

"Santuarios del Sincretismo Religioso de Guatemala"

"Witnesses of the Mayan and Catholic spiritual fusion"

A proposal for UNESCO World Heritage Site



The Sanctuaries of Sincretismo Religioso represent a living cultural phenomenon where the spiritual traditions of the Mayan culture and the Catholic influence brought by the Spanish colonizers converge. They include colonial churches, chapels, ancient murals, archaeological sites and public spaces, reflecting a unique fusion of beliefs, rituals and artistic expressions in a multicultural and multi-religious context in colonial mesoamerica.

UNESCO Criteria Applicable to the Nomination "Santuarios del Sincretismo Religioso de Guatemala":

II: Witness a significant exchange of influences, during a specific period or in a particular cultural area, in the fields of architecture or technology, monumental arts, urban planning, or landscape creation.

III: Provide a unique, or at least exceptional, testimony of a living or disappeared cultural tradition or civilization.

IV: Constitute an outstanding example of a type of construction or architectural or technological ensemble, or landscape illustrating one or more significant periods of human history.

VI: Be directly or materially associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, beliefs, or artistic and literary works that have exceptional universal significance. (For the Committee, this criterion should be related to other criteria).

Themes of Comprehensive Representation:

A. Living syncretism with traditions, ceremonies, customs, or continuity

B. Syncretism embodied in art, architecture, or urbanism

C. Main site witnessing colonial evangelization

D. Main site witnessing indigenous lordships or the Conquest of Guatemala

E. Sites or routes of ancestral pilgrimage

F. Sites witnessing the Conflicto Armado Interno

1. Church of Santo Tomás Chichicastenango, its cemetery, plaza, Chapel of El Calvario, and Sacred Site of Pascual Abaj, Quiché

Main Theme: B

Themes it covers: A, B, C, D

The two churches, cemetery, and main plaza vividly preserve the traditions of the *cofradías*, markets, and processions. The church of Santo Tomás Chichicastenango and El Calvario are situated in a way that alludes to temples in a pre-Hispanic plaza in their positioning within the square. Both churches represent the Catholic and syncretic sides of the town. Being a redoubt of indigenous people during colonial times, Chichicastenango's Spanish urban design was notably influenced by Mayan urban design. Inside the temples, valuable colonial altarpieces and imagery are kept. The churches also serve as seats for Mayan *cofradías* and daily ceremonies.

The indigenous redoubt, Santo Tomás Chuwilá, was under the charge of the Franciscans and was where the only known copy of the Popol Vuh written in K'iche' by Diego Reinoso, an indigenous man, was found and later translated by Fray Francisco Ximénez. This copy was later moved to the capital of Guatemala and disseminated years later. The cemetery's significant color palette complements the landscape and the Mayan meaning of death. In the town, Pascual Abaj is venerated, located in a sacred site south of the town on the hilltop. The archaeological museum displays representative pieces from the region, and next to the church is the seat of the indigenous municipality and a republican theater.

2. Church of Santiago Atitlán, the chapel of Maximón, and the archaeological site of Chuitinamit, Sololá

Main Theme: A

Themes it covers: A, B, C, D, F

The church of Santiago, founded in 1547, is an important part of Holy Week and the daily life of the town, containing altars and saints traditionally dressed by the 13 *cofradías*. Inside the church, there are three altars: to the right, the image of the Virgin of Santa Ana (this altar is used for women to ask for fertility or a partner); on the left side is the image of the Sacrificed Jesus (dressed in a typical apron, where men can make their requests); and in the center, a Syncretism altar, where Catholic and Mayan images can be observed on the same level upwards. According to construction plans, the place was previously filled with Mayan altars; therefore, it is a sacred place for the faithful as they communicated with the gods of water, fire, and corn, among others, each god having its own altar.

This church has the figure of the Holy One on one side, whereas normally in Catholic churches it is in the center, demonstrating the adopted syncretism. Its art has local interpretations of the Tz'utujil Mayan religiosity, such as the main altar of approximately 200 years. The front balcony was used to preach to the outside. In its convent, Father Apla was martyred, who protected the Tz'utujil Mayans during the Conflicto Armado Interno in the 20th century, an altar was dedicated to this priest, and his heart was buried in the convent while his body returned to his home country. The chapel of Maximón, a former capilla posa, is the headquarters of the deity on Holy Wednesdays. It is an example of the transformation of space use by the indigenous community. The post-classic archaeological site of Chuitinamit was the protective fortress of the Tz'utujil before and during the conquest. As a result of the fall of this city, the Spanish initiated evangelization in this region, and the current town of Santiago Atitlán was founded.

3. Church of San Andrés Xecul, Totonicapán

Main Theme: B

Themes it covers: A, B

Church with a yellow facade containing around 200 figurines representing Mayan legends and beliefs as well as local history mixed with Christian beliefs and Spanish colonial power. Its dome is painted as if it were a traditional Mayan ball. It is highly representative of syncretic architecture in Guatemala due to all it represents and has gained value among the population, who now tend to paint it vividly, leaving their mark on it. In front of its beautiful facade, the traditional Palo Volador is performed.

4. Basilica del Cristo Negro de Esquipulas, Chiquimula

Main Theme: E

Themes it covers: A, B, C, E

An important pilgrimage center for all of Guatemala, Central America, and certain regions of Mexico and the United States, it is the site of various syncretic cultural manifestations from the four peoples of Guatemala and visitors from other countries. It is home to the Cristo Negro de Esquipulas, a highly revered colonial baroque image and reason for constructing the basilica. The Mayans relate the black Christ to the god Ek Chuah or Ek Balam, who also has black skin. Originally, in this Chortí-descended town, pilgrimages were made in honor of the Mayan god or grandfather in a chapel where the Parroquia de Santiago Apóstol now stands. The Basilica of the Lord of Esquipulas is unique in its architecture as it has 4 high bell towers and is very representative of Guatemalan baroque art and architecture. Being a place of much cultural convergence, it also witnessed the Esquipulas Accords in the 90s, which initiated a commitment

to end armed conflicts in Central America, turning the town and its basilica into the capital of Central American faith.

5. Church of Rabinal, the fortified Mayan city of Kaj Yub', Baja Verapaz

Main Theme: A

Themes it covers: A, B, C, D, E

The church of Rabinal is the headquarters of the Rabinal Achí along with Kaj Yub', sites that are key in preserving the intangible work as witnesses to its practice. The architecture of the sites preserves the spiritual, natural, and historical significance, as in Kaj Yub', where on its main temple rests a Maya ceremony altar still in use. The Achí fortress of Kaj Yub' witnessed conflicts between the K'iche and the Achí in pre-Hispanic times mentioned in the Popol Vuh. Today it remains a pilgrimage site during Rabinal Achí festivities. In the Catholic church, a colonial Mannerist style is presented on the facade, and inside it has three naves, highlighting its particular baptistery and a bell representative of the *cofradías*. It has 4 capillas posa and vestiges of the old convent. After the 1976 earthquake, murals made by indigenous people were found, representing examples of the use of chinchines and gourds in local ceremonies and dances along with unidentified maya deities.

6. Church of San Gaspar Chajul and the Ixil houses with murals, Quiché

Main Theme: B

Themes it covers: A, B, C, D, E, F

The 10 houses with murals are an exceptional representation of Mayan art during Spanish evangelization, as they contain representative figures of the brotherhoods and the town's traditions that were preserved. The church is a well-preserved Dominican temple containing baroque art with Ixil influences in art and conventual architecture adorned with columns carved in the Ixil style.

On the main altar is kept the image of Cristo Camino al Gólgota, said to be miraculous for appearing near the town. This caused many people from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico to start pilgrimages to honor him. In the courtyard of its cloister is a chapel in memory of the victims of Guatemala's Conflicto Armado Interno (1960 - 1996) as the church was a stronghold during that time. Even in that dark time, images of saints were taken and dressed as soldiers.

7. Church of San Juan Chamelco, Ermitas de El Soldado, Santa Ana, and San Agustín, Alta Verapaz

Main Theme: B

Themes it covers: B, C, D

The church of San Juan Bautista stands out with colonial architecture influenced by the Plateresque style, showing distinctive elements of Verapaz churches like its double entrance and bell gable with pinnacles. It has the bell of Aj Pop Batz', chief of chiefs, brought from Spain as a sign of reconciliation between local Q'eqchi power and Spanish imperial power. Its facade is rich in colonial details such as shields and emblems that tell its pacification history. The ermitas of Chamelco (El Soldado, San Agustín and Santa Ana) represent exceptional Q'eqchi mural paintings from the 16th century about evangelization and the town's foundation.

8. Church of San Cristóbal Totonicapán, Totonicapán

Main Theme: C

Themes it covers: B, C

An example of the colonial baroque church in 16th-century Guatemala, boasting elaborate baroque altars, imagery, paintings, and tiles. It houses a particular convent with gargoyles of jaguars and mythological beings, a circular base bell tower, part of the first church, and capillas posa. It represents the adoption and consolidation of Catholicism among the indigenous people of the region, who later incorporated it into their daily lives through the square. It preserves its capillas posa and the rhomboid plaza, showing the cultural fusion of spatial traditions. In archaeological excavations, 960 obsidian cores were found, demonstrating the existence of a pre-Hispanic sacred place as the predecessor of the sacredness of the site.

9. Church of San Cristóbal Acasaguastlán, El Progreso

Main Theme: B

Themes it covers: B, C, E

Church with a highly elaborate baroque facade incorporating indigenous elements, highlighting the Sun God painted in red with the face of Ixquic, one of the daughters of the lords of Xibalba. It also has representations of Tepeu and Gucumatz and the feathered serpent. It is an exquisite example of an eastern Guatemalan colonial church with its dome, balustrades, and sacristy. Inside, it holds rich baroque altars and imagery. It was a Jesuit church that sought to replace the Mayan sacred sites already being pilgrimage to as a new point of religious encounter.

10. Church of San Agustín Lanquín and the Ermitas of San Agustín, Sacsi, and Chisubin, Alta Verapaz

Main Theme: B

Themes it covers: A, B, C

The colonial church of San Agustín Lanquín stands out for its peculiar urban positioning within the town as it is on top of a hill at the old entrance to the town, not in a park or plaza. It has a stone staircase leading to the atrium and convent, standing out in the landscape. Limestone was used for its construction, showing rustic details along with bells dating from the 16th century. It is closely related to the first Dominican expansion for the peaceful evangelization of the Verapaces along with the churches of Cobán and Santa María Cahabón in such a way that they demonstrate a centripetal growth aligning between settlements in response to influence radii in remote and rugged geographical conditions, its colonial function was that of annex of the Curato de Cahabón. Inside was displayed the main silver altar which was replaced by a wooden one in the 90s to avoid theft and damage. Its main facade stands out monumentally when the afternoon sun marks time of mass, remembering the mysticism that captivated the indigenous people during the Conquista, thus contributing to its syncretic character.

The growth that the town had was foreign to the traditional colonial scheme, and the church ended up turning its back on the town. The continuity and adoption of Catholic practice are reflected in the subsequent construction of small churches characterized by their vernacular materiality and baroque sobriety in decoration. The Ermita de San Agustín is the seat of the q'eqchi' traditions of the town, its facade shows the sober language of vernacular architecture from Lanquín, and it shares its public space with the Ermita de San Vicente. The Ermita of Sacsi, located on a small remote plain among the karst hills to the west of the main town, is witness to an ancient evangelization route between Cobán and Lanquín. It also shows a primitive stylistic variation of the vernacular architecture of Lanquín with a belfry with two arches and three pinnacles. The Ermita of Chisubin is an example of a small rural church built on the highest point on the road to Semil as a point for remote evangelization.

11. Church of San Francisco el Alto, Totonicapán

Main Theme: B

Themes it covers: A, B, C, D

A representative church of colonial baroque art that inside preserves excellent examples of altars, silverware, and Guatemalan imagery well preserved, complemented decoratively with mural paintings made by the indigenous artist Ah Chuen and the Franciscan friars. In its syncretic elements, there is Amerindian flora, animals, and stars from the K'iche' Maya cosmology like the

tiger, the moon, and certain Aztec gods imposed by submission like Huitzilopochtli in the form of a hummingbird. There are also various angels, instruments, and dances represented such as the Trompeta Tum along with various saints and friars. Ah Chuen used his ingenuity to transmit pre-Hispanic symbols to his people, extending syncretic Catholic practice. The church remains the site of thanksgiving after Maya ceremonies, and around it, the market is set up, considered one of the largest and most representative in Guatemala.

12. Ermita de la Inmaculada Concepción "La Conquistadora", Quetzaltenango

Main Theme: D

Themes it covers: B, C, D

The first church in Guatemala and Central America, it was here that the first mass was officiated by orders of Don Pedro de Alvarado in honor of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception. It is the best witness to the entry of Christianity into the region reflected in its facade and architecture with late Romanesque and Baroque influences. On its facade, details of Arabic and medieval elements are observed along with fruits important to indigenous cultures like bananas, pineapples, etc., mixed with the characteristic curved and protruding moldings of colonial art.

Similar UNESCO World Heritage Sites:

- Antigua Guatemala, Guatemala
- Ouro Preto, Brazil
- Cusco, Peru
- Oaxaca and Monte Albán, Mexico
- Taos Pueblo, United States
- Baroque Churches of the Philippines, Philippines

Similar Sites not on the UNESCO World Heritage List:

- Izamal, Mexico
- Purepecha communal chapels, Mexico
- Rural churches of Cusco, Peru
- Baroque Churches of Collao, Peru

Guatemala's Intangible Heritage of Humanity and UNESCO Memory of the World associated with the ensemble:

- Rabinal Achí
- Semana Santa Guatemalteca
- Recordación Florida

Intangible and literary heritage of Guatemala not on UNESCO lists associated with the ensemble:

- Popol Vuh
- Maximón Cult
- Ceremonies and customs according to the Mayan calendar
- Patron Saint Festivities and Cofradías (Santo Tomás Chichicastenango, San Pablo Rabinal, Santiago Atitlán, San Agustín Lanquín, etc.)
- Popular Dances of Guatemala (El Palo Volador, El Venado, El Torito, La Conquista, La Serpiente, etc.)
- The Annals of the Kaqchikel
- Caravana del Zorro
- National and international pilgrimage to Esquipulas

- Pilgrimage for the Cristo Camino al Gólgota in Chajul

Integral Representation by Property (Uniqueness):

1. Chichicastenango - Churches, convent, and public spaces where the everyday Mayan-Catholic religious duality is preserved.
2. Santiago Atitlán - Conventual church, chapel, square, and archaeological site representative of the resistance and continuity of Tzutujil religious practices.
3. San Andrés Xecul - Baroque church with indigenous character, local expression of syncretism.
4. Esquipulas - Devotional pilgrimage to the Basilica del Cristo Negro.
5. Rabinal and Kajyup - Church and archaeological site tangibly related to the Rabinal Achí.
6. Chajul - Art, traditions, and Ixil Mayan architecture in a conventual church and townhouses.
7. San Juan Chamelco - Q'eqchi' religious art in hermitages and a monumental church built during the Peaceful Evangelization of the Verapaces.
8. San Cristóbal Totonicapán - Church, convent, square, and resting chapels from the 16th-century representative of the fusion of spatial use traditions and the adoption of Catholicism in everyday life.
9. San Cristóbal Acasaguastlán - Jesuit church with elements of the Mayan worldview on its facade made by a group of disappeared indigenous people.
10. Lanquín - Colonial church and hermitages representing the geographical adaptation of the Peaceful Evangelization of the Verapaces in its materiality, positioning, and architecture.
11. San Francisco el Alto - Colonial church with mural painting representative of the K'iche' syncretic religious process and the imposition of Catholicism and colonial power through art.
12. Salcajá - First Catholic church in Central America and Guatemala, where the first mass was given by the conqueror Pedro de Alvarado with architecture influenced by the late Romanesque and Baroque mixed with Arab, medieval and Aztec decorations.