



# Seeing and Being Seen: The Q'eqchi' Maya of Livingston, Guatemala, and Beyond

*Hilary E. Kahn*

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The practice of morality and the formation of identity among an indigenous Latin American culture are framed in a pioneering ethnography of sight that attempts to reverse the trend of anthropological fieldwork and theory overshadowing one another.

In this vital and richly detailed work, methodology and theory are treated as complementary partners as the author explores the dynamic Mayan customs of the Q'eqchi' people living in the cultural crossroads of Livingston, Guatemala. Here, Q'eqchi', Ladino, and Garifuna (Caribbean-coast Afro-Indians) societies interact among themselves and with others ranging from government officials to capitalists to contemporary tourists.

The fieldwork explores the politics of sight and incorporates a video camera operated by multiple people—the author and the Q'eqchi' people themselves—to watch unobtrusively the traditions, rituals, and everyday actions that exemplify the long-standing moral concepts guiding the Q'eqchi' in their relationships and tribulations. Sharing the camera lens, as well as the lens of ethnographic authority, allows the author to slip into the world of the Q'eqchi' and capture their moral, social, political, economic, and spiritual constructs shaped by history, ancestry, external forces, and time itself.

A comprehensive history of the Q'eqchi' illustrates how these former plantation laborers migrated to lands far from their Mayan ancestral homes to co-exist as one of several competing cultures, and what impact this had on maintaining continuity in their identities, moral codes of conduct, and perception of the changing outside world.

With the innovative use of visual methods and theories, the author's reflexive, sensory-oriented ethnographic approach makes this a study that itself becomes a reflection of the complex set of social structures embodied in its subject.

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