focusing on modernization and economic growth, has been heavily criticized and widely considered a failure, but has yet remained dominant in global politics (Gudynas, 2011: 441-442) (Escobar, 2005: 341). At the same time, local indigenous culture in the South has often been marginalized, considered primitive and "backward" (Escobar, 2012: 78-79, 214). Social movements are trying to change this, showing that there are other ways of organizing society and other values to aim for. Often brought up as a successful example of this is the concept of *Buen Vivir* (translated to 'good living’ in English). Originating from Aymara and Quechua concepts and struggled for by indigenous movements, it has been established in the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador as a challenge to the Eurocentric development model, for example by the acknowledgment of nature’s own rights (Escobar, 2012: vii, xxv).

In Chiapas, Mexico, a similar notion exists. *Lekil kuxlejal* is an expression in tsotsil and tseltal, two of the Mayan languages spoken in Chiapas. Very simplified, *Lekil* translates as *good*, *kuxlejal* as *life*. It is usually translated as *good living, living well* or *dignified life* and involves many aspects, such as autonomy, the recognition of all living beings, harmony between humans as well as between human and nature. I first came across the concept while reading about the objectives of the indigenous rights organization Las Abejas de Acteal, where it was translated directly to *buen vivir* (Las Abejas, 2015). When coming to Chiapas I spoke to Estela Barco at the non-governmental organization DESMI (Desarrollo Economico y Social de los Mexicanos Indigenas - Social and Economic Development of Indigenous Mexicans) who told me that this concept, originating from the indigenous communities in Chiapas, was just beginning to be explored by civil society organizations.

In tseltal language, the word for *word* and *struggle* is the same: *k’op*. The political struggle in Chiapas is often described in terms of speaking, of giving one’s word. This is the point of departure for this thesis. Words are struggles: over meaning and power, over definitions of reality. I will here explore how the concept of *Lekil kuxlejal* works as such.
1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the concept lekil kuxlejal, how it is constructed in the context of the indigenous movements struggle in Chiapas and under which circumstances it has emerged as a political objective. By doing this, I want to analyze how it can be an alternative to the development discourse, as well as a move towards recognizing historically marginalized epistemologies. The Ecuadorian and Bolivian indigenous concept of Buen Vivir has become known worldwide as an indigenous cosmology gaining political influence, de-centering Western development discourse, and has been given great significance in the search for alternatives to development (Escobar, 2012: xxv). Though originating from a different geographical context, lekil kuxlejal seems to share some of its core features, why there is a need to explore this concept further. The main questions guiding my research are:

- How come there seems to be an increased mobilization around lekil kuxlejal as a political goal?
- How is lekil kuxlejal constructed as such within the indigenous movement in Chiapas?
- In what ways does it work as a potential alternative to development discourse?

1.2 Previous research

While there is plenty of writings on the Ecuadorian and Bolivian concepts of Buen Vivir, such as Gudynas (2011), Walsh (2010), Acosta (2011), the academic writings on Lekil Kuxlejal are still very few. What seems to be the first, and probably the most well known analysis of the concept, is Antonio Paoli’s book "Educación, Autonomía y lekil kuxlejal: Aproximaciones sociolingüísticas a la sabiduría de los tseltales" ("Education, autonomy and lekil kuxlejal: sociolinguistic approaches to the wisdom of the tseltal") (2003). In his analysis, the Lekil Kuxlejal that once existed fully is in a process of being lost, but can be brought back (Paoli, 2003: 71). To understand lekil kuxlejal, Paoli describes several aspects of social life in tseltal communities, such as the relation between community members, how children are integrated in community life through participating in family work, how justice is exercised collectively by the community, and the central role of the work on the field (Paoli, 2003: 99, 208, 129). For Paoli, tseltal culture can be understood in terms of autonomy, which permeates community life and is present in tseltal language through not just one, but many different concepts (Paoli, 2003: 218). It is a remarkably harmonious life that is depicted in Paoli’s analysis of "the tseltal world". Although Paoli himself recognizes that his analysis is idealizing and that it does
not seek to focus on the disharmonious aspects of the communities (Paoli, 2003: 11), it leaves room for many questions of oppositions, injustices and divisions.

*Lekil kuxlejal* as a political struggle is also analyzed by Magali Barreto Avila (2011). She defines the concept as ”what is done in order to integrate material, spiritual and communal needs” (Barreto Avila, 2011:487) and highlights how *lekil kuxlejal* relates to zapatista autonomy. She proposes an understanding of the community’s food autonomy, based on the concept of *lekil kuxlejal*, as it works outside of the capitalist system’s logic of maximization. There is inevitably an economic aspect to this ”good living” in order to live, but it is rather based on producing enough than producing as much as possible (Barreto Avila, 2011: 487).

Another contribution to academic writing on *Lekil Kuxlejal* is made by Jaime Schlittler Alvarez, in his master’s thesis ”Lekil Kuxlejal como horizonte de lucha? Una reflexion colectiva sobre la autonomia en Chiapas” (“Lekil Kuxlejal as a horizon for struggle? A collective reflection on the autonomy in Chiapas”) (2012). As Paoli, Schlittler Alvarez starts by discussing *lekil kuxlejal* as a cultural concept originating from tsotsil and tseltal cosmology (Schlittler Alvarez, 2012: 41). Departing from his own activism, the analysis becomes more politicized than that of Paoli (2003) as he proceeds to understand it as a political idea, a counter-hegemonic paradigm shift and an alternative to development, where autonomy is central (Schlittler Alvarez, 2012: 31, 57, 66, 91). Through dialogue with one of the teachers at CIDECI-Unitierra, a university for the indigenous communities in Chiapas, a group of students at a local high school, members of the organization Las Abejas de Acteal as well as the media collective Koman Ilel, he discusses how *lekil kuxlejal* is constructed politically, seeing it more in terms of practice rather than only theoretical concepts (Schlittler Alvarez, 2012).

Tseltal sociologist Xuno Lopez Intzin (also part of this study as participant) (2013) emphasizes as Schlittler Alvarez, the political and decolonizing aspect of *Lekil Kuxlejal* as dignified life. He discusses *lekil kuxlejal* in relation to *Ich’el ta muk*’ - another tseltal concept that in short means ”to recognize the other being’s greatness”, a respect that goes for all things, not just human beings (Lopez Intzin, 2013: 147-148). Lopez puts forward the centrality of the *ch’ulel*, which could be translated to the soul, or energy, inherent to every human and non-human subject, as well as the centrality of the *otan’il*, the heart, in tseltal cosmology (ibid.) Because everything in the universe has a *ch’ulel* and an *ot’anil*, everything is worthy of *ich’el ta muk* (ibid.). In his research with the tseltal communities of Tenejapa, these concepts are contextualized in the relation to the Mexican state, and its non-recognition of indigenous peoples as subjects (Lopez Intzin, 2013: 158). Lopez
Intzin describes how colonization has meant a colonizing of the *ch’ulel* of indigenous peoples, a form of oppression of thought (Lopez Intzin, 2013: 155-156). In this way, *lekil kuxlejal* and *ich’el ta muk’* relates to the political resistance of indigenous peoples, the struggle to demand the *ich’el ta muk’* from the state (Lopez Intzin, 2013: 155-156). *Lekil kuxlejal* based on *ich’el ta muk’* entails equal relations; between men, women, nature and state, as well as a form of de-colonization, a re-cognition of non-occidental knowledges and a move towards both cognitive and social justice (Lopez Intzin, 2013: 160-161).

The majority of the existing writings emphasize the aspect of struggle in *lekil kuxlejal*, as a recuperation of a relation between humans and to nature that existed before. Although it evidently already has been analyzed in terms of alternatives to development, I argue that there still are several areas yet to explore within this perspective. For example, the connection between *lekil kuxlejal* and the revolutionary aspect of demanding *ich’el ta muk’* that Lopez Intzin (2013) makes is particularly interesting and deserves further emphasis. It raises the question of how the centrality of traditions, customs and community life, at times romanticized in Antonio Paoli’s (2003) rather homogenized interpretation of the ”tseltal world”, relates to *lekil kuxlejal* as a struggle for equal relations. An example of such is the indigenous women’s fight for gender equality, breaking with traditional gender roles within community life, voiced for example by zapatista women through the ”Ley revolucionaria de mujeres” (Women’s Revolutionary law) (EZLN, 1993). Another topic that can contribute to the understanding of *lekil kuxlejal* is its relation to the South American discourse of *Buen Vivir* in Bolivia and Ecuador. Being based on an indigenous cosmology and emphasizing the collective, *lekil kuxlejal* has sometimes been mentioned as a Mayan equivalent to *Buen Vivir* (Borquez & Nuñez, 2014:190). While Schlittler Alvarez touches briefly upon their similarities (2012: 90), a more nuanced and critical analysis of both accordances and differences in how they are articulated and manifested is yet to be made.

Addressing questions like these, this thesis will contribute to existing literature by further deepen the analysis of how *lekil kuxlejal* is constructed around todays circumstances facing the indigenous population in Chiapas, what the concept means to the indigenous movement as a political objective and how this meaning is negotiated. Without forgetting or ignoring the cultural ties to the ancestral, the task of this thesis will be to explore how it works as a decolonizing political proposal in the present and potentially an alternative to development, hopefully adding to a nuanced, organic and feminist understanding of the concept, with room for many struggles and voices.
1.3 Theoretical framework

To explore lekil kuxlejal as an alternative to development, this thesis will place it in a larger context of the search for non-Western practices that challenge the development paradigm. In order to do so, the theoretical framework for this thesis will be some of the concepts elaborated by two important development critics; Arturo Escobar and Boaventura de Sousa Santos.

**Post-development alternatives**

Escobar (2005) (2012) discusses development, based on the Eurocentric idea of linear progress and modernization, as a hegemonic and colonizing discourse. He describes how this discourse, which emerged after World War II, became the way in which the ‘First World’ made Africa, Latin America and Asia into the ”Third World” and placed them in the homogenizing category of ”underdeveloped”(Escobar, 2005: 342, 2012: 53). Through international institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF post-Second World War, this discourse has allowed the ’First World’ to exercise power over these countries in the process to become ’developed’ (Escobar, 2005: 342). Seeing development as a discourse puts this description of the world into a wider perspective: Latin America, Asia and Africa has not always conceived themselves based on this notion (ibid.).

While there is a wide critique of development and a consensus on its failure, the discourse and way of thinking about the world still prevails, which leads to the question of which practices and thoughts that can provide another understanding of the 'Third World'(Escobar, 2005: 341). One of the core arguments in post-development thought is then, that what is needed is not development alternatives, but *alternatives to development* (Escobar, 2005: 343). Simply put, the notion of *alternative* here refers to an imagination of what could come after the development paradigm, what Escobar calls ”a post-development era” (Escobar, 2005: 349). New ways of the global South to conceptualize itself is necessary, which can challenge the narrow category of ”under-development” in which it has been placed (ibid.). He finds such potential in political articulations of indigenous cosmologies that are not based on the Eurocentric modernity and the idea of linear development, but stems from other forms of knowledges (Escobar, 2012: xxvi). This is exemplified by the indigenous concept of *Buen Vivir* mentioned earlier, originally *Sumak Kawsay* in Quechua or *Suma Qamayuqa* in Aymara, which has become widely known since it brought notions of collective well-being and the rights of nature into the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia (Escobar, 2012: vii, xxv). These alternatives can also be referred to as *discourses of transition*, as they move beyond the current existing paradigm, into other ways of constructing society (Escobar, 2012: xx, 2015: 453). Accor-
ding to Escobar, an important task for social research is to look for these alternatives, or transitions, are articulated and mobilized around in the practices of grassroot movements in local contexts (Escobar, 2012: 222, 19).

**Towards a cognitive justice and an ecology of knowledge**

Like Escobar, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) emphasizes the epistemological aspect of Western domination and how it has excluded the world views of indigenous peoples. The way in which modern science has been considered the highest type of knowledge has meant an oppression of other forms of knowing (Santos et al, 2008: xix). The subordination of one culture by another, such as European colonialism, has not only meant the killing and enslavement of people in Latin America and Africa, but has also been a murder of epistemologies, what Sousa Santos calls *epistemicide* (Santos, 2014: 92). One of the main arguments of this perspective is thus that a global social justice is impossible if we cannot achieve a global *cognitive justice* (Santos, 2014: 207). In order for this to happen, Santos proposes an *ecology of knowledges*, which is the recognition of multiple forms of knowing (Santos, 2014: 189). In this ecology, it is not only necessary to recognize various forms of science, but also to credit non-scientific knowledge (ibid.). To achieve this kind of dialogue between knowledges and separation from the dominant Eurocentric tradition, Santos advocates an intercultural translation between epistemologies (Sousa Santos, 2014: 42, 222). Translating indigenous languages to colonial ones, he argues, leads to new concepts that breaks with the frames of traditional Western political thinking, such as *good living* and *mother earth* (Santos, 2014: 40-41).

This thesis is intended as a contribution to such translation. I hope to provide an understanding of the concept *Lekil Kuxlejal*, the cosmology in which it is constructed, and how it potentially could add to the ecology of knowledges proposed by Santos. *Lekil Kuxlejal* becomes interesting since it has not reached any constitution or even a wide public recognition as *Buen Vivir* has done, but is beginning to emerge politically on grassroot level. As Escobar suggests (2012: 19), it is precisely on such local articulations social research should focus in the search for alternatives to development. Analyzing what *Lekil Kuxlejal* means in the Chiapas indigenous movement with this theoretical framework would thus be a relevant contribution to the imagining of what comes after the development paradigm, further elaborating what Escobar calls ”imagining a post-development era” (2005).
1. 4 Disposition

In the next chapter, I will present the method I have used for this study, including a brief presentation of the participants, my methodological approach, as well as some reflections on ethical issues. Following, a background to the political scene in Chiapas, the indigenous movement’s struggle and the relation to the Mexican government will be provided. Chapter 4 is divided into themes which I have identified as some of the most central aspects of *lekil kuxlejal* based on their recurrence in the interviews. The first one will address ecological dimensions. Here, it will be demonstrated how nature is viewed as a mother, how *lekil kuxlejal* entails a resistance towards GMO’s and how this implies a spirituality where all existing beings are recognized. Following, I will discuss how role social justice, the tseltal notion of *ich’el ta muk’* as well as gender relations are understood. The last theme deals with the relationship to the state, the view on governmental projects and the role of autonomy in *lekil kuxlejal*. The fifth and final chapter will consist of a brief summary and concluding reflections.
2. Method

The information for this thesis was collected during a 10 week field study in San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas between April and June 2015. Being a central spot for NGO’s and organizations working in communities around Chiapas, this was a natural choice of location. In 1994, the city became world famous as the Zapatistas, an armed group of indigenous peasants, occupied the city in an uprising to demand recognition of indigenous peoples’ rights (Stahler-Sholk, 2010: 270) (a more detailed description of the uprising is provided in the next chapter). Today, it is home to a broad movement for indigenous rights. The struggle for justice and autonomy is constantly felt in the city which seems to breathe political activism, through culture, manifestations, seminars and discussions. While the main material consists of interviews, it needs to be emphasized that the learnings I have tried to voice in this thesis is far from limited to these. Apart from the interviews, I attended the seminar held by the Zapatistas between May 3-9, at CIDECI- Universidad de la Tierra (Indigenous Center for Integral Capacitation - University of Earth), a university for the indigenous communities around Chiapas as well as a meeting and discussion forum for the indigenous movement.

2.1 Interviews

I have spoken to people who in different ways are active within the spectra of indigenous movement in San Cristobal de las Casas. The field is thus not a traditional field limited to a certain group, organization or place, but consists of individuals with very different occupations. However, there are some features I determined as the main criteria to define the field: the participants are working in some way of improving conditions for the indigenous population, working for indigenous peoples’ rights or raising awareness of indigenous culture, for example through women’s fair trade handicraft, sustainable agriculture, coffee cooperatives, promotion of indigenous art and student activism. All except for one of the participants are tsotsil or tseltal themselves. I was pleased to manage an equal gender division: the interviews consists of 4 men, 4 women as well as one group interview with university students consisting of both.

- Sara, a young woman from a tseltal community, working in a textile shop in San Cristobal where women from the community sell their handicrafts to fair prices.
■ Juan Jose, photographer from a tsotsil community, working at an art gallery in San Cristobal which aims at promoting indigenous artists and bringing exhibitions to the communities.

■ Ana, founder of an organic farming cooperative working with autonomous indigenous communities.

■ Luis, Ana’s son, working with the cooperative together with his mother.

■ Xuno, tseltal sociologist, also teaching tsotsil and tseltal.

■ Estela, coordinator of DESMI (Desarrollo Economico y Social de los Mexicanos Indigenas - Social and Economic Development of Indigenous Mexicans), an NGO working with sustainable agriculture and solidary economy in autonomous communities.

■ Antonio, activist from a tsotsil community and one of the founders of Las Abejas de Acteal, a catholic peace organization working for indigenous rights.

■ Micaela, coordinator of the women’s department at OMIECH, Organization of Indigenous Doctors in Chiapas

■ Members of the student movement ”Lekil kuxlejal”, organized by students at UNICH (Intercultural University of Chiapas), who initiated a strike in May 2015, demanding equality and measures against discrimination and racism towards indigenous students.

■ Carlos, employee at a zapatista supportive café in central San Cristobal, from one of the tsotsil communities.

I came into contact with the participants in a variety of ways. I was able to conduct my first interviews thanks to the generous help of my contact person in field José Luis Escalona Victoria from CI-ESAS (Center for Research and Higher Studies in Social Anthropology). I had established a contact with the organization DESMI from Sweden on beforehand and I was able to speak to Antonio Gutierrez Perez from Las Abejas when he held a lecture in Lund in November 2014. In other cases,
I came into contact with people through friends and sometimes just by fortunate coincidences. I came across the student movement "Lekil Kuxlejal" through their Facebook page and I started talking to Micaela from OMIECH at a press conference held by a human rights organization in San Cristobal.

I got to know Xuno when I started studying tseltal. While I decided to study tseltal first and foremost as a free time activity for fun and my own curiosity, the classes and conversations with Xuno ended up being some of the most educational experiences for understanding both tseltal cosmology and the concept of Lekil Kuxlejal from a linguistic approach.

I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews, around 40-60 minutes each, some less organized than others. Nearly all interviews were recorded and transcribed, except for two of them of which I took notes. They usually took place in the workplace or the home of the participants. I had prepared a few questions as an interview guide, but each interview took different paths and some were less formal than others. As Bryman (2008) states, the semi-structured form allows the participants to emphasize what is important to them, without the researcher deciding what topics to address (Bryman, 2008: 438). I considered this particularly important since the participants described lekil kuxlejal from such different contexts. It is also connected to a concern to minimize the influence of my own presumptions and definitions coloring the questions, which a fixed set of detailed questions could have done.

Furthermore, the semi-structured form of interview allowed many of the meetings to become an exchange of reflections, rather than only a question-answer communication. It allowed me to participate more freely, being open and shared my own reflections. In some of these cases, the question ”What is lekil kuxlejal to you?” was returned to me, which made the interview more of a conversation and a dialogue. I experienced that this served to create a more confident atmosphere where the other person seemed more comfortable sharing their perspective. As Davies explains (2008), achieving an open atmosphere with a natural "flow" is not easily done if one of the participants is hiding his/her own thoughts in the communication (Davies, 2008: 107). Although this also surely exposed presumptions and prejudice on my part, it resulted in many rewarding conversations.

2.2 My positioning as a researcher

Inevitably, the information in this study will represent my own interpretations of interviews, conversations, observations of activities and events and it would be insincere to claim that the reason for my research interest the struggle of the indigenous movement in Chiapas lies outside of any per-
personal political engagement. The reason for conducting this study is obviously rooted in a will to raise awareness of the oppression suffered by indigenous peoples as well as the movement that struggles against it. Being personally attached to the field in this way might pose a problem for some in terms of objectivity. However, from a constructivist’s point of view, I believe that complete objectivity in social research is impossible, particularly in such a political atmosphere where the research for this study has taken place.

The personal engagement has been a constant learning about Chiapas sociopolitical context: the land conflict, the zapatismo, the increasing political division in communities and the political discussions, up-close on an everyday basis. This has given insights, encounters and experiences which would not have been possible otherwise. Furthermore, my personal interest does not mean that I am uncritical. Life in San Cristobal was often puzzling and confusing, sometimes contradictory, as reality in any society. I was constantly forced to question my own assumptions and deprived of any possibility of holding onto an over romanticized or homogenized image of the indigenous movement.

2.3 A politically sensitive field
An ethical question I had been concerned about before going to Chiapas was how comfortable organizations and activists would be in sharing information with me, considering the sensitive situation and tension between civil society and the state. As the background chapter will show, human rights activism in Chiapas has often meant putting one’s security at risk. Some of the activists who participated chose to have their real names and organizations published. However, most of the identities have been anonymized as well as names of communities, all in accordance with the wish of each participant.
3. Background

The state of Chiapas in southern Mexico is the richest state in the country in terms of biodiversity, yet it has long been characterized by the poorest living conditions for its population (Frayba, 1994:3). As of 1990, 30 % of the superficial water in Mexico was found in Chiapas, yet only 57 % of the Chiapan population had access to running water (Frayba, 1994:4). In 2012, the percentage living below the extreme poverty level was 32,2 %, compared to the national percentage of 9,8% (CONEVAL, 2015).

Around one third of the total population speaks indigenous languages, the most common being Tseltal, Tsotsil, Ch’ol, Zoque and Tojolabal (INEGI, 2010, 2004). The political structure of society has subjected indigenous population to an oppression that dates back to colonial times, when indigenous people were exploited as slaves by landholders (Collins, 2010: 774). The same landowning elite in Chiapas has to a relatively large extent been in place since colonization, and has been able to keep control over land through corruption and connections to political leaders (Wager & Schulz, 1995: 4). For this reason, neither land reform or the Mexican Revolution has meant any significant change in terms of land justice for the indigenous peasant population (Collins, 2010: 775). Landowners, also known as caciques, have been able to secure their land holding from redistributive policies, often preventing the indigenous population from their right to land by violence and connection to paramilitaries (ibid.). Amnesty International has clearly stated that the indigenous peasants are victims of human rights violations, more than any other group in Mexican society, particularly in Chiapas (Amnesty International, 1995:1).

3.1 Neoliberal development in Mexico

In the 1980’s, the Mexican economy was radically neoliberalized, in line with the Washington Consensus, which meant increased privatization and increased power of foreign financial actors (Cypher, 2013: 392). This was part of a larger trend in the global political economy where Latin American economies were to fully open up to the international market (Cypher, 2013: 391). For example, Mexico opened up by adopting the Structural Adjustment Programs by the World Bank and the IMF (Gledhill, 488-489). Neoliberal policies in Chiapas had disastrous effects on indigenous peasants livelihoods, much regarding the issue of land tenure (Stahler-Sholk, 2010: 270). Human Rights Center Fray Bartolome de las Casas states in 1994 that the neoliberal politics that have been implemented since mid-80’s have hit indigenous peasants the hardest (Frayba, 1994: 11). For these groups depending on agriculture, securing land to cultivate is a question of securing life and increa-
sed privatization meant that the already few possibilities of securing access to land were practically lost (ibid.). During this time, statistics indicate alarming living conditions. In 1988, 54 % of the population in Chiapas suffered from malnutrition (Frayba, 1994: 6).

3.2 The Zapatista Uprising

In the beginning of the 90’s, neoliberalization accelerated further as the Article 27 in the constitution, which aimed at securing land distribution, was modified (Collins, 2010: 777). The modification allowed selling distributed land to large agro-businesses, as a preparation for entering the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (ibid.). Meanwhile, the government’s neoliberal policies had been accompanied by an increased militarization and intrusion by security forces in indigenous villages in Chiapas (Frayba, 1994: 9). Several human rights violations against indigenous communities and activists were reported. For example, in 1991, 103 ch’ol and tseltal activists were arbitrarily arrested and tortured by the judicial police during a peaceful protest in Palenque (Amnesty, 1992). A similar operation was made by the Mexican military as 1000 militaries violently attacked five villages in Ocosingo in 1993, arresting and tortured 23 people (Amnesty, 1993).

As the NAFTA came into force the 1st of January 1994, the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation), an armed group of indigenous peasants, rebelled by occupying four municipalities and releasing The First Declaration of the Lacandona Jungle, demanding peace, justice, work, food, land, housing, democracy, education, healthcare and indigenous independence (Stahler-Sholk, 2010: 270) (Collins, 2010: 778) (EZLN, 1994). The government answered with heavy military force and human rights violations such as torture, suspicious killings and disappearances were reported (Amnesty, 1994). The violence of the government was followed by civil society protests to demand peace and dialogue with the zapatistas (Stahler-Sholk, 2010: 283). The armed confrontation lasted for 12 days before both parts agreed on a ceasefire (Stahler-Sholk, 2010: 270). The EZLN agreed to peace talks with the government, but eventually rejected the governments proposals and created 38 autonomous municipalities by the end of the year (Reynoso & Sanchez, 2015: 131-132). In 1996, negotiations initiated again as representatives from the EZLN and the government gathered to sign the Agreement of San Andrés (Brand &Sekler, 2009: 66). However, the answer from the government did not fully address the zapatistas demands, and was ultimately dismissed (ibid.) As the state proved unwilling of putting indigenous rights into practice, the construction of autonomous education, healthcare and political structure in zapatista villages initiated (Reynoso & Sanchez, 2015: 178-179).
Despite the official ceasefire, the land conflict and the government’s treatment of indigenous resistance has been violent. Human rights organizations have reported violations such as arbitrary arrest, torture, threats, unfair imprisonment, homicide committed by both public security forces and paramilitaries, disappearances and rape (Amnesty International, 1994b, 1994c 1995) One of the most brutal killings happened in December 1997, as 45 indigenous people belonging to the civil society organization Las Abejas were massacred by a paramilitary group in Acteal (Frayba, 1998: 8). Many of the abuses are directly connected to the government’s attempts at controlling and stopping the zapatistas (Amnesty International, 1995:1).

The zapatista resistance to neoliberalization and the Mexican national state is considered by many as a unique example of bottom-up democratization (Stahler-Sholk, 2010) (Swords, 2007) (De Angelis, 2000). The indigenous movement in Chiapas has, by the identification as "los de abajo" - "those below" not only proposed a rebuilding of Mexico, but also been able to solidarize with other movements, both in Mexico and the world (Reynoso & Sanchez, 2015: 423). The zapatista movement has for example made connections with labour rights and feminist movements in other parts of Mexico, mobilizing around the common goal of challenging the system (Santos, 2014: 222). This width of supportive ties became very clear during my two months in San Cristobal de las Casas. Meeting both local and international activists and organizations supporting the zapatistas and the indigenous movement, I saw a movement mobilizing around a broader struggle, not only for autonomy but for many different causes. These include for example the demand for justice regarding the disappearance of students, resisting the use of GMO’s, fighting for women’s rights, against political imprisonment, reviving indigenous culture and art, promoting sustainable agriculture, among other things.

Apart from creating physical spaces for indigenous autonomy, it is often emphasized how the Chiapas indigenous movement’s fight for dignity is a fight for other world views that challenge the dominant discourses. It should thus be seen as a struggle, not only for social justice, but for an epistemic justice (Icaza & Vazquez, 2013: 685, 699). As Escobar argues, indigenous knowledge has largely been excluded as an aspect of colonization, which makes indigenous movements’ knowledge production a form of de-colonization (Escobar, 2012: xxvi). He emphasizes this aspect by referring to indigenous struggles as ontological struggles, due to the challenging of the oppositions that dominates the worldview of modern society, such as nature vs. culture, individual vs. community. The indigenous struggle in Chiapas for autonomy can be viewed as an example of mobilization around other ways of life, apart from liberal capitalism, for "a world where many worlds fit" as
formulated by the zapatistas themselves (Escobar, 2012: xxviii). This became particularly clear at the seminar “Critical Thought Versus the Capitalist Hydra” (referring to capitalism as the multi-headed monster from Greek mythology) arranged by the EZLN between May 3-9. Representatives from the EZLN, academics, writers, artists and activists from Mexico, Latin America and other parts of the world were invited as speakers, with around 2000 people in the audience. Theoretical concepts, experiences from other resistance movements as well as the practical experience of the autonomy project were presented and discussed. It was a clear example of how alternatives are formulated both practically and theoretically, constructing these other worlds in Chiapas highlands, as well as in other parts of the world.

It is within this context of epistemological and cultural struggles and construction of other possible worlds that the tsotsil and tseltal concept of *Lekil Kuxlejal* becomes relevant. Recent writings and discussions within the indigenous movement suggest that there is a growing mobilization around *Lekil Kuxlejal* as a political objective, such as Xuno Lopez Intzin’s (2013) writings on tseltal philosophy, and Jaime Schlittler’s thesis about *Lekil Kuxlejal* as a political horizon (2012) as well as civil society organizations’ embrace of this concept. An example of this is the meeting in San Miguel Arcángel, Huixtan between the 24th and the 26th of July, 2014, organized by INESIN, a peace organization for intercultural dialogue. Civil society organizations that in different ways work with indigenous communities participated together with catholic servants and parroquial members, with the purpose to discuss what *Buen Vivir* or *Lekil Kuxlejal* means and how to strengthen it in the different communities. Several aspects of *Lekil Kuxlejal* were reflected upon, such as how it relates to the Bible, relations on family and community level, the respect of Mother Earth and autonomy, placing it in the context of other indigenous forms of knowledges, such as the *Buen Vivir* in Bolivia and Ecuador (INESIN, 2014). In the following chapter, I will discuss some central aspects of this concept and how it relates to the political scene in Chiapas.
4. Dimensions of Lekil Kuxlejal

4.1 Madre Tierra - Mother Earth

"Before you asked permission for everything. From the water holes in the mountain, because everything has life. In the end, everything has life, a tree, the water, the animals. So everything is connected. Since it has life, before doing anything you should show respect." (Student, UNICH)

Agriculture is central to the indigenous communities in Chiapas, and thus, the earth has always played essential part in the communities well-being. As Paoli points out, the corn is fundamental, not only as an agricultural crop and physical nutrition but as a central aspect of the indigenous spiritualities (Paoli, 2003: 58). In Popol Vuh, for example, the Mayan story of creation, the first humans were made of corn (Christenson, 2007: 180-181). This centrality of earth was reflected with everyone I spoke to as all participants emphasized the relation to land and the work in la milpa, the cornfield, as a part of lekil kuxlejal. Furthermore, the majority of the participants referred to the earth as a mother at some point. Antonio, one of the founders of the indigenous rights organization Las Abejas, compares the way in which earth nurtures people, with the way a mother breastfeeds her children:

"Earth is our mother. Just like many mothers here in our country breastfeed their children, the breast of our mother is the earth. She is giving us nutrition, so we have to defend her and achieve lekil kuxlejal, to survive with our communities, with our families. Because everything that we wear comes from earth, everything that we eat, the shoes, come from earth. Everything we drink, the water, comes from the earth." (Antonio)

As Escobar writes, acknowledging the rights of nature is abandoning the view of nature as an object, giving room to nature as a subject (Escobar, 2012: xxvii). The description of the earth as someone who gives, who nurtures, who feeds the people, which was common among the participants, implies precisely such a shift. In the following part I will demonstrate how the recognition of earth’s subjectivity is one fundamental part of Lekil Kuxlejal.
"It existed before"

"Before, it was a good life, when they had their own land. But now, it’s very different (…) Lekil kuxlejal is not here anymore. People say that we are living well, but they do not realize that we are running out of land.” (Juan Jose)

Among the people I spoke to, there is a strong memory of a past, when *lekil kuxlejal* existed in the communities. There is a wide consensus among the participants that the relationship between human and nature is a fundamental part of this, and that this relation has now been degraded. This is connected to the changes that have affected agricultural practices and access to land, as expressed by Juan Jose above. Sara, a young woman from one of the tseltal communities, associated *lekil kuxlejal* to a family that lives together, without problems. She told me how it has become harder, as it has become more difficult to get a fair price for your work and explained: "My mother says that it existed before. That that’s how it was out in the countryside, where they grow corn, coffee, beans… even if they didn’t have money, they had something to live off together.”

The members of the student’s movement "Lekil Kuxlejal” at UNICH expressed it this way:

"In a family context, the values are passed on to the children, teaching them. Because before we could see in the tseltal homes (…) we saw that these values were contributing to nature, why? Because they appreciated it, they knew that nature is a live. There was a reciprocity between human and nature, that also formed these values. The caring, knowing to respect. (…) This made you as a human learn, to be conscious of the reality that is happening. Because let’s be honest, currently no one is living with the ‘buen vivir’. Unfortunately, it has broken. There was a rupture around maybe the 60’s and the 70’s (…) With this whole process of modernization and globalization, we are absorbed. This connection is lost because nowadays, no one values nature for example. (…) Like one teacher told me, I think it was last semester: when cutting a tree for the kitchen, the cooking and so on, nowadays you don’t plant it again like you did before. Why? Why did we ask permission to go to the plantings, to cut a tree? Because there was this connection that I am talking about, that was so strong. Now, we don’t do it anymore. Now we buy everything, that’s how we do it, without being conscious of what will happen afterwards. Because no one appreciates it. So the ‘buen vivir’ is not only a concept. It’s to put it in practice.” (student, UNICH)

With Mexico’s neoliberal reforms in the 1980’s, there was a dramatic drop in prices for maize and beans, affecting small scale peasants very hard (Burgess, 2012: 182). Both Sara and the students
from UNICH express two things that can be seen in the light of these changes as a degradation of *lekil kuxlejal*: the difficulty for farmers to make a living from cultivating, and the transition to buying goods instead of cultivating. It is important to note Sara’s statement: ”even if they didn’t have money, they had something to live off together.” which demonstrates that economic wealth is not the objective here, but the possibility of the family’s collective well-being in living off their land.

This resonates with the findings of Barreto-Avila in the food production of women in Ocósingo: the economic aspect of *lekil kuxlejal* is not to have as much as possible, but to have enough to live well (Barreto Avila, 2011: 487).

"**That’s when you stop having empathy with earth**” - resisting GMO’s

”They bring packages for producing (...) they come and they say ”I’ll give you this amount of seeds, so that you’ll grow corn. And I’ll give you this amount of agrochemicals, pumps, pesticides”. So when doing this, that’s when you stop having empathy with earth. The harmony. They give a package and they try it, they notice that in three-four months the corn grows, and not small cobs, but enormous ones, with lots of corn in every cob, they no longer have to go and cut the cañas. (...) If there’s a plague, they take the pump, they walk and start to sprinkle. So that’s when politics enter the communities.” (Luis)

Apart from the difficulty in cultivating and living off the land, the lost relationship to earth was also directly connected to the use of los *transgenicos* (GMO’s - Genetically Modified Organisms), chemical fertilizers and pesticides. It is one of the main issues that organizations working with indigenous communities in Chiapas struggle with today and there is a large mobilization around organic production. With the people I spoke to, there was a strong concern for the harm of using los *transgenicos*. A wide consensus between the participants indicated that by using chemicals, we are hurting someone who takes care of us.

Luis, whose family founded a coffee cooperative that works with organic production in autonomous indigenous communities, defines *lekil kuxlejal* as ”improvement of life in a collective sense” on community level. *Lekil kuxlejal* is described as a harmony, which is put into practice by producing organically and avoiding GMO’s and chemicals.

**LUIS:** The main factor is health. Health, taking care of earth and harmony. Between human and earth, because if you use agrochemicals in the earth, it will erode. When it erodes, that’s where climate change and all that starts. So it’s the harmony that we want. As members of the community and
as a cooperative we also want the people from outside to understand this harmony that you should have with earth. (...) When you use the transgenic seed, Monsanto for example, the pesticides and all that, everyone knows that they are chemicals. So practically, what you are consuming, in corn, in tortillas, all of that, is pure chemicals. It hurts you on cellular level. For example in the communities, the women are starting to have problems in having children, the men with prostate problems and all of that. Before, you didn’t see that in the communities, mostly in big cities, so that’s what we want to avoid as well.

LOVISA: So how do you achieve this harmony with nature?

LUIJS: Well, you achieve this harmony by saying, like something symbolic, ”I take care of earth and she takes care of me, she feeds me.” So it’s reciprocal. I take care of her, she nurtures me and at the same time I avoid natural disasters, like I mentioned before the erosion of earth. Creeks and rivers can get infected, times of drought… that’s when there is most disease. For this reason. So, that is the harmony that you have with nature.

The harmony described here is thus based on reciprocity. Nature cares for our health, so we should care for hers. The well-being of nature is the well-being of the human body, both of them suffers consequences from the use of chemicals. This interconnectedness was also emphasized by Micaela, coordinator at the Organization for Indigenous Doctors in Chiapas (OMIECH).

"By using fertilizer, the vegetables grow very large. "Oh you’re corn cob is so nice, very big" - but only when you give it fertilizer, not when you don’t. The earth gets used to it and that is very delicate. It is our body as well. We are earth, we are water. Be aware, foods with chemical is harmful. If you take care of everything, nature and body, you feel happy. That is lekil kuxlejal. It’s to rescue the ancestral. Before there were neither fertilizers nor chemicals. The leaves fall, oh how nice, just natural, all the medicines, just natural. And right now, everything is chemical, that’s why there is so much disease today, many complications. I wonder if it is not because of all these chemicals.” (Micaela)

When Micaela talks about lekil kuxlejal as the happiness that comes with taking care of nature and body, this connects the well-being of humans to the well-being of nature. The use of chemical fertilizers in the earth also means chemicals in your body, and thus the health of human bodies and the body of Mother Earth is one. The statement ”We are earth, we are water” blurs the lines between the human and the environment, illustrating an example of the alternative potential that Escobar (2012) sees in indigenous ontologies, namely to challenge Western assumptions of oppositions between nature and culture, human and non-human (Escobar, 2012: xxviii). The resistance towards the use of GMO’s is not merely based on the arguments of the physical harm it does, but on a larger reformulation of relations between the human and non-human.
A political spirituality of nature

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the earth is an important part of the spirituality the communities in Chiapas. Xuno explains how, in tseltal, everything has a *ch’ulel* and an *o’tan*, an inherent energy/soul and a heart. This is for example demonstrated by the practices of some communities in Tenejapa, where the seeds are never to be thrown on the ground, but should be picked up, because they have a spirit (Lopez Intzin, 2013:148). For the striking students at the movement Lekil Kuxlejal at UNICH, their struggle for *lekil kuxlejal* includes a demand to valorize and recognizing these ways of relating to nature. For example, one of the students told me about rituals are made in the community of Oxchuc, when you pray to the earth before cultivating. He then reflected on the possibilities of doing something similar at their university:

STUDENT: (…) It would be good to do rituals, to thank this space, I don’t know… so that nothing happens to anyone(…) Do like a mega-prayer for the whole school. To thank the ground for holding us, so no one will fall. Because in the prayers, that is how they say. So no one will fall, so no one gets hurt, and at the same time the ground takes care of us. I think that’s needed.

LOVISA: So there is need for some kind of spirituality?

STUDENT: Yes of course. Ask forgiveness for being here, then ask for permission and that at the same time for being taken care of. But no... and as I said before, this should come from above.

LOVISA: From above…?

STUDENT: Yes, the ones in charge, the directors… to propose to do this kind of prayer for the whole school. But as I said, they do not know or maybe they don’t think it’s important. They know, but the thing is that they don’t value it, or they think that it’s something that doesn’t exist, that is ”eh, it’s their stuff. The indians’ stuff”, they could even say. But they really have a lot of value, these issues. Things that have been lost, things we no longer do that we only see in the communities.

As Escobar argues, social struggles are not only about material objectives, but about defining the world (Escobar, 2012: 16). To place this in the perspective of Santos, this proposal of recuperating the ”things that have been lost” by putting the recognition of earth into practice is one example of demanding *cognitive justice* in a situation where the experience of directors devaluing indigenous beliefs witnesses of a cognitive *injustice* (Santos, 2014: 42). Re-thinking the relationship to earth as the students are proposing, as one of reciprocity, is thus not only about ending an oppression of nature, but about ending an oppression and marginalization of world views.
Here, it is interesting that some of the participants spoke of mother nature from a catholic spirituality. I had long been curious over the relationship between Mother Nature and God in communities where catholic faith is strong. How do they co-exist? Micaela from OMIECH stated that "nature has an owner already, and that is God". Antonio described the relation between Mother Earth and God somewhat differently:

ANTONIO: It's more like, Mother Earth is the platform of God. (...) The fundamental base. Mother Earth communicates with her father God, she communicates to heaven from earth, through the trees, through the wind and through everything. It's the communication.

LOVISA: So there is a mother and a father then?

ANTONIO: Well, all of this forms a spirituality that cares for us and keeps us safe. Yes. All of this is a spirituality of good spirits. Communicate with them, pray, communicate, and they take care of you. But if you communicate with the bad spirit, evil will come to you.

Although the belief in both Mother Earth and God can seem contradictory from a genealogical perspective, especially in a search for de-colonizing alternatives to Western ontologies, the notion of earth as a subject is still evident. While my thinking of lekil kuxlejal was definitely colored by this feeling of contradiction, I learned that for many, this was not a contradiction at all, but completely natural. As Antonio put it "All of this is a spirituality of good spirits".

Here, it is important to understand the particular history of syncretism that has characterized Chiapas. Catholicism is very strong in many communities, and Mayan beliefs are often interconnected with the belief in God (Kovic, 2005: 49). There is a long tradition of catechism and evangelization of indigenous peoples since colonization (ibid.). However, in Chiapas, the catholic church made a significant turn starting from the 60's, with the bishop Samuel Ruiz (Kovic, 2005: 50-51). The relation to the indigenous population changed parts of the dioceses adhered to the liberation theology with social justice as a main objective, playing a big part in the critique of the Mexican government (Kovic, 2005: 50-51, 63). When the zapatistas rebelled in 1994, the bishop Ruiz, often referred to as Jiatik Samuel (our father Samuel) by the indigenous communities openly supported their demands (Kovic, 2005: 66). Understanding the spiritual aspects of lekil kuxlejal is thus impossible without looking at the role of the catholic church in Chiapas and acknowledging the religious heterogeneity of indigenous communities.
This heterogeneity was pointed out by Xuno. When we spoke, he made the point that no matter how attached to liberation theology the catholic church might be, they will never take a Sunday off from church to go to the cave and pray. However, while it is important to recognize the different conceptualizations and practices of *lekil kuxlejal*, it is necessary to see the features they have in common:

XUNO: A missionary, a priest will speak of lekil kuxlejal from his or her point of reference. A traditionalist, a healer, a prayer leader, a farmer will have his or her notion of lekil kuxlejal.

LOVISA: Like with any concept right?

XUNO: Like any concept. But of course, if we put together all these visions and make a fabric, we can see that there are patterns that repeats themselves, so we hold onto that.

Following Xuno’s thinking, one of these patterns to hold onto could be the recognition of nature as a living subject. Despite the differences, the conceptualization of *lekil kuxlejal* within the political struggle for indigenous rights entails the understanding of nature as a mother that is being mistreated by humans, whether there is a father in the picture or not.

**Lekil kuxlejal as a discourse of transition?**

Escobar writes that “nature is a co-construction between humans and non-humans” (Escobar, 2012: 207). In this view, we are able to engage in different kinds of conversations and interaction with all beings in our surrounding, which determines what discourse dominates our understanding of nature (ibid.) The potential of changing the dominant discourse lies in social movements; activists and academics have the possibility to reformulate these conversations, preventing the environment from being discussed only in terms of development (Escobar, 2012: 211). This is demonstrated when the participants speak of nature in terms of someone to defend, a provider of food, a person to take care of which in turn takes care of us. *Lekil kuxlejal* here is the communication with this person, constructed in a political struggle, but based on the experience of small-scale agriculture, and the dependence on the earth. Understanding *lekil kuxlejal* in this way is accepting the social relation between the human and the non-human, where the latter is not merely considered a resource or a mean of production, but another being worthy of respect. As described in the introduction, *lekil kuxlejal* can here be placed in the context of other political mobilizations around non-Western world views, such as Escobar's notion of *discourses of transition* (Escobar, 2012: xx), as it proposes a
move towards a paradigm shift in how the world is defined. The world is here seen as *pluriverse* rather than universe, challenging the division between human and nature, and recognizing the interconnectedness between the human and non-human (Escobar, 2012: xxvii).

Although one maybe should be careful with equating *lekil kuxlejal* and the south american *Buen Vivir* and homogenizing world views just based on being "indigenous", it does not seem unlikely that groups with strong ties to land for survival share some core features in the thinking of nature. Furthermore, the local formulation of *lekil kuxlejal* occurs in a context of solidarity and communication between other movements, sharing the same struggle against neoliberalism and exploitation of earth. When this way of speaking about nature enters into political spheres, the protection of nature is not only a question of environmental politics, but of giving value to forms of knowledge and definitions of the world that have been historically marginalized. As Santos argues, the ecology of knowledges is about achieving a communication between scientific knowledge and other forms where not only the former has validity (Santos, 2014: 188-189). The ecological aspects of *lekil kuxlejal* as part of a growing non-Western knowledge of nature is thus an important contribution to such ecology.

### 4.2 Lekil kuxlejal as social justice

*Ich’el ta muk’*

"For me, lekil kuxlejal is dignified life, the dignity of human life. The dignity of what exists. And the ich’el ta muk’ is the statement we make towards this dignity of life. That is, we have to recognize that dignity of life that the other person has, that the caves have, that the mountains have. They have their dignity, their greatness, so we have to recognize that. Recognizing that is respecting, considering their voice, listening to their voice. It’s beginning with equality, like the women in the communities are demanding.” (Xuno)

According to Schlittler Alvarez, *lekil kuxlejal* is not a fixed set of values, but a negotiation of what is conceived as well-being (Schlittler Alvarez, 2012: 85). Defining *lekil kuxlejal* as one ready package of ideas and principles thus becomes impossible and when thinking about the translation "living well" it is obvious that each person’s definition will vary depending on who is speaking. Fortunately, this thesis is not aiming at a complete representation of the cultural meaning of *lekil kuxlejal* in all tsotsil and tseltal communities in Chiapas, but what it means as a part of the indigenous movement’s political struggle today. When looking in this direction, several participants wit-
hin the activist scene provided a criteria for what *lekil kuxlejal* can be, namely an outcome of the tseltal concept *ich’el ta muk*. *Ich’el ta muk* means recognizing the greatness of the other being, not only humans, but every living thing:

"When I ask the people "What is lekil kuxlejal?" "Well, the good living” but they associate it with *ich’el ta muk*, and they tell me "it’s when you recognize that something has life, not only the people, but nature, and since you recognize that it has life, you respect it. Because by having life, you owe it respect, not only to people, men, women, children, but also nature. For example to a plant. Why? Because it has the right to grow without you disturbing it.” (Estela)

The use of *ich’el ta muk* as a political tool for achieving *lekil kuxlejal* is exemplified by the student movement at the Intercultural University of Chiapas, who used it on their protest sign at the entrance of their university. One of the students defined it simply as "Consider us.” or "take us into account”. Demanding *ich’el ta muk* is demanding to be seen and claiming your rights in any situation where these are being ignored, a prerequisite for *lekil kuxlejal* to exist, as explained here by Xuno:

"We can’t speak of lekil kuxlejal if there is not an *ich’el ta muk*. The *ich’el ta muk* is like the base of lekil kuxlejal. If we put it in other terms, what is it that the people have sought historically? The fight for democracy, the fight for justice, for equity. In tseltal terms, the *ich’el ta muk*. Here I am, in front of you. Whether I am big or tiny or whatever. In terms of human dignity, we are equal, so recognize my equality to you. Give me *ich’el ta muk*.” (Xuno)

*Ich’el ta muk* is thus inherently political as it translates into any context of injustice as a tool for rebellion. This is connected to the awakening of the *ch’ulel*, the tseltal notion for soul/energy/potential in each being. When your *ch’ulel* wakes up, you realize that you have rights to claim. Both Estela and Xuno connected *ich’el ta muk* to the indigenous peoples’ political struggle in Chiapas, particularly the zapatista rebellion in 1994:

"Maybe starting from 1994, or a bit before, the people also started to have this consciousness of their rights. Chiapas comes from a situation of exploitation, of marginalization. The people didn’t know their rights. So, when the people became aware, a lot of them through the catholic church, they started to realize that they could be equal to the rest.” (Estela)
"I think that ich’el ta muk’ is highly revolutionary. It has a liberting and revolutionary potential, where societies historically have been oppressed, when they realize their greatness, their chulel wakes up and they say "we will demand ich’el ta muk' from the one who oppresses us" (Xuno)

Ich’el ta muk’ implies that there is no well-being without justice, without equality and mutual respect for everyones dignity and equality. When Xuno states that lekil kuxlejal is the outcome of ich’el ta muk’, not the other way around, there is a parallel to be drawn to development. It makes the statement that there cannot be true and just well-being, no matter what kind of sustainable, social or economic development is pursued, if there is no recognition of everyones dignity to start with.

However, as Xuno further explains, it is not only about justice and recognizing dignity, but also about recognizing the other’s capability; "Ich’el ta muk’ is not only respect, it’s beyond respect. It’s recognizing that the other person has the capacity of doing something and transforming". Again, the question of subjectivity becomes relevant. As Escobar writes, the development discourse in Latin America has largely treated indigenous peoples as objects for different projects, based on the view that they had to be modernized and adapted to the Eurocentric culture of the mestizo majority (Escobar, 2012: 43). In this sense, ich’el ta muk’ becomes the contrary to such discourse. Instead of seeing a need to modernize and develop the Other, there is a recognition of their own capacity. This resonates with the claim for subjectivity found in the Buen Vivir discourse, as expressed in Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ ”Manifesto for Buen Vivir”, ”We do not want to be spoken about, we want to speak for ourselves. We do not want to be seen on the other side of the line. We want to eliminate the line” (Santos, 2014: 6). Although it is relevant to question for whom Santos speaks when using "we", being a European male academic, it makes an important point in how indigenous movements struggles against this objectification and what Escobar calls "imperialism in representation" (Escobar, 2012: 162). As a demand to be recognized as a subject, ich’el ta muk’ is potentially an elimination of this line. With ich’el ta muk’ as a prerequisite for well-being, the uprising of a subject vs the intervention towards an object allows lekil kuxlejal to be seen as a kind of counter-development.

"When the women start speaking like this, the man has to react"

When visiting one of the tsotsil communities I had a small talk with a man from the village. Our conversation came to the topic of lekil kuxlejal and I was told that lekil kuxlejal is when old customs and traditions were preserved, for example when women wore traditional clothes. Another example he brought up was the situation when a boy and girl fall in love. According to him, this not only between two people, but the whole community’s business and the boy has to ask permission of the
girl’s father in order to be a couple. The father should decide for his daughter. Puzzled, I asked him if this really would mean lekil kuxlejal for everyone, for the girl as well. He was sure that it would.

The conversation confused me and I realized that the connection between lekil kuxlejal and gender needed to be explored further. On one hand, his definition of lekil kuxlejal went hand in hand with others in the emphasis of the collective, the will to preserve community traditions and the conviction of that something has been lost with modernity. On the other, it seemed contrary to ich’el ta muk’ and the recognition of each person’s capacity.

In both Antonio Paoli’s work (2003) and that of Schlitter Alvarez (2012), gendered aspects of lekil kuxlejal are given very little room, though Schlittler Alvarez does emphasize the women’s participation within the zapatista struggle (Schlittler Alvarez, 2012: 123-124). In Paoli’s depiction of tseltal culture, when the relationship between a man and a woman is discussed, it is stated that the man should love the woman and the woman should love the man, no one should decide more than the other (Paoli, 2003: 78-79). However, he also writes that the relationship between men and women is normally loving, but that it is not uncommon that the man hits his wife (Paoli, 2003: 90). This seems quite contradictory: domestic violence directed at women is normal, yet relationships can be described a loving and described as harmonious.

After having the conversation with the man in the village, I was reminded that there is no room for idealizing community life as a perfect harmony, and that patriarchal structures exist here as in any other part of society. This led me to the question: is there a conflict between the collective harmony through traditions and customs vs. gender equality? The zapatistas have long been talking about these issues, clarifying that discrimination and violence against women is a serious problem, for example, through the Women’s Revolutionary Law (EZLN, 1993).

When I brought up my concern with Xuno, he described this as a serious problem in many communities. According to him, the collective harmony, this cannot exist without equality, without ich’el ta muk’. Achieving lekil kuxlejal when unequal relations exist requires rebellion:

"When they say "It’s enough", they acquire a potential, they stand up as subjects, with courage, dignity and voice, when they say "It’s enough! Stop it you bastard"(…) When the women start speaking like this, the man has to react, it’s like a shock. They’ve never said this to us before and suddenly they tell us "Stop bastard! Enough!" This shakes us. But once the women have woken up their ch’ulel, and demanded ich’el ta muk’, things have to change, they need to change. As men we need to rethink the historical role we have had towards women, which has also been imposed, although of course it’s an imposition that we enjoy (…) And it is also something we reproduce. Because it is always at our favor, always at our service. So I think, for me, lekil kuxlejal is there, but I find the libe-
rating and revolutionary potential in ich el ta muk'. Because that’s where the subject stands up and demands recognition from the other.” (Xuno)

This view was also shared by Estela:

"If there is violence and an unequal situation in a couple, or between men and women, there cannot be a good living. It can’t. There is not that harmony in family. No, there is a situation of submission. That is, the same submission that existed from the farm owner towards the farmer, was reproduced within the couple. So if there is this situation of inequality in a family, there cannot be a lekil kuxle-jal.” (Estela)

Here, there is a direct connection between colonial oppression of indigenous peoples and the oppression of women, where the latter is a reproduction of the former. Gender oppression as a reproduction of colonialism was also brought up in the speech by Comandante Miriam during the zapatista seminar in May in San Cristobal. Although women do not work for landowners who keep them under slave-like conditions anymore, she describes how the same oppression has remained within the homes:

"It’s as if the men drug these bad ideas along with them and applied them inside the house. They acted like the little boss of the house. It’s not true that the women were liberated then, because the men became the little bosses of the house.” (Comandante Miriam)

In order to understand the circumstances in which the women’s struggle in Chiapas is made, it is important to look at the gendered aspects of colonialism, capitalism and development. Indigenous women seem to have suffered particularly from colonial violence. For example, in Sylvia Marcos (1992) analysis of colonization and sexuality in Mexico, she describes how colonial landlords in Chiapas could access to indigenous women’s bodies and systematically raped women working for them (Marcos, 1992: 165). As land was colonized, so were indigenous women’s bodies.

The ways in which both nature and women have been subordinated to masculinity in the capitalist system is underlined by Escobar (2007). He emphasizes how the very idea of androcentric modernization with the division between nature and culture has associated women to nature and put them at the margin of the Eurocentric worldview (Escobar, 2007: 197). This perspective goes in line with the argument of some Latin American feminists, that there is an idea of women as "the Other of modernity” (Escobar, 2007: 195). In development, argues Escobar, patriarchal structures have
been renewed into a form of modernized patriarchy, often overlooking women and their role in the economy, for example as food producers (Escobar, 2012: 173). Furthermore, with capitalization of nature, women often takes the hardest consequences as their livelihoods in many places depend on land (Escobar, 2012: 201).

However, women are not being passive objects facing this oppression. As Escobar (2012) shows, there are many movements where indigenous women in Latin America are rising up against this patriarchal modernization, both providing a critique of Western feminism, as well as standing up against oppression under the name of traditions and culture (Escobar, 2012: xi). The zapatista women’s struggle is an evident example of this, and has been raised by several Latin American feminist scholars, such as Sylvia Marcos (2011) and Margara Millan (2011). A historical milestone is The Women’s revolutionary law that was released in 1993 by the zapatista women, declaring a list of rights, such as political participation, the right marry whomever they wanted, freedom from domestic violence (Ezln, 1993). A feminist understanding of lekil kuxlejal should be seen in the context of this de-colonizing gender struggle. Here ich’el ta muk' secures lekil kuxlejal as a well-being that indeed is collective, but consists of relations between respected subjects. The the collective well-being can only exist if all parts of the collective are subjects with recognized ch’ulels.

The idea of lekil kuxlejal is not static or homogenous, nor are the social dynamics in the communities. The indigenous women’s rebellion which Estela and Xuno refer to shows that there is a feminist struggle within the struggle which needs to be recognized, facing difficulties both from within and from the outside. It also shows that the struggle for gender equality is not found in the opposition between modernity and tradition, but can be seen in the light of an existing cultural concept within tseltal cosmology. Just as the autonomous indigenous communities in Chiapas are not depending on a Western idea of progress, gender equality does not depend on a Western feminism, but on a resistance that already exists, through the conceptualizations of justice and equality that lekil kuxlejal through ich’el ta muk’ means.

4.3 Lekil kuxlejal and the government

"And the government changes the law. If they found oil, they tell the people “I will expropriate your land because there is oil here that belongs to the nation”. Nowadays they don’t call it "expropriation", they call it “occupation”. And they keep finding and modifying the law to be able to benefit the system. I think the governments no longer serve the people, they serve the big transnational companies. So meanwhile all of this exists, there cannot be a full lekil kuxlejal. So that’s where we’re going. That’s why we are struggling.” (Estela)
As described in the background section, indigenous communities’ experience of the state and the government has been violent: human rights have been violated by authorities and political mobilization has been a particular target for military repression. The coincidence between violence by paramilitaries and the government’s strategy to end zapatista insurgency have been highlighted by human rights organizations, for example after the massacre of 45 members of the organization Las Abejas de Acteal in 1997 (Frayba, 2007). For the indigenous movement in Chiapas, there is thus extremely little, if any, confidence in institutionalized politics and the government is often referred to as *el mal gobierno* - the bad government. For Antonio, one of the founders of las Abejas, there is currently no possibility for a *lekil kuxlejal* within the political parties:

ANTONIO: As the UN charter says, learn to build the rights, giving rights to the life of man, of woman, of children. Life of the infants. The life of so many things that exist in the world, we have to learn them. And here, there has been an embrace between the bible, the indigenous culture and the international rights. Except for political parties.

LOVISA: Except for them. They can’t?

ANTONIO: No, they can’t. They’re something different. Something very different.

LOVISA: A political party can never achieve lekil kuxlejal?

ANTONIO: No. (...) Let’s take Chiapas, Mexico. If there is a lot of illness in the hospitals, the government says: "Ah, there’s no money, there’s no medicine". How can there not be money for the hospitals, how can there not be money for medication, when they’re giving money in exchange for land to women? How can there not be money if they’re taking money for the arms of paramilitaries? (...) How can there not be money? There is money to make injustice, and there is no money to find lekil kuxlejal.

The Mexican government has been present in the communities of Chiapas through different projects to extract natural resources, often without prior consent of the communities. For instance, when I visited Antonio’s community, he told me about when the state petrol company entered the village and destroyed the farmers’ plantations. Another example of how these projects, often under the name of "development", are experienced is provided by Micaela from OMIECH:
"There is no good living. According to the government it is good living, but it’s not. We’re already filled with development, they deepen their projects. So many projects. They tell us everything, how to do this and that… They come and take it into their projects in order to sell it to the very same community afterwards. Like the wells, the water. They already have the wells. (…) The government comes where there are wells, to get in and afterwards you have to pay annually for the water. I pay annually. Before, it was a little. I pay 600 pesos per year. You see? Even though the wells are right there, the government is now the owner.” (Micaela)

The breadcrumbs from the state

A problem frequently discussed within the indigenous rights movement currently, are the packages and projects delivered to communities by either the government or the political parties in exchange for votes or loyalty. These can include financial aid in cash or packages of food products, for example. In the interviews, it was often referred to as a large obstacle for lekil kuxlejal, causing division between community members, controlling opposition towards the state and undermining the possibilities of collective work and autonomy. Estela described this as a new, subtle strategy to end political mobilization:

ESTELA: Problems arise. Because the people receiving the projects sometimes want to make other people receive as well.

LOVISA: Really?

ESTELA: Yes. So this creates serious problems.

LOVISA: So… is it like an assignment from the government? Do they, or the political parties, say to people to tell their neighbors…?

ESTELA: Yes. It’s like a form of counterinsurgency. Because what the government wants is to stop the zapatista bases. (…) So what they have not been able to do with paramilitaries or militaries, they try to do in a more subtle way. And much has succeeded I believe, controlling the people with the support they give, that does not resolve anything. It doesn’t resolve, but it controls.

Frequently, this phenomenon was referred to by the participants as "las migajas del estado" - the breadcrumbs from the state: you are given a small amount of material goods to keep you from demanding what you really are entitled to, at the same time as human rights can continue to be ignored. The majority of those I spoke to shared the view of this phenomenon as taking advantage of a
group living under poor circumstances in order to keep them from mobilizing. According to Xuno, it also stops people from seeing their own situation:

"There is not, there cannot be, there will not be lekil kuxlejal if there is no ich’el ta muk’. If I’m talking to you saying ”Hey, let’s be in harmony, let’s be this and that”, but if I’m trampling on you all the time, if I’m not recognizing your value, if I’m not recognizing your importance as a person, how can there be lekil kuxlejal? For example, the state can sell an idea of lekil kuxlejal, giving us programmes, giving us breadcrumbs, giving us charity, domesticating and alienating people, the communities. And the worst part is if you say ”Ah yes, here we are fine. There is a lekil kuxlejal” and you also think that there’s an ich’el ta muk’ when you don’t realize that you are depending, you are being supervised.” (Xuno)

This concern was also raised by Ana, when she told me of the sometime difficult work with the organic farming cooperative. For her, the task of the cooperative is show people who are members of the political parties that autonomy is possible and that dependence on governmental support is not necessary. As she put it: ”as autonomous we can live organized and work, without the breadcrumbs of the government.” She described how many communities are becoming more reluctant to organizing:

"The sad thing that is happening right now in the communities is all the political parties, they hand out maseca¹ and stuff, when the community already have these things in their land, they have their own product, the corn. So some are leaving this aside, but why? Becasue the government is always there giving and giving. So it’s very hard to convince people.” (Ana)

Escobar underlines how the development apparatus gives the state more power at the same time as it takes away the political aspect of the underlying reasons for people’s living conditions (Escobar, 2012: 143). Here, the discourse of the indigenous movement in Chiapas has been able to put itself outside of the paradigm, inventing other descriptions of the practices that are called ”development” or ”progress” by the Mexican government. If the development discourse here de-politicizes the real problems by making it a question of material goods and not one of power and inequality, this way of talking about the government’s projects re-politicizes it. The metaphor of ”breadcrumbs” puts the governments development in a bigger picture and indicates that while small material gifts are granted, something larger is being held back. It exposes other aspects of the rela-

¹ Maseca is the name of the most common brand of corn flour
tionship between the state and communities than only the action of giving, such as the simultaneous denying of human rights.

**La lucha**

Perhaps one of the most important points to be made about alternatives to development is as Escobar argues, that such concepts cannot be seen as a set of fixed meanings, but as constant creations (Escobar, 2012: xxx). As previous chapters have shown, *lekil kuxlejal* is constructed in the light of political and environmental crises, social injustices and a concern for the future. When discussing what needs to be done in order to create a *lekil kuxlejal*, the majority of the participants spoke of la *lucha*, a struggle. Seeing *lekil kuxlejal* as Escobar argues, as constantly being created, is seeing how it is expressed in a collective political activism:

"We have to build, weave, embroider, to stand up as a collective subject demanding ich’el ta muk’ from the state or from the other who does not give us ich’el ta muk’, for our good living, dignified living. A full living. A fair living. That is the lekil kuxlejal and ich’el ta muk’.” (Xuno)

"It’s possible, but it’s a process and it should be done together. How do we want the next life for the future generations to be? Now it is a threat to everything, we are seeing many things happening, we are facing many things. What will happen? Everybody is worried about what will happen later, if we no longer have forest, if the government privatizes so much. It’s a threat to everything.” (Juan Jose)

"To look for a good life, you relate to the word of God, that is the only way. Where we are taught to struggle, to walk, to pray and to protest against the injustice. It’s our right to complain, protest against injustices that we are living, to find lekil kuxlejal (…) We can’t remain silent while receiving injustices. We are all human, we are people, we are flesh and blood. We have to find the way to save ourselves, to end this large amount of violence and injustice. But no governor can teach us that, no president of the republic, no authorities.” (Antonio)

"What we have to do to bring back the lekil kuxlejal is to re-organize, not cause any harm, talk, inform, do workshops, exchange, flyers, spread all of this and ask ourselves: what did we have? What is happening to us? What is it doing to us? Maybe we can. But the people are used to it now. So many stores, commercials that encourage people. So I don’t know… it’s a bit difficult. If people would stop asking for the projects of the government. It’s difficult, because the government dominates them, everything is already dominated.” (Micaela)

*The struggle* here is understood as several actions: raising awareness, making people ask themselves questions of their own situation, as well as resisting the government’s “crumbs”. It implies a
collective action, looking both forward, asking how we want life in the future to be, as Juan José proposes, as well as looking back, asking Micaela’s question: "What did we have?". Here, it becomes clear that lekil kuxlejal is both a re-construction of something that once existed, as well as a completely new building foundation. The former can be associated with a cognitive justice (Santos, 2014: 42), a legitimization of indigenous knowledge, while the latter is an outlook on the future, the kind of imagination that Escobar (2005) proposes.

**Autonomous Lekil Kuxlejal vs. Institutionalized Buen Vivir**

"For the indigenous communities, lekil kuxlejal is to have your own education. Autonomous education, not from the government, because that of the government, well, there is a lot of repression. (…)And also autonomous healthcare. This would be the lekil kuxlejal for the zapatista indigenous communities." (Carlos)

I have previously discussed the relationship to the state and the resistance towards it, where the reflections of the participants indicate that a true lekil kuxlejal is not possible inside the framework of the state. As Schlittler Alvarez describes, the few expectations that existed of the state meeting the demands of autonomy were eventually abandoned after the negotiations with the government in 1996 (Schlittler Alvarez, 2012: 119). It then became clear that the change that the Zapatistas sought would never be provided by the state, but had to be constructed independently (ibid.). This had been fully put into practice by 2003, as the Zapatistas had created political autonomous organizations in the villages (Reynoso & Sanchez, 2015: 194). These were built around five caracoles (literally translated as seashells or snails) which constitute the political centre for the communities (Reynoso & Sanchez, 2015: 181). Here, their own governments - their called Juntas de Buen Gobierno, "councils of good government", function as the link between the zapatista communities and the rest of society, with the task to for example resolve conflicts in the communities and address reports of human rights violations, all under the zapatista motto "mandar obedeciendo" - rule by obeying (ibid.). Autonomy here thus implies a new way of social organization, not centered around taking power, but about self-determination, often referred to as radical democracy (Escobar, 2012: xxix).

In my interviews, autonomy was expressed in different ways as a significant part of lekil kuxlejal. Apart from the councils of Good Governments, perhaps the most visible practice of autonomy is what Carlos describes above: having your own autonomous schools and clinics. When describing his own community, he emphasized an environment free from exploitation as well as collective work:
"Lekil kuxlejal for me, it’s with the zapatista communities. Not speaking of the **priistas**\(^2\), because the **priistas**, I feel that they do not have the lekil kuxlejal. They’re destroying everything. And there are many communities that have lekil kuxlejal. For example, there is a one community where I come from. It’s a lagoon. There are like 30 families living there, 30 families with like 200 people. And they live there, without receiving support from the government, they work the land collectively, they have their assembly collectively. It’s a super lagoon, full of trees. Impressive nature. Lekil kuxlejal” (Carlos)

The role of the zapatistas as constructors and innovators in building the real **lekil kuxlejal** was also expressed by Estela:

"So while there are injustice, we can’t say that lekil kuxlejal is being lived, fully. While that exists there is not good living. So from the uprising of the zapatistas, I think the people who are organized are showing that they can do things of their own. We work with two of the caracoles (…) And we see that strength that the compañeros and compañeras have, what they are constructing, what they are achieving, from what they bring and what they do. Because they do a lot of work. And also with support and solidarity from international and national collectives. They contribute a lot.” (Estela)

Xuno describes this construction in terms of demanding **ich’el ta muk’**. That is, demanding not in the sense of ’asking for something from someone’, but as a claim to be recognized:

"When they realize that something is wrong, they re-think and turn things around. And that’s what our struggling people has done, the autonomous communities, and that’s where they had to be recognized, the ich’el ta muk’ they are demanding of the state that they were not given, to have a lekil kuxlejal. "We will build our autonomies” There are the autonomies. And I think that that’s why the ich’el ta muk’ is not only respect, it goes way beyond respect. It is recognizing that the other person has the capacity, the potentiality of doing something and transforming. "(Xuno)

As we have seen, the autonomous communities are not described merely as "having” autonomy, but in terms of "constructing”, ”achieving”, ”doing something and transforming”. As Carlos stated:

"The zapatistas are the ones who are trying and building something beautiful for **lekil kuxlejal**.”

This makes the important point that autonomy is a process, not the final goal. This is also pointed out by Schlittler Alvarez as he states that the concept of autonomy should not be understood as an

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\(^2\) Priistas refer to members of PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) one of the largest political parties in Mexico.
objective in itself, but as a road towards lekil kuxlejal, dignified life (Schlittler Alvarez, 2012: 135-136). In this way, equating lekil kuxlejal with autonomy is erroneous. Rather, "building something beautiful for lekil kuxlejal” indicates that lekil kuxlejal is the desired outcome of autonomy.

Putting the aspect of autonomy in lekil kuxlejal into the larger context of Latin America’s Buen Vivir movement, there are some important differences to recognize. The relation to the state is perhaps the clearest point where lekil kuxlejal differs. While the success of Buen Vivir as a new development discourse often refers to its inclusion in the Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitution, as by Escobar (2012, xxviii), the conceptualizations of lekil kuxlejal in the indigenous rights movement in Chiapas dissociates with the state. Here, it is of course relevant to look at each country’s different history of indigenous peoples’ political participation. For example, both Bolivia and Ecuador both have much higher political representation in official politics of indigenous peoples in relation to their share of the total population (IPU, 2014: 6). However, there is also reason to critically ask what risks there are when "alternatives” are institutionalized.

While recognizing that the Eurocentric construction of the state to a large extent has had divisions based on for example class, ethnicity and sex as fundamental elements, with no room for collective rights, Santos still sees potential in a transformation of the state (Santos et al. 2008, xx-xxi). Buen vivir is often brought up as an example of such. For example Escobar writes that the it should be seen as a re-thinking of the state as plurinational and multicultural (Escobar, 2012: xxvi). However, there is also a growing critical stand towards the institutionalized Buen Vivir. Anna Kaijser writes about the Bolivian government’s construction of the highway through an indigenous territory and national park in 2009, which was met with resistance from social movements (Kaijser, 2014: 99, 103). The government’s standpoint has been heavily criticized as contradictory as critics point out that while the Bolivian government officially is aligned with the Buen Vivir philosophy, it still adopts strategies for economic growth through capitalist exploitation (Kaijser, 2014: 109). There is obviously a risk when alternative concepts from below are adapted by the top. This leads to the question: Can the good living for those below really come from above, that is, from within the same framework that caused the oppression that these movements oppose? In the discourse of lekil kuxlejal, there is very little room for such expectations. In the context of alternatives to development, lekil kuxlejal seems to provide an even more alternative road to the post-development era, which does not go within governmental territory.
5. Summary and conclusions

This thesis has aimed at describing the construction and mobilization around lekil kuxlejal as a political proposal in a variety of spheres. The ways in which nature is treated as a subject, a caring mother, suggests a communication with nature which entails another way of relating to the environment than that of neoliberal development discourse. The centrality of ich’el ta muk’, the recognizing of the dignity of all beings, highlights the importance of social justice and equal relations. Finally, the ways in which lekil kuxlejal relates to the Mexican state has been pointed out, demonstrating how the lekil kuxlejal that once existed is considered impossible to achieve under the policies of the government. While lekil kuxlejal often is put next to the South American discourse of buen vivir, I argue that there should be caution in equating these. Lekil kuxlejal has emerged in a different sociopolitical context, and although it shares some core principles with Buen Vivir that should be emphasized, it is different in the sense that it centers around a will to be autonomous from the state - not included in it.

The purpose of this thesis is by no means to romanticize indigenous communities, or claim that indigenous communities automatically live according to a certain cosmology in a perfect harmony with nature and with each other. Such analysis would be equally stereotypical as the colonial view of indigenous people as ”backwards” and another way of ”othering”. The point is however, to demonstrate that the ideas are there and they are based on other assumptions than those of the current development paradigm. It is an example of how other ways of defining the world are emerging in the political sphere and how these are being constructed around a struggle in this very present time by an indigenous movement. It has been demonstrated that lekil kuxlejal cannot be homogenized into one definite meaning, but needs to be seen as a heterogenous negotiation which at times can be contradictory, for example regarding gender relations. It cannot be emphasized enough that it is understood differently from different contexts and that the definition of what is buen vivir, good living, can of course draw in different directions. However, there are some recurring patterns, some nodes where different perspectives on lekil kuxlejal seem to coincide, which this thesis has aimed at pointing out.

Lekil kuxlejal is both a remembrance of history, as well as the outlook towards a completely new paradigm. It is a concept with a clear ancestral memory which translates into today’s politics and the desire for a non-capitalist future. The reason for why articulations of lekil kuxlejal seems to be emerging within the political struggle can be seen as a response to current political circumstances, essentially a defense of life against several forms of exploitation which has been directed at
both the indigenous population and at Mother Earth. However, more importantly, it should be seen as a creative statement of another society being possible. As the voices by the participants in this study have shown, there is a collective memory of a past where society looked differently and where relations were organized around other values and principles. This should not be seen only as nostalgia, but as a determination that if this different society once did exist, a different society can exist again.

When people asked me about my research I was sometimes told that “Lekil kuxlejal is a concept invented by Western academics!” Paradoxically, people who claimed this were often non-indigenous academics themselves. I cannot determine who invented this concept, nor provide the accurate genealogy of it. However, what this thesis has attempted to do, is to show how it ideas of a society based on lekil kuxlejal is alive within the indigenous movement, as a counter-discourse to the neoliberal development paradigm in a variety of concrete ways. Considering that it seems relatively new as a political articulation, the importance it will have for social movements in Chiapas in the future is currently impossible to say. However, the findings of this thesis suggests that lekil kuxlejal has significant potential in contributing to a paradigm shift, decentralizing the development ideals such as modernization and economic growth. It constitutes an alternative, not only as a mobilization around a non-Western proposal of what society can look like, but also as a demand to recognize marginalized epistemologies.

*Lekil kuxlejal* is not only a local concept, but a part of a larger struggle. Although lekil kuxlejal should be contextualized within the larger *Buen Vivir* movement in Latin America, there are important differences to be recognized where it makes important contributions to the idea world of *Buen Vivir*. The experience of autonomy, the concept of *ich’el ta muk*, the women’s struggle and the resistance towards institutionalized politics are some important examples.
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