The *beauty pageant* is an international phenomenon that manifests itself in very different ways depending on the local values of the participating community. The idea of choosing one female community member based on locally defined characteristics to represent an entire community can tell us much about the values inherent in that culture. As an annual event it can also be used and manipulated on a variety of fronts.

My interest in the local manifestations of beauty pageants came from an opportunity I had to attend an election of a Mayan Queen in a small Tz'utujil town called San Juan La Laguna along the volcano lined shore of Guatemala's Lake Atitlán. I had come to Guatemala in order to study anthropological research methods in a new setting, and was staying with a local family while attending field school courses.

In this essay I will first introduce the town, then go over my first impressions of the pageant, discuss my purpose, themes, background reading, theories and methods. Then I will go through the cast of characters that are important to the pageant, discuss its history and explore its recent politicization.

**Introduction to San Juan La Laguna**

San Juan La Laguna, my home for two months in 2008, is a fairly small town with a concentrated commercial district. The majority of the residents are Catholic (about 75% of them), although there is a significant Evangelical population as well. The locals, referred to as *Juaneros*, are especially friendly, and the town was officially awarded the title of *Municipio Amigo de la Paz* in 2006, for its welcoming environment. While there are significantly less tourists in San Juan than in many of the other communities around the lake, there are several businesses that cater to them like art galleries and places to buy naturally dyed weaving. There are also many murals scattered through town.

San Juan La Laguna was founded in the first quarter of the 17th Century (Saqb'ichil Copmagua 1999: 64) with an economy based in coffee cultivation. While relative to other indigenous towns in Guatemala it was not directly affected much by the violence of the civil war in the 1980's, its population was decreased drastically much before that time, during the reign of Manuel Estrada Cabrera. During this time, forced labor obligated much of the population to leave and most of the rest were killed by an epidemic of cholera (Saqb'ichil Copmagua 1999:65).

The mayor is the leading authority in town, but he makes decisions along with a council of Principals (elders) and the president of *Acción Católica*, who represents the Church's authority. Within the municipal government the posts include “alguacil, guard or municipal police, comisario, from third to first aldermen, second and first syndicate, and municipal mayor,”(Saqb'ichil Copmagua 1999:163).
The Pageant

I had been living in San Juan La Laguna for two weeks when I was fortunate enough to attend the annual election for a teenage queen, a title called Ru’kotz’ij Tinaamit (flower/beauty of the village) in Tz’utujil and referred to in Spanish with one of the names of La Reina del Pueblo (Queen of the Village), La Reina de la Paz (Queen of the Peace), or La Reina de la Feria (Queen of the Town Fair) depending on the context and the speaker. While after some research I was to quickly learn that physical beauty was not entirely important to the competition, in English I still refer to the event as a beauty pageant for a number of reasons. First, because that is how I was introduced to it from the beginning as heard similar events around the lake being referred to as beauty pageants by English speakers. Second, because that is the terminology I have seen in the background reading I have done. I read several articles and book chapters that discussed “Mayan beauty pageants”. I only found discussion of the term in one article that stated “the argument that it is a cultural - not a beauty - pageant is common in cultural pageants such as those that purport to reward cultural ‘authenticity’, cultural practices and preserve cultural traditions. However, they do so by choosing a woman as a symbol of all of this ‘culture’.(King-O’Riain 2008:81). Third, because the Tz’utujil term refers to beauty and the Spanish term to queen. Fourth, because the competition historically was based on the quick spread of ladino and indigenous pageants throughout Guatemala in the 1960’s as a response to the new Miss Universe pageant (Crawford et al 2008:62). So, it follows the same process as beauty pageants elsewhere with performances, speeches and question sessions.

The pageant I went to was on May 31, 2008, three weeks before the queen’s coronation that would commence the town’s annual Patron Saint Festival (la feria). Just before going I learned of its importance as a community event, since my host mom’s weekly English class was canceled for it and footage of the town’s new outdoor auditorium, where the event would take place, was broadcast on the local channel even though no one was there yet and men were just setting up plastic chairs. Following is a summary of a description of the event that I wrote right after attending, which captures my first impressions:

At 7:00pm, with umbrellas open to shield us from the light rain, my host family and I make our way to San Juan’s central outdoor auditorium. Rows and rows of seats are set up and there is a standing crowd we must pass through before reaching free seats. Vendors walk through the crowd selling peanuts and popcorn. In this standing group of young people I see boys dressed in their traditional traje (clothing) for the first time since I have been here. They wear either red scarves or hats on their heads, short white pants with dashed black stripes and colorfully embroidered bottom hems. The girls are dressed in embroidered white sobrehuipils (large woven blouses) and have red ribbon twisted around their hair. Pine needles are spread on the floor and one boy swings incense back and forth so that a fragrant fog hangs over the crowd. Many of the girls hold long white candles. People in the standing crowd hold signs with political slogans like “Want to make a winning vote? Vote for Miriam!” and “The Perez Gonzalez family is with Meyna.” With all the incense and signs the atmosphere seems more like a combination of a political rally and a religious ritual than it fits my assumption of what a beauty pageant would entail.

Behind the stage hangs a large dark green banner that reads, “ELECCIÓN RIKOTZ’I’J TINAAMIT 2008 2009.” On the right side of the banner is a profile of a kneeling, topless indigene with her head bowed and arms stretched forward with the offering of a quetzal bird (one of Guatemala’s national symbols).
An announcer on stage reads through all the rules for the competition, which include that all participants must be fifteen years and up, and that they must give speeches in both Spanish and Tz’utujil.
Marimba music begins and a procession starts as some of the dressed up kids in the standing crowd walk down the aisle to the stage. A boy swinging incense leads the group and is followed by six girls all carrying candles. Loud firecrackers (called bombas) are set off from behind the stage and the air is filled with both the smell of the incense and this slightly less pleasant sulfur. The procession reaches its destination in the front and the boy carrying the incense places it stage center and all seven dance together on stage, stepping back and forth to the music. This group includes the first contestant who remains on stage as the rest exit and she takes a seat on one of the wooden, upholstered, Victorian-style seats on stage. She holds the tall candle next to her.

The next processions are made up of groups of adolescents similar to the first. In one, girls carry baskets and a boy at the end carries a bag on his back strapped to his forehead, in another boys are dressed as San Juan's city workers, dragging a blue garbage can or carrying a rake, in yet another a girl holds a kitten up to lead the group down the aisle followed by boys carrying plants. During each one a male announcer on stage tells us about the girl, including who she represents and what she wants to be. Some of the groups represented are the association of market vendors, a youth group called Young Ambassadors for Peace, a women's rights group, and the Catholic school San Juan Bautista. All the contestants have dreams of becoming lawyers, and some further specify they would like to be “grand” lawyers.

A character named San Jorin joins the festivities, swinging incense and holding an ax prop as he dances onto stage. He is dressed in a red velvet costume, with a red mask that includes a pointed blonde beard, long yellow yarn hair, and a tall red hat with gold tassels with a tall red feather sticking out of it. He mimics the youth on stage.

After all the processions there are five contestants on stage. I ask my host mom who she is going to vote for, but she tells me she does not know yet. The first contestant begins her speech in Spanish, but quickly loses the audience's attention. She is nervous and embarrassed so she finishes quickly and sits down without finishing. The fifth speaker shares her nervousness, but I am really impressed by the middle three who are incredibly comfortable on stage and speak passionately in both Tz'utujil and Spanish about themes like pride for San Juan, respect for nature, global warming, and the importance of their ancestors' respect for the mother earth. The fourth contestant stands out because she cues the disc jockey to accompany her speech with music. She speaks passionately as she moves her body back and forth on stage to the rhythm of her words. During her speech, my host mom turns to me and says, "Ella tiene capacidad!" (She has the ability!). The question and answer session begins after the speeches. Contestants are asked to describe the Maya cosmovision, discuss global warming, and talk about keeping the town clean.

The voting process follows and I wait while people stand in line to cast their votes. When my host mom returns from voting for the fourth contestant she buys everyone in our row peanuts from a vendor. The fourth contestant wins the competition and a celebration follows with a ladino (not indigenous) band from Guatemala City. The band is all men with the exception of a girl who dances in the front of the stage. She is wearing a short white mini-skirt, high heel shoes and a tiny black spaghetti strap tank top. It is a strange contrast to see her nearly naked on stage in front of the conservatively dressed crowd and queen contestants. We stay for the first two songs, but it is already close to 11pm, so then we head home.
I was intrigued by much of the event, how it differed from my assumptions of what a beauty pageant would be, the way traditional ritual was somehow held both far and near simultaneously, but mostly I was inspired by the articulation and pose of the young women on stage. I was immediately curious about the history of the event, because I had never seen women give such impassioned speeches to such captivated audiences before. I was also interested in the idealization she represented, since people are choosing their representative, whatever they would like to see in her is what they would like to see in their community. While many aspects of the pageant are incredibly interesting, the emphasis of my research on these areas demonstrates my bias as a young woman interested in women’s issues. I see the world from a feminist perspective, and in no way did this study escape that filter. In later background reading I found that the speeches of the Mayan beauty queens made a similar strong impression on John Schackt at the national level Rabin Ajaw in 1998:

When I first witnessed this event in 1998, I was struck by the radical political content of the speeches of many candidates. Although many also included patriotic statements of a more general nationalistic kind in their speeches, one could certainly think that many of the attitudes and opinions expressed would give rise to worry in some circles.

Another foreign spectator at the 1998 pageant, who was also surprised by the political tendency of many statements, suggested to me that the candidates’ addresses should be looked to as a ‘genre’ and that clear and conscious expressions about their Maya heritage and identity would probably be rewarded by the jurors. He believed that the candidates had been well instructed about what they should say by their local mentors. However, later interviews (like the one referred to below) revealed that many candidates are not simply reiterating learned formulas but relate in a sincere way to the opinions they express. The jurors clearly do not reward statements that sound learned or formulaic and may disfavor others that are overtly antagonistic. [Schackt 2005:281-282]

This pageant made a big impression on me, but at the time I was planning to write about adolescent identity in the town as my research topic. While doing some initial background reading for this topic I came across Carol Hendrickson’s book Weaving Identities. Throughout the book she uses references to Mayan beauty pageants as evidence for her arguments often, and I found that these were my favorite passages to read. However, I was still blind to this research project. It was not until I conducted three exploratory interviews with adolescents that I realized I was most interested in what they had to say about the local pageant. It clearly had a political dimension as a public space to celebrate Mayan tradition and female orators, and I quickly learned that the words I had been using to interpret the event, like “contestant,” and “pageant,” were more often referred to with the more politicized vocabulary of “candidate,” and “election.” There was much more about it I did not understand yet, and I was curious and anxious to learn more.

I was still a bit unclear about what the purpose of my study would be beyond a general description of Ru’kotz’în Tinaamit (the name for the pageant and the queen), but I hoped talking to a few more people would inform me enough to figure it out.
The purpose of my study was finally framed by one of my first interviews. This 2002 queen had just finished a research assignment for her social work degree at a university in Xela. She had conducted interviews with Juaneros about the political participation of women. She reported to me her results that women do not participate in politics. She feels that self-esteem issues are a really big problem for women here and she strives to educate women about self-esteem. She feels that a large part of this is that men have to recognize the importance of women. She told me, “Women do not have active political participation, and their economic participation in the household is most often not recognized by men who don't like to acknowledge that they are not the single provider.”

I asked her if the pageant was a place where this respect for women was demonstrated. She told me that the competition may be a place to demonstrate the importance of women, but it doesn't really help women in general, because it only lasts for a moment. After hearing her opinion, I set out to investigate, as an outsider to the community, if she was right or if evidence existed that showed the event might be useful in demonstrating this importance and if it could have more than just a moment's effect.

Methodology

The population I studied included everyone involved in Ru'kotz'i'j Tinaamit, which turned out to be the entire town, since it is a major community event that most people attend, and those who do not are actively absent, and thus involved somehow as well. I used different methods of sampling to reach different elements of this population. For my interviews I practiced saturated sampling, as my strategy was to understand the event from the perspectives of different types of experts. In this sample I was sure to include ex-queens (both recent and older ones), parents of candidates, sponsoring institutions, entertainers who perform at the elections, a community leader and event organizer, a judge from a previous year, and voters. Due to time constraints, in total I only conducted 12 structured interviews (many respondents participated in more than one of the groups), although I had many more informal conversations that were integral to the study.

I also administered surveys and engaged Juaneros in a pile sort activity through convenience sampling. Within these samples I was sure to include respondents that represented different age groups and strived for an equal gender representation. For my survey and pile sort I was more interested in voters' opinions, and I found these informants through convenience sampling on the street and in a secondary school. In both the survey and the pile sort I read the words aloud for participants who were illiterate, but I let others fill out the form or sort the piles themselves.

The survey proved to be too complicated, in that some questions confused respondents and their responses often confused me. I really only found some of the simpler questions and blank spaces for comments to be useful. My pile-sort was much more useful, and I used it to understand the characteristics that voters awarded importance to in the election. I made a long list of characteristics I had compiled from interviews and from the survey and wrote each characteristic on an index card. Then I gave the pile of cards to participants and asked them to sort the characteristics into “Not Important,” “Important,” “Very Important” and then to pick their top five. I let people add another card to their top five if they were having a really hard time choosing, because I thought it would reflect their opinions more. To analyze this data I awarded 0 points to everything in the “Not Important” pile, 1 point to everything in the “Important”
pile, 2 points to everything in the "Very important pile" and 3 points to the top five of each informant. I interviewed the participants about their choices and learned a lot from the experience.

During this study I used a lot of systematic observation and event analysis as well. During all of my interviews I observed the people, as well as observing the actual events of the election and the coronation. I also watched and analyzed DVD’s of the 1995 and the 2006 coronations from a local television company called NaviSatelite.

Cast of Characters

In each interview I learned more and more about the event, who was involved, how the preparations were done and what all the responsibilities were. Ru’kotz’i’j Tinaamit’s cast of characters includes the mayor, the organizations he invites to participate, the candidates who are chosen by the invited organizations, the entertainers, and the voters.

Mayor

The mayor is the ultimate authority on the organization of the events, and informants tell me that the process changes quite a bit depending on who the mayor is. For example, while the last mayor invited all the town’s organizations to propose a candidate, the current mayor does not. Also, the last mayor used to invite judges from out of town, while this mayor used a panel of local judges for a couple years before changing the process to voting this year. The current mayor also initiated a 3,000Q prize for the winner. In the mayor’s office is the Committee ProFiesta which is an entirely male organization that plans all the logistics of the events along with the mayor.

The mayor is involved as an advisor as well as an authority. He gives advice on public speaking to the candidates once they are proposed. Apparently this advice is in a handout of tips he has created. Unfortunately, was unable to get my hands on this sheet. However, I have seen several speeches at this point, from queen candidates and the mayor, and I can see a definite style that is probably promoted in this handout. They use their arms to engage the crowd, articulate their words very clearly, and avoid standing stiffly on stage. In one of my exploratory interviews I asked an adolescent girl why her friend didn't win and she responded by standing up suddenly and stiffly with her arms glued to her sides to demonstrate the bad speech technique that I assume the mayor discourages as well.

The mayor’s responsibilities after the queen’s coronation are to presents her with a certificate of achievement and to help support her travel around the country to represent San Juan in other towns and in the national level elections.

Organizations

Organizations participate because it gives them good publicity in town. These are often youth groups or associations of workers, like weaving cooperatives and organized market vendors. In the past, soccer teams have been very involved, and for a period of time in the 1970’s I believe it was only soccer teams that proposed candidates. This year some of the organizations that were invited and participated were not typical of previous years. For example, San Juan Bautista, the Catholic school, sponsored the winning candidate, and many people told me they felt this institution was too big to participate, because too many
people of the town were connected to it and therefore possibly biased. Once invited by the mayor, an organization is responsible for choosing a candidate. They might choose a girl who is part of their organization, the daughter of a member, or they might just ask an unrelated girl who they think would make a good candidate. The organization’s ideas about what makes a good candidate may vary with what they do. For example, while a women’s rights group (like the one that participated this year) may propose a girl because she is interested in women’s rights, a weaving cooperative that has won the election several times told me they choose girls who “know how to express themselves, they know Tz’utujil, they do not have cut hair, their hair is complete, long hair, and they know the traje, they like to wear the traje of San Juan La Laguna.” Once a girl is selected, they approach her and her parents to get permission from all parties. It may be hard for them to find someone who agrees to participate (this year there were only five girls who agreed), and this is a reason that many of the town’s organizations do not propose any candidate to the mayor’s office.

Once the candidate is proposed the organization helps her prepare in a variety of ways. They work with her to locate San Juan’s ceremonial traje, which is a long white woven blouse with embroidered eagles, called a sobrehuipil, and will most often pay for her to rent one. They teach her about tradition and how to present herself in an authentic Juanera way. They help her practice answering questions and giving speeches. The organizations also put together estampas, the folkloric dance troupes that will present the candidates at the election and perform at the coronation if she wins. The queen’s organization is responsible for choosing a symbolic decoration theme for the night of the coronation and for the parade float (which is constructed on a pick-up truck).
Parade Float
Here is the pick-up truck parade float complete with corn stalks and water jug. The queen’s young assistants sit around her and a boy dressed as Saint John the Baptist stands to her side.

For example, this year they made a giant paper maché water jug to sit on stage and on the queen’s float. A musician told me that the Tz’utujil name for this symbol is “Xecuubaaj, which also means watering hole, and was the name of the San Juan community a long time ago when it was much larger and over by a water hole. He tells me all the significance he sees in this prop, a water jug is for water, he says, and water is life, so the water jug protects life. There used to be a lot of animals that gathered by the water hole to drink, and the water gave them life.” Besides taking care of the decorations, the organization must also help support the elected queen financially during her term, and help her travel to different towns throughout Guatemala.

Candidates

Many of the girls who are asked to participate share a number of characteristics. They are:

- typically fifteen to seventeen years old,
- Catholic, live near the center of town,
- have supportive parents,
- are enthusiastically pursuing higher education, and
- many of them also share political ambitions.

In recent years the candidates have been getting younger and younger, in an interview I learned this is because the younger girls have had more access to education and are less shy. Once a girl is asked to participate, she must decide whether or not to accept the offer. She may not want to accept because the position requires a great deal of preparation and confidence. I know of at least one girl who accepted and then got so nervous before the election that she got a high fever and the doctor told her not to participate. If a candidate is nervous on stage, the town will jeer, and this discourages many girls from being interested. I believe the mayor has started to award the prize in order to encourage the participation that is dwindling. If the girl does accept the offer, she has about a month to prepare for the election by writing and memorizing her speech and studying themes like local social and environmental problems, nature, current events, global warming, and the Mayan cosmovision. She uses a variety of resources to gather information. For example, the 2006 Ru’kotz’i’j Tinaamit told me, “One has to investigate, look for information on the internet, in the media, or also by talking with different people.” She also has to learn to speak as an idealized representative of San Juan, and learn the appropriate answers to the questions she might receive. For example, the president of a sponsoring organization told me, “You know what you should ask when you interview the queens? Ask them what their favorite food is! If they say ‘pescaditos’ (little fish) that is a traditional response. If they say ‘chicken’ or ‘meat’ those are not traditional. The whole world eats chicken and meat, but pescaditos are our tradition.”

When the candidates arrive at the election they all pick numbers to see who will have to go first. Each girl takes her turn dancing, stepping side to side and bouncing lightly, as she comes down the aisle with her
In past years she has been accompanied by a marimba band, although this year a disc jockey played recorded music for all but one of the girls who were accompanied by a flautist and drummer. When she reaches the stage she kneels and bows in all directions before sitting in her assigned chair. She presents her speech and answers questions and then at the end the winner hosts a midnight party with a marimba band and refreshments at her house. The mayor and other local authorities all attend. All of the candidate’s families must be prepared to host this party, because they do not know who will win. The prize that has been awarded for the past three years is partially used to help her parents pay for this celebration.

Queen

The coronation of the queen is on June 21st, and it officially commences the patron saint festival. For the coronation the winning candidate shows up in San Juan’s traje típico -- a red huipil (blouse) and black corte (wrap-around skirt) -- and dances on to stage with the last queen and several other queens from different towns around the lake. She kneels on stage while the last queen removes her ceremonial huipil, her earrings, her necklace, and her crown and dresses the new queen with all of these adornments. She has an assistant, usually a young girl or an adolescent boy (this year it was a boy dressed up as the patron saint John the Baptist) who accompanies her and helps her carry the certificates and gifts she receives. She usually throws souvenirs out to the crowd, like roses or petate mats made out of dried reeds. After her coronation, the queen’s responsibilities involve participation, both within San Juan and as a representative of San Juan in other places. She must be present at several events during the festival; for example, she must sit in a float in the parade and dance at the dance of the elders.

During the queen’s yearlong term, her responsibilities inside the community include being respectful of elders (for example, she must always greet an elder in passing), receiving tourists well and setting a good example for youth by encouraging people not to drink, do drugs or rob. She must always accept the invitations she receives to participate. One woman who was a queen in the 1970’s and is the mother to a more recent queen told me that she does not think the girls are continuing to be as respectful of elders as they should. She feels some of them get too proud of their educational achievements and look down on those who do not know how to read or write. Ru’kotz’i’j Tinaamit 2002 told me that she feels that the queen should have more responsibilities within the community, like working with kids and just helping out in general. She thinks this would make the position more respectable and that more girls would then want to participate. The queen’s responsibilities outside of the community are to make a good impression of San Juan as a representative in different towns and to compete in national elections. She must also attend and participate in as many of the other coronations around Sololá that she can.

Atitlán Queens
This photo shows many of the queens from different towns in the department of Sololá who came to the coronation of Ru’kotz’i’j Tinaamit 2008 to honor San Juan La Laguna’s queens.

**Entertainers**

The entertainers that are involved with Ru’kotz’i’j Tinaamit include a folkloric dance troupe called the estampa, the marimba band musicians, and an invited band from outside of the community to celebrate after the end of the election. The estampa and the marimba band serve a purpose beyond entertainment, as they are also to add to the sense of tradition of the event, by performing the songs and dances of the ancestors. The estampa is a group of youth that are either put together by the sponsoring organization or are the cousins and friends of the candidate. The estampa dancers wear traje tipico or dress up in costumes relevant to San Juan (for example as city workers).

A male 19 year-old dancer described more about the meaning of the estampas to me, “They act out the legends our grandparents passed down to us. These legends include the history of the countryside, San Juanerita, the way girls used to collect water at the shore, Qiaaq’a’ K’ashool’, and Da Q’aap’ooj’. They make these legends into a dance. The dances come from our grandparents, and we teach the younger kids. For example, my grandparents taught me how to dance.” While many of the youth who participate in these presentations refer to these stories as legends or myths, a middle aged musician began telling me Da Q’ap’ooj by saying, “this is a history, it is not a legend, the history, the story of Da Q’aap’ooj’. It is not a legend because legends are not true; it is a history because histories are true.”
San Jorin, or Qiaaqa’ K’ashool’ is an important figure in the estampas of the election. He is a man dressed all in red with a red facemask and blond beard. I heard several different renditions of his story, but they all agree that many years ago he lived up in the mountains above San Juan and was bothersome to the people. The ancestors of the current Juaneros demanded that he leave them alone, so he complied and fled to the area around Xela where he died. However, he was a carrier of luck and brought economic prosperity to that region after his death so people regret that their ancestors asked him to leave. He is always involved in ceremonies and celebrations where luck and prosperity play a role.

The estampas that perform during the election present the queen while creating a mood with props like incense, plants, and water jugs. At the coronation, the estampa performs a more exquisite scene adorned in elaborate costumes.

“Estampa del Viento”

At the 2008 coronation the estampa from the school San Juan Bautista performed a dance in honor of the wind.

In the pile sort I conducted participants had to rate the importance of having an entertaining estampa versus having a traditional estampa. All respondents agreed that both were important, but most felt that its representation of tradition was more important that its entertainment value. The only exception I found to this statement was from the only ladino (non-indigenous) I interviewed, who told me that having an entertaining estampa was the most important factor. However, I did not have time to complete an appropriate number of pile sorts to give much validity to this finding.
Voters

After the question and answer session, all the audience members are invited to form a line down the aisle to tell their decision to one of the people tallying votes by the stage. The voters are all community members who attend the election and have a preference for one candidate over the others. They come from all walks of life as anyone who wants to vote may vote. Youth make up a great deal of the people who are most interested, but a large number of adults vote as well. I went with my host family and the mother and daughter stood in line to vote together, but the father did not. This may be a gender pattern that is repeated in other families, but I do not have any other evidence to support it. At the election and coronation I observed that there were a large number of people, and the two events were by far the largest gatherings I saw during my entire time in San Juan. In my survey of 22 people, only two said they have not been to Ru'kotz'i'j Tinaamit. I believe one misunderstood my question, because he explained that participants have to be chosen by associations and the other must be a bit of an outsider to the community because her explanation was that the event was not brought to her attention. Among those I surveyed between the ages of seven and 48, I saw no patterns distinguishing those who identified as audience members and those that identified as voters.

In order to understand which characteristics voters prefer in their beauty queen I surveyed and conducted a pile-sort with community members to understand the characteristics they awarded importance to in the election. Through interviews, surveys and conversations I created the following list of characteristics:

- “Animated Orator,”
- “Expresses Herself Well,”
- “Responds Well to the Questions,”
- “Good Tz’utujil Pronunciation,”
- “Good Spanish Pronunciation,”
- “Traditional Estampa,”
- “Entertaining Estampa,”
- “Respects Elders,”
- “Participates in the Community,”
- “Will Continue Studying,”
- “Likes to Wear Traditional Indigenous Clothing,”
- “receives Tourists Well,”
- “Intelligent,”
- “Responsible,”
- “Nice,”
- “Honest,”
“Pretty,”
“Ugly,”
“Sets Good Example,”
“Purely indigenous,”
“Her face looks ‘Mayan’,”
“Public Acceptance,”
“Long Hair,” and
“Religious.”
I decided to add “Catholic,” and “Evangelical,” to see whether people felt this division made any difference.

I asked participants to sort these characteristics into three groups: very important, important, and not important. I believe it is relevant that the majority of these characteristics would be desired not only in a cultural representative but also in a political representative. I will discuss more about the politicization of the election later.

Overall the top five most important responses were:

• “Intelligent,”
• “Good Tz’utujil Pronunciation,”
• “Participates in the Community,”
• “Will Continue Studying,” and
• “Traditional Estampa.”

However, 25 out of 27 of the characteristics made into at least one of the respondents’ “Very Important” pile. The only two that were always placed in “Not Important” were “Evangelical,” and “Ugly.”

One informant added, “She has a good message” as another important characteristic that my pile sort lacked. Due to time constraints I was unable to interview enough informants to have very reliable data, but I think it’s worth noting that I received such a variety of responses. This demonstrates that voters clearly approach the election with their own biases, so the election is less structured and their expectations are less clear than when there were judges.

History

Beauty pageants were popularized in Guatemala after the spread of Miss World and Miss Universe pageants based on pageants developed in Britain and the United States respectively (Crawford 2008: 62). In the 1960’s ladino girls from towns across the country began to compete for the title of Miss Guatemala. The concept of the beauty pageant was equated with modernity and progress, and it spread across the country quickly. Indigenous beauty pageants became popular as well, and were organized by both ladinos and Mayans depending on the region. However, the winners of these pageants were not qualified to participate
in the Miss Guatemala pageant, so the national level Rabin Ajaw was initiated in 1972 as part of a folkloric festival in Cobán (Chun 2005).

In San Juan, the first beauty queen was elected around 1968. Both the first queen and a male pageant organizer told me that the mayor at the time, Marcos Perez Hernandez, decided to choose a queen as a way “to move the community forward.” In the first election the mayor’s office simply discussed the issue and chose a pretty queen. The next year the pageant was turned into a fund raiser and a voting system was established so that each vote cost one cent. In the 1970’s and 1980’s candidates were chosen by organizations like sports teams and their names were written on a blackboard in the center of town. Voting was open for seven weekends, and every weekend people would come back to see who was ahead and support their favorite candidate since there was no limit to how many votes one person could make. In 1984, a local folkloric group called “K’asalya” (Tz’utujil for “to pour water” or “baptize” in honor of the patron saint, John the Baptist) was formed. I spoke with one of its most prominent members, a doctor who owns one of the town’s nicest hotels that has a jungle inspired decoration scheme much like the jungle stage setting of the Ru’kotz’ii’j Tinaamit coronation. He relayed this local history of the event to me:

Well, Ru’kotz’ij Tinaamit. [Pause.] Before she was called the queen, the Queen of the Fair (Reina de la Feria), in the ’60’s, ’70’s, the ’80’s. In ’84, we, as students of San Juan, we formed a team, and we decided to change the Queen of the Town, because her name, and her reality, were not representative of our culture. It was a culture contrary to ours, because she is called a queen, here we don’t even have the words “king” or “queen.” “Queen” just doesn’t exist. And to use a metal crown, the [pauses while he mimes throwing a cape over his shoulders] cape of the kings, these are from the Western culture, not from ours.

The idea arose, and I was one of its promoters, of Ru’kotz’ij Tinaamit, Flor de Pueblo (Flower of the Town). We relate “flower” to the beauty of the woman, of a flower, “Ru’kotz’ii’j” means “flower”, so then “Ru’kotz’ii’j Tinaamit” means “The Beauty of the Town”, in place of “Queen.”

But it wasn’t just the name, it was also the reality of it, no more cape, we began to use the traditional traje that our grandmothers used in ceremonies, in parties, the ceremonial traje. There is daily traje, and then there is ceremonial traje, that they only use like this, for religious activities, family activities, parties, birthdays, so it is ceremonial traje. We were investigating what the ceremonial traje was, and we found in the literature, in the histories, the traje of the San Juan woman was white with decorations, with Mayan figures. And so the women began to use this.
“Traje Tipico and Traje Ceremonial”

Just before the 2008 coronation, the queen-to-be is still dressed in San Juan’s traditional clothing while Ru’kotz’i’j Tinaamit 2007 is wearing the ceremonial sobrehuipil (long blouse) that and the wooden crown with a carved quetzal that was introduced in 2006 to replace the silver plated crown.

And the man, of course, with his traditional traje, with sandals [points down to his feet], with the strap here on his head [motions toward his head], this is one traje. The other is to present the Maya culture, the Tz'utujil culture, or the Quiché culture, well the Maya culture. To do presentations, like how to cultivate corn, what the midwives do, what is done in the pueblo, or what was done, how did our grandparents sow corn, how did they do commerce, trade with other municipalities, how were their lives, how did they tortilla [slaps hands together to illustrate his new verb), what was their staple food, the customs, the traditions, the cofradías [religious brotherhoods].
The idea was to rescue the appropriate people, to civilize them, and to begin to practice again. This was the objective: to present to the people the good customs. Another one of the customs was to rescue greeting and mutual respect, human rights: to respect adults, for their life experience, and to respect children, because they are going through preparation. It is a, the idea of the culture, is that all have respect, adults, children, youth, that they live together in an environment of harmony, of respect. Because at this time we were in the '80s, and the youth at the time, they were listening to rock music, only rock, not the sounds of the marimba. But it wasn't only rock, they also began to smoke marijuana, to plunge into cocaine and drugs, for that same atmosphere.

The youth were risking losing the traditional music and culture. So this was one of our objectives. And the youth, they were involved in drugs or they were outside of society, and they didn't respect their parents anymore, there was no longer respect either way. So, they were now using the family unity, the familial education, if there is family unity there is social unity. Respect and unity have to come out of the family. These were the objectives, the vision, why we formed the group called Grupo Folklorico K'asalya’...

So little by little, the people were civilized, and when the teachers realized that the Folklorico left people in a better condition, they changed. The municipal government and the teachers changed what they were doing. So now they got into Folklorico, so they left the “Queen” on one side, and then they replaced it with “Ru'kotz’ij Tinaamit”...

See, the change didn’t happen in ’84, but the idea, it, began in ’84. But people would still always say the “queen,” always the “queen,” always the “queen.”

And then when the 1990’s arrived, they changed the name and “queen,” disappeared. And it came to be Ru'kotz’ij Tinaamit. Little by little, the idea spread among the population.

I find it as no surprise that the pageant changed drastically in the early 1990's. The Mayanist Movement that developed in reaction to the Civil War of the 1980's affected Mayan pageants all over the country in similar manners. Cultural identity had been challenged during the war, and where else could it be better celebrated in the 1990's than at a pageant. Along with the name and clothing changes came the introduction of a panel of judges and a new emphasis on capacidad -- the ability of the candidates to give speeches and answer questions well -- as voting was no longer done with money. The judges would rate the candidates on a scale of ten points for their estampas (skits and dance presentations with troupe), 20 points for the way they would speak, and 70 points for their answers to the questions. Up until 2005 the judges came from other parts of Sololá, but in 2006 and 2007 the judges were from San Juan. This year, 2008, was the first time that the beauty queen has been selected through voting.

**Politcization of Ru'jotz’i’j Tinaamit**

As I applied feminist theory to the election, I was mostly curious about what the event meant for women. Through my observations and interviews I saw from an early point that recent elections had some relationship to the politicization of women. Cecilia Mendez, who runs the Office of the Woman and Child in the government building, told me:
The role of Ru'kotz'i'j Tinaamit is a very important space where women can and do participate. Here there are no women involved in the corporation, so it is good to see a woman honored as the most important, using her right to participate with su voz y su voto (her voice and her vote). These are spaces that women have to take advantage of; these are our rights and our space...

We need a representative like a female mayor. Women aren't afraid to speak anymore, their spirits have been lifted. Our work here in the Oficina de la Mujer is to accompany and support these women. Before (ten years ago and before) all the institutions and organizers for the Ru'kotz'i'j Tinaamit were men. But now we have had women even as judges.

Recent winners themselves made the importance of this space clear to me. They expressed their own ambitions to run for mayor to me:

Ru'kotz'i'j Tinaamit 2006: In San Juan La Laguna, no woman has ever been a candidate for mayor, I think because they are afraid, or because very few people know about or value women's rights, but in my case, I do think I will prepare for this, right now I am finishing diversificada and am beginning to prepare myself for university, because I have to be academic, I can't try only because I am a woman and a Juanera and everyone knows me, the capacidad that the candidate has is also very important.

Ru'kotz'i'j Tinaamit 2002: I am too young now, but in four or five years I would like to break the tradition of male mayors, and be the first female mayor in San Juan.

So, even if their participation in Ru'kotz'i'j Tinaamit did not fully prepare them for this political post, it at least made their names well known in the community as experienced cultural leaders and representatives.

I find the ambition of recent queens to run for mayor a clear testament to the politicization of the event. The pageant attracts politically minded young women to accept the offer to participate as representatives of their community. Then the experience prepares them for a future in public speaking and representation. I believe this space for the politicization of the event lies in its history. In “Making the Perfect Queen,” King-O'Riain states, “The pageant in the Mayan case [has become] a venue for conflict between traditional folklorist types of orientations and more recent politicized Mayanist agendas” (2008:81). However, I argue that at least in San Juan with its vast indigenous majority the folklorist traditions were produced in resistance to the nation's ladino pageants. This spirit of resistance has not faded out of the ceremonies, and young women who wish to be heard are currently using the free speech associated with it. On the local and national level indigenous beauty queens have taken it upon themselves to represent Mayan women and youth and publicize the difficulties they face. However, once crowned, the queens do not necessarily think to highly of their position and have been known to publicly protest the national competition in order to encourage changes and improve it.

Local queens in San Juan La Laguna have also been known to take advantage of their free speech. For example, during the 2006 coronation the departing queen chastised the mayor for not supporting her and encouraged the audience, which is most of the community, to think before they vote in the next election:
I don't want to leave you silently, but I would like to tell you that the elections for our next authorities are getting closer. So let's think very carefully before we write an X, before we mark our votes. Because, in reality, most of the time they propose things, but in the end they don't actually fulfill their promises. The youth need support. I don't say it for myself, but for all the youth of San Juan La Laguna. [Tinaamit Te Ve 2006:53:00-53:45]

In this case, she politicizes the event by using it as a platform for critique. However, the mayor's response politicizes the event further. In several of my interviews people told me that the mayor no longer invites all organizations to participate, but only the ones that were active in supporting him in his election. He has also made many of the changes that this Ru'kotz'i'j Tinaamit 2005 encouraged. For example, in her speech she chastised the mayor for not helping her travel to Cobán to participate in the national election of Rabin Ajaw, but the following year he did support the Ru'kotz'i'j Tinaamit to participate in the nationally where she won second place and a trip to Miami. Now he continues to give the queens more support and has started to award a prize of 3,000 quetzales (roughly US$400) to the last three queens. However, all these queens come from families that actively supported his own political campaign. This aligning of beauty queens with political parties only serves to further politicize the election.

The mayor also initiated this year's controversial voting process. I discovered many strong opinions about this change in both the interviews and the survey. Seemingly ironically, many of the respondents use the word “undemocratic” to describe the voting process, as they see it as a space for corruption since people can easily buy votes and because it favors the larger organizations that participate (like this year's winner, the school San Juan Bautista, which is the largest institution to ever participate with connections to about one quarter of the town's residents). A judge from a previous year told me:

They used to bring judges in for the competition from Sololá to keep it unbiased. The judges, the autonomous judges, are the most right, the most trustworthy. Because the people cannot evaluate, there are many aspects to evaluate, it's even hard for the judges, sometimes it is complicated, how to evaluate, and they are just five or six or seven people. Because they have to evaluate various aspects, how she enters, how she speaks, how she explains, is her theme relevant, yes or no? But with voting, maybe one person stays with Nature, “Ah, my queen won because she answered the question about Nature, I'm going to vote for her!” But did she respond well to the others? So the judges, they have to announce what the themes are first, what the rules of the game are. But this, voting, no, it doesn't seem good to me.

However, in my interview with the 2006 Ru'kotz'i'j Tinnamit, she defends the change:

On my part, I consider this change a positive change. Because many times there have been like arrangements between the qualified judges and groups that have their candidates. In this case, the pueblo in general, the people determine, “I want her to represent me,” because it's logical that she gives representation to the entire municipality, and not just to one group.

Either way the change is significant and political. It corresponds to the fact that the recent queens I interviewed relayed interest in running for mayor once they finish their education. I believe the current mayor is aware of these ambitions and supportive of them (at least of those who are members of his political
party). I was unable to talk with him directly, but his cousin assured me that the mayor is very interested in encouraging women to participate in politics. By switching the process to voting, whether intentionally or not the mayor is playing his advisor role by giving the candidates practice in the politics of public acceptance.

Unfortunately much of the data I would have liked to analyze to further this argument was unavailable to me do to my time constraints. I need many more responses for the quantitative aspects of the survey and pile sort before I can interpret the data. Also, most of the recent queens are studying in other parts of the country, which was a challenge to me, but also a testament to their ambitions. It was also very difficult for me to get a chance to talk with the mayor, as he was very busy preparing for the patron saint festival and then on vacation afterwards. Other problems in my data collection and interpretation included the language barrier, as Spanish is not my first language, and I hardly know any Tz'utujil.

Conclusions

The folklorization of Ru'kotz'i'j Tinaamit in the early 1990's provided a space for educated adolescent girls to speak publicly and be honored. The importance of active cultural representation opened the doors for queens to promote their own political agendas as representatives of the community. Now both the candidates and the mayor have used this space as a political arena. Also, as respect and honor continue to be associated with this position, young girls are increasingly socialized to be more comfortable with public speaking.

Further Research

Further research could be carried out with many aspects of the beauty pageant. It would be worthwhile to return in ten years to see if any of the recent queens had n for mayor and to see how the beauty pageant may have changed in general. It would also be fascinating to explore the folklorization of the Maya Tz'utujil culture. One could also compare the pageant in San Juan La Laguna to another in a community with more ladinos.

References Cited

Chun, Eduardo Sam

Crawford, Mary, Gregory Kerwin, Alka Gurung, Depti Khati, Pinky Jha and Anjana Chalise Regmi

Hendrickson, Carol
King-O’Riain, Rebecca Chiyoko
2008 “Making the perfect Queen: The cultural production of identities in beauty Pageants.” Sociology Compass 2(1):74-83.

Schackt, Jon.

SAQB’ICHIL - COPMAGUA

Tinaamit Te Ve