

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

ScholarWorks @ UTRGV

Anthropology Faculty Publications and
Presentations

College of Liberal Arts

12-2011

Mayas, spirituality, and the unfinished history of conflict in Guatemala [Los mayas, la espiritualidad y la historia incompleta del conflicto en Guatemala]

Servando Z. Hinojosa

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, servando.hinojosa@utrgv.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/anthro_fac



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hinojosa, S. Z. (2011). Mayas, spirituality, and the unfinished history of conflict in Guatemala. *Revista Cultura Y Religión*, 5(2), 173-187.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts at ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact justin.white@utrgv.edu, william.flores01@utrgv.edu.

Mayas, spirituality, and the unfinished history of conflict in Guatemala.

Servando Z. Hinojosa

Abstract

Maya spiritual practice in Guatemala has been actively challenged by mainstream religions and by pressures originating from other institutions. Many Maya ritualists have been directly reproached by religious leaders and have been targeted by a state apparatus that associates rural Maya life with insurgency. As a result, many Maya spiritual elements have been pushed to, and kept at, the margins of society. Focusing on the past two decades, this essay reviews how Mayas nevertheless maintain an active ritual life. They do this by engaging in a close relationship with the spirit-owners of the landscape, beings upon whom humans depend for their sustenance and life. They do this, also, in the face of many challenges from organized religions, the educational system, and the military. Having considered the effects of these institutions upon Maya spirituality, I then put forward some concerns Mayas face when addressing how to value and promote Maya spiritual practices in Guatemala. In addition to encouraging young Mayas to uphold their heritage, Mayas may need to prevail upon Catholic and evangelical Protestant congregations to suspend judgment about Maya spirituality and to acknowledge its far-reaching importance in culturally pluralistic society.

Keywords: Mayas, Guatemala, spiritual practices, religion, institutional conflict

Los mayas, la espiritualidad y la historia incompleta del conflicto en Guatemala.

Servando Z. Hinojosa

Resumen

Las prácticas espirituales mayas en Guatemala han sido desafiadas activamente por las religiones institucionales y por otros sectores públicos. Muchos ritualistas mayas han sido hostigados por líderes de otras religiones y han sido atacados por un aparato estatal que asocia la vida maya rural con la insurgencia. Como resultado, muchos elementos espirituales mayas han sido alejados hasta las márgenes de la sociedad. Dirigiéndose a las últimas dos décadas, este trabajo examina como, a pesar de esto, los mayas mantienen una vida ritual activa. Logran esto mediante una relación estrecha con los dueños espirituales de la tierra, seres de quienes dependen los humanos por su sustento y vida. Logran esto, además, mientras que enfrenten muchos desafíos de parte de las religiones institucionales, del sistema escolar y del sector militar. Habiendo apreciado los efectos que tienen estas instituciones sobre la espiritualidad maya, articulo unas dificultades que enfrentan los mayas cuando asesoren y promuevan las prácticas espirituales en Guatemala. Además de fomentar un interés patrimonial entre la juventud maya, los mayas tendrán que exigir que las congregaciones católicas y evangélicas dejen de reprochar a la espiritualidad maya y, en lugar de esto, concedan su importancia amplia en la sociedad pluricultural.

Palabras clave: mayas, Guatemala, prácticas espirituales, religión, conflicto institucional

Mayas, spirituality, and the unfinished history of conflict in Guatemala.

Practitioners of Maya spirituality in highland Guatemala maintain an active ritual life despite the pressures they have faced and continue to face from established religions and other institutions. To appreciate the scope and depth of Maya spiritual practices, and to see how they have responded to massive disintegrative pressures, we should direct our attention towards the historical strongholds of Maya religion, namely, towards agricultural fields, forests, caves, homes, and bodies. There, where Mayas work, pray, and experience the world, we can observe Maya ritualists in their larger role as mediators between humans and the sacred landscape. There, too, can we observe how this role has been challenged by Catholicism in the last five centuries and by evangelical Protestantism in the last six decades. This essay will review how these sectarian institutions, together with other entities like the educational system and the military, have threatened the viability of Maya spiritual knowledge. And in view of how Maya ritualists face many such challenges to their legitimacy, I will then explore how some Mayas frame Maya spirituality in ways that align with broader cultural revitalization goals. Finally, I suggest how Maya spirituality can be valued and promoted within a landscape of religious pluralism.

I approach these issues mainly using ethnographic methods applied during thirteen research visits to Guatemala between 1990 and 2003. I spent the bulk of this time researching spiritual life and traditional health practices. During yearlong dissertation research from 1995 to 1996, I also studied community dance in the Kaqchikel town of San Juan Comalapa. When I focused my research on bonesetting, I included the Tz'utujil town of San Pedro la Laguna in my purview. Through this fieldwork I got to know and observe dozens of midwives, spiritual specialists, bonesetters, dancers, and other ritualists. But I also observed how Mayas who did not specialize in these activities also incorporated ritual observances into their daily lives. My conversations and open-ended interviews with them, together with contact with Guatemalan and foreign individuals working in education, health, and language issues afforded me insights into how a broad range of Maya people are applying Maya ways of being today, and are even reframing what it means to be Maya. Their views, as well as insights from ethnographic works of the last thirty years, continue shaping my views of Maya spirituality, the challenges it faces, and how it can be actively valued by larger society. To make any headway in these directions in this discussion, though, I should first identify what Maya spirituality is, and what it is not.

Observers of highland Maya culture have sometimes discussed whether Maya spiritual practice is a form of shamanism (Fabrega and Silver, 1973; Tedlock, 1992). They occasionally refer to classic cases of Arctic and Siberian shamanism (Eliade, 1974) and compare features of these cases with Maya ritual practices. Maya ritual elements, however, do not lend themselves easily to comparison with conceptual and performative elements of Siberian shamanism. In fact, Maya ritual life does not usually take a form congruent with classical understandings of shamanism, even if indigenous ritual life in central Mexico has in the past been likened to it (Madsen, 1955).

Maya ritualists in Guatemala generally do not go into trance or engage in spirit flight, for example. Nor do they emphasize the removal of introjected objects from peoples' bodies. Rather, they burn offerings in ceremonial settings, and they divine using the sacred 260-day

Maya calendar. Some practice forms of divination involving bodily signs (Tedlock, 1992), at times utilizing a bowl of water as a visionary portal for recovering lost soul fragments (Hinojosa, 2006). Amidst these techniques are found efforts at diagnosing and healing people of different ills, but many techniques are practiced without a specific person's recovery as the main objective. It is here that a different face of Maya ritual experience can be seen and that some of its larger purposes can be appreciated.

Much of Maya ritual life centers on attending to a basic relationship between humans and spirit-owners or earthlords (Molesky-Poz 2006). Rajawala', as these spirit-owners are known to Kaqchikel Mayas of Comalapa, are entities that inhabit and exercise dominion over specific mountains, gorges, rivers, valleys, and other landforms. The spirit-owners are responsible for providing adequate rainfall, warmth, and agricultural fertility, and are prevailed upon to keep away disease, drought, and pestilence, over which they also have control. Even though Mayas do not hunt wild animals as much as they used to, they appeal to the rajawala' to provide some of these to humans, and to keep dangerous wild animals away from them. The spirit-owners, in this way, bestow sustenance and health upon people. They can also send people important messages through dreams, even if ordinary Mayas may need to consult a ritual specialist to clarify the messages they contain (Hart, 2008).

Although the rajawala' are identified primarily with the forest, most Mayas retain a regular awareness of them even as they go about their lives in villages and large towns. They might even offer the rajawala' ritual prayers or burnings in their homes, as well as in their family fields. For some people who seek it (and some who do not), the spirit-owners can provide ritual knowledge, or clarity about personal circumstances, that will deepen the individuals' ritual obligations to the rajawala'. Some people may be awakened to a personal spiritual vocation as a result (Hinojosa 1999). With human willingness, the rajawala' open up pathways of human-divine contact that are ultimately meant to enmesh humans more with their spiritual co-inhabitants of the earth, and improve group well-being. The importance of these pathways becomes very evident when reviewing how rural prayermaking unfolds, and when examining annual community dance traditions. Ethnographic vignettes of these arenas give a glimpse of how Mayas work to forge stronger links between themselves and the sacred landscape. They also cast light on why they have been attacked for doing so.

Ritual life on the ground

The influence of spirit-owners reaches into every corner of Maya life, but nowhere is it more deeply felt than among Mayas who live in rural, farming-dependent communities like Comalapa. This community's need for a healthy relationship with the spiritual beings of its hinterlands is expressed in how the people of Comalapa, as do those of many highland Maya communities, periodically go to places in the countryside and make ritual offerings (Wilson, 1993). Given Guatemala's 500 years of evangelization experience, it is not surprising that Mayas of many communities regard the assigned patron saints of their towns as the proper objects of their devotions, especially if they ascribe Maya qualities to those saints (Watanabe 1992). Nonetheless, Maya devotions are chiefly directed to the pre-Christian rajawala', in the various Maya and Spanish names they are known by.

Maya ritualists of Comalapa must offer items like copal incense, liquor, tobacco, and candles, as well as foods like beef, sausages, chocolate, sodas, and candies in burnt offerings to rajawala' on a regular basis. People of different means can substitute more or less expensive

items, but the place where the offerings are made should be close to the spirit-owners, or where particular spirit-owners are thought to be most active. Thus, most offerings are made in a family's maize fields, on hilltops, or beside rivers or springs. Many ritualists consider caves, rock outcroppings, or places known today as archæological sites to be ideal places to make these offerings (Carot, 1989). In the K'iche' Maya area, in particular, ritualists make offerings at ancestral shrines in the mountains, and they recognize close affinities between the spirit-owners of the hills and the spiritual forebears of local townspeople (Tedlock, 1992).

Whatever form the offerings might take, the idea is to make a proper gift to those entities upon whom human lives depend. Maya people regard their prosperity, and indeed their very survival, as hinging upon a healthy state of relations between themselves and the rajawala' that exist around them. When people approach the rajawala', therefore, they must bring the necessary material offerings, perform the rituals the necessary number of times, and most importantly, be in a proper frame of mind. Mayas in Comalapa say that a person should not be "de dos corazones" (i.e., unsure or duplicitous) when they reach out to the spirit-owners. They must be clear in their intentions and sincere of purpose. For this reason, when people make offerings to the spirit-owners, they pay careful attention to what they are burning. They verify that lit cigarettes placed in the ground burn steadily. They check that candles burn without excessive dripping. Ritualists also study the flames of the central offering and reflect on how their bodies respond to them with signals in the blood (Molesky-Poz, 2006). Materials that burn properly indicate that the spirit-owners are accepting the offerings and that the ones making the offering are indeed of one heart.

This attention to offerings and bodily states intensifies dramatically among Kaqchikel Maya dancers of Comalapa who, near the end of every year, set the stage for some very transformative rituals. When young Comalapan men raise money every November to rent elaborate dance costumes for the "Baile de los toritos," they do so knowing that their upcoming performances will be about much more than just glitter and movement. They know the dancing they will do in public plazas, streets, and in some peoples' homes will have a private, embodied aspect that only a select few individuals will witness. This private aspect, to be sure, will cost them a lot of money and deprive them of energy and sleep, but more importantly, it will require them to achieve a very specialized state of awareness about the costume and mask each dancer is entrusted with. This is because the costume and mask they adopt are anything but mere material objects. I first caught glimpses of this in mid 1995 when I attended a welcoming ceremony for dance costumes in Comalapa for an off-season dance. The dancers and dance sponsors treated the costume bundles with great reverence, and even brought a Maya ritualist from out-of-town to preside over the ceremony. Later that year I began observing the regular season dance group assemble, rehearse, and ritually begin the dance season. By the time the Baile de los toritos was performed in public on December 8, I had seen up close how the dance was less about the European characters it showcased and almost entirely about the sacred landscape.

Maya dancers of Comalapa consider the costumes and masks they "rent" as abodes of the spirit-owners that inhabit the land surrounding their town. From the moment the dance troupe receives its twenty-four costumes and masks in December, it regales them with gifts of incense, liquor, flowers, and other foods befitting a sacred visitor. The troupe makes sure to first receive the material manifestations of the spirit-owners, the masks and costumes, at a spot in the landscape clearly outside their town's boundaries, in the rajawala's domain. They then bring the costumes and masks to a makeshift chapel, still in the countryside, where, in the course of a day and night, each dancer will bond closely with his adopted accoutrements. Following an

initial feeding of the costumes, each dancer will repair and enhance his costume with mirrors and other accessories. He will spend a cold night with his costume, feeding it liquor and cigarettes, and deepening his relationship with the entity it embodies. Only after this night can the costumes be worn and brought into town for the end-of-year festivities. Costume preparatory rituals of this kind are widespread in the Guatemala Maya highlands, but relatively few ethnographers have given them adequate coverage (Bode, 1961; Cook, 1986; García Escobar, 1989; Hutcheson, 2003; Luján Muñoz, 1971; Ortiz Martínez, 1993; Tedlock, 2003). This is unfortunate because the domain of dance encases some unique aspects of Maya ritual life.

Most notably, during the four or five weeks that the Comalapa Maya dancers perform, each dancer develops a very close bond with his or her costume and mask. Dancers report how their masks appear red and healthy when they have ingested enough liquor, and when the dancers have themselves drunk enough liquor. If they neglect to feed either their masks or themselves, the mask or their own faces will become pale, and the “lord of the costume” can visit sickness or hardship upon them. The spirit of the costume can appear to them in dreams, demanding proper stewardship, and can even cause the metal swords of the costumes to rattle loudly at night when the dancers are asleep (Hinojosa, 1999). The end of the dance season, when the dancers must return the costumes to the business from which they were rented, afflicts the dancers with grief and sadness. For the dancers, there is no doubt that their dance activities change them profoundly at the same time that they affect their community’s relationship with its surrounding spiritual entities. But they rest assured that, for at least another year, they have brought their fellow Comalapans into the good graces of the rajawala.

Comalapa Mayas take the dancing very seriously, but their Baile de los toritos does vary somewhat from year to year. While the dialogue remains relatively stable, the costuming is subject to the finances of the moment, and the choreography is taught according to the memory and preference of whoever is guiding the dance troupe in a given season. Individual dancers also introduce variations and personal touches into the routines. The plasticity of the dancing is not surprising, however, in light of Hutcheson’s (2008) finding that K’iche’ Maya dancers, like those that dance the “Baile de la culebra” in Joyabaj, Guatemala, are more concerned about enactment and less about the narrative content. They dance primarily for each other, he argues, because they are chiefly interested in “bringing out” the dance physically, enacting a physical rather than literary memory of the dance. As long as the dancers first invoke the “rajawala” of the region, and so long as they act out their ancestral mandates through the dance, they consider the dance authentic.

The activities of Maya dancers, as of the Maya ritualists described above, are vital to the continuation of community life. Importantly, their activities sometimes evidence a healing imperative as Maya ritualists try to repair sometimes damaged relations between themselves and the rajawala, and between communities and the sacred landscape. This imperative unfolds in relation to the sacred landscape, away from healing sessions centered on specific people, although it can also arise in some aspects of personal healing sessions. So deliberate is the ritual attention devoted to “paying” the rajawala and thanking them for what they do, that we can speak of a Maya interest in a covenantal relationship between humans and the divine (see Monaghan, 2000). In line with this, Wilson (1991: 127) speaks of how among Q’eq’chi’ Mayas, “People and mountains must feed each other, not just consume without recompense.” The Mayas he works with have very strong connections with the mountain spirits, the “Tzuultaq’a,” living closest to their town, and so they make cave sacrifices specifically for them. Maya spiritual practitioners of many places are aware of a fundamental interdependence to be upheld in

the world, and reveal this through the care they take to maintain relationships between humans and the living landscape (Molesky-Poz, 2006), enacted at times through costume and mask stewardship.

Challenges to ritual life

One reason why these Maya ritual expressions and elements exist at the fringes of urban society today is that this is where they are most meaningful to Mayas. But these expressions have also been pushed there by a number of Guatemalan institutions, namely, by organized religions, the educational system, and the military. These institutions have had very damaging effects upon Maya spiritual traditions. As a whole, these institutions have cast judgment on and disparaged the kind of traditional knowledge upon which Maya spiritual practice rests (Wilson, 1993). At times they have even directly attacked Maya ritualists.

Guatemala's organized religions have been particularly aggressive in this respect. With a few exceptions (Carlsen, 1997), institutional religious leaders have acted with great hostility to practitioners of Maya religion. Beginning in the colonial period, and continuing to the present day, many Catholic priests have been especially hostile to Maya ritualists, denouncing them in weekly sermons and calling them "brujos" or witches (Hinojosa, 1999). Because Maya ritualists interpret many of their practices through a Catholic lens and maintain public Catholic cults, Maya ritualists have been very visible to the clergy, and therefore vulnerable to their attacks. To avoid the scrutiny of the priests and of Ladino (non-Maya or Mestizo) elites, therefore, Maya ritualists have had to perform many of their rituals away from town centers.

Evangelical Protestants and their leaders have been even more intolerant of Maya devotions, even of popular ones. Part of their evangelization strategy has been to mock sites and caves long regarded as sacred, to try to discredit the Maya earth-centered cult. An evangelical Protestant Maya woman of Comalapa, for example, described to me how she and her evangelical friends came upon a sacred Maya cave called Pa ya'; they linked arms and approached the cave with mock trepidation and fear. In other instances, evangelical Protestants have destroyed wooden crosses placed on hilltops and town entrances by partly Catholicized Maya spiritual practitioners, as also occurred in Comalapa. Growing evangelical Protestant practice is challenging many expressions of Maya religion, but the underlying Maya mental frameworks have proven harder to change. I have personally witnessed evangelical Protestant Kaqchikel Mayas place protective herbal amulets in children's clothing, relate Maya versions of human creation, and perform soul-recovery rituals. Some recent Protestant converts in Comalapa also express fear of rajawala' they have offended in the past, just as newly converted evangelical Protestants in a K'iche' community reportedly feared transforming witches (Saler, 1970).

The educational system been deeply involved in shaping "acceptable" ways of being Maya. Not only have schools mandated how Maya students will schedule their day and how they will dress, they have dictated the parameters of learning and of what constitutes "valid" knowledge (Simón, in Garzon et al., 1998). They have for centuries, and until very recently, taught only in Spanish and have prohibited the on-site use of Maya languages, of which there are twenty one in Guatemala, something that has cost children and their families much of their traditional knowledge. As a vehicle for the affirmation of identity, Maya languages are unparalleled in importance (López Raquéc, 1989). Since ritual knowledge is transmitted through Maya languages, and since Maya languages are being interrupted in their transmission through schooling, this knowledge is in danger of not being passed from one generation to the next.

People can certainly learn the physical aspect of rituals, but the core meanings of these rituals are best apprehended through Maya languages (Kab'lajuj Tijax et al., 1995). The move away from daily Maya language use can impede, for example, fully learning the sacred Maya calendar, a complex vehicle of meaning (Molesky-Poz, 2006). Many Maya ritualists already work without an operational knowledge of the calendar, even though they continue to be called aj q'ij, which means, "he of the day," i.e., "he who knows the calendar." In some communities, Mayas now accept that many of those individuals they call aj q'ij do not actually have the sacred calendrical knowledge that aj q'ijab' (pl.) of the past once had. What this means for the future of the daykeeper role in many parts of the Maya highlands is unclear.

The military's effects upon society are, however, more apparent. During the decades of attacks and surveillance by the military upon rural peoples from the 1960s through the 1990s, many Mayas learned how their daily activities could evoke suspicion from the military. Maya villagers became fearful of going into the hills, or of carrying any foods (including ritual offerings) there for fear of being accused of taking them to guerrillas. They nonetheless had to work their fields, so they lived with their fear. Many individuals distanced themselves from traditional spiritual activities because the state associated these with subversive tendencies. But even among Mayas who did not decide to abandon their traditional spiritual activities, military intrusions disrupted these activities. For example, when military conflict pushed many Q'eq'chi' Mayas from their home regions, their Maya devotional life faced an unexpected kind of crisis. Because they had fled their home regions, leaving the earthlords of their homes far behind them, they could no longer properly interact with their sacred landscape, worsening their plight (Wilson, 1993).

Across Guatemala, however, many Mayas chose to avert suspicions by converting to Protestantism. Thousands of families abandoned their ancestral Catholic-Maya religiosity altogether and joined evangelical Protestant congregations, which were generally regarded as non-threatening to the ruling powers (Garrard-Burnett, 1998). The new non-traditional religious frameworks were thereafter inherited by the generation born to these converted evangelical Protestant families. As members of these families have grown ever more distant from their Maya ancestral traditions, they have often become very vocal critics of these traditions.

In these and other ways, Maya spiritual practitioners have been made to feel under attack by organized groups and larger society. In a hypocritical turn, the mainstream media have sometimes given Maya ritual elements very high visibility, focusing on their performance at temples currently known as archaeological sites. The Guatemalan media's publicizing of Maya spirituality might seem a positive development, but these efforts are under-girded by an institutional momentum that has been anything but friendly to Maya spiritual practice.

A Maya future in Guatemala

For Maya spiritual traditions to have a future in Guatemala, then, several concerns must be addressed. First, Mayas will need to identify the locus of responsibility for achieving change in their culture and society. Second, they will need to identify what kinds of change align with their long-term vision of Maya life in Guatemala. Third, if Mayas decide to preserve and promote Maya spirituality, they will need to decide how to uphold Maya spirituality within the current religious landscape of Guatemala. I reflect below on these points, incorporating the perspectives of some Mayas who have voiced concerns about the present and future of Guatemala.

In the process of exploring how to bring changes to Guatemalan life, many Mayas have analyzed social inequalities in Guatemala. And while most agree that the asymmetrical relations favoring Ladinos in Guatemala stem from Spanish colonial policies, Mayas have not agreed on how to change the conditions that keep these relations in place. This is partly because it is still unclear who bears the responsibility for transforming society. Is it up to the individual, namely the well-informed Maya person, or the state? Responses to this question reveal different perspectives on the role of personal drive, political consciousness, and state accountability in effecting social change.

Some Mayas, for instance, have asserted that attending the university can enable social mobility among those Mayas willing to make great personal sacrifices, as educator Arnulfo Simón has shown (in Garzon et al., 1998). This view suggests that educationally-empowered individuals can lead the charge for change. Other Mayas, meanwhile, see the university as a primarily Ladino institution, in league with other Ladino-controlled institutions like the Church and state (Cojtí Cuxil, 1994). For them, therefore, it must be the state and its organs that play a central role in reversing social inequality and injustice. Simply attending the university would not change the system, this view holds. And even if Maya individuals could access the university, up until recently they would be hard-pressed to find any Maya content in the curriculum. This reaffirms what the late Sam Colop (1991) posited: that Mayas who want to learn about their culture must either teach themselves or go to foreign universities. If Guatemalan universities do not acknowledge Maya culture and challenge social injustice, then they are unlikely to be strong advocates for fundamental social change.

Despite the fact that Mayas voice suspicion about powerful institutions like the educational system, the Church, and the state, they are still using some aspects of the system to further their goals. For example, the founders of the “Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala” (ALMG) labored to secure an official government status for this institution, finally achieving it in 1990. By officializing the ALMG, and by endorsing the language in support of Maya rights contained in the 1996 Peace Accords, Mayas have found utility in existing vehicles of power.

As Maya people identify mechanisms for bringing about change, they will need to identify which of their ideas they want to enact, and then reaffirm that these align with their long-term goals for society. Proponents of Maya revitalization have mobilized around several areas of interest, but they have made an especially strong push in the domains of language, dress, and spirituality. Although they continue to refine their views of what the culturally-pluralistic Guatemala of tomorrow should look like, many Mayas have established baseline expectations that center on Maya access to the cultural forms of their choice. Nowhere is this more evident than with language.

Over the last twenty-five years, many Mayas in Guatemala have set out to preserve, study, and publicly validate Maya languages (López Raquéc, 1989). Many individuals from highland communities, especially, have analyzed their maternal languages, identified how they are distributed into dialect communities, and charted how they have changed (Chacach Cutzal, 1990). They have then pressed for the teaching of these languages in homes and schools, and for the acceptance of these languages in public life, alongside Spanish. This has required them to try elevating the overall status of Maya languages, and to do this, they have tried to enhance the way that Mayas themselves view Maya languages. Part of this approach to language is informed by a desire to counteract the self-deprecating tendencies of Mayas who undergo, by choice or otherwise, acculturation. Those Mayas who, according to Tum and Sanic (n.d.), identify with the

Ladino world and give up their maternal languages eventually confront a double problem. They find they not only lack the economic means to achieve a higher education, therefore consigning themselves to the lowest rungs on the socioeconomic ladder, they also diminish their ability to relate to their own native world. The poor Maya self-image that sets this process into motion can often be traced to the classroom, where for generations students have been chastised for speaking Maya languages. The view persists that schools are still unwelcoming to Mayas, making young Mayas feel, today as in the past, that schools are literally and figuratively a place of punishment, not learning (Simón, in Garzon et al., 1998).

The emphasis on validating Maya languages has been coupled to an interest in promoting native Maya dress. Mayas of different communities have historically woven and worn blouses, shirts, pants, and belts of different colors and patterns. Over time, since specific designs and color arrays of garments came to be associated with specific Maya communities, the different garments themselves developed into markers of locality and identity. Through much of the twentieth century, though, traditional dress among Maya men continued a decline that had begun during the centuries of colonial rule. The use of Maya dress among women, meanwhile, remained strong. With the targeting of indigenous communities during the years of intense civil violence (1980-1983), though, many Mayas became fearful for their lives. To avoid being singled out as Indian supporters of the guerrillas, many rural Mayas fled to the cities and adopted Ladino clothing to conceal their rural origins. With the return to democratic rule in 1986 and the relative peace that followed, though, many Maya women felt emboldened to not only continue wearing their community's dress, but to adopt the dress of other towns. The renewed embrace of native dress dovetailed with the growing interest in Maya culture and affirmed the role of Maya clothing as a anchor of identity (Otzoy, 1996). That it is used by those persons most responsible for teaching Maya languages and values from an early age -- women-- underscores the broad and enduring importance of this craft. Its plasticity has even transformed it into a surface onto which people can inscribe their renewed interest in Maya calendrics, in hieroglyphic form.

Maya forms of spirituality, like native language and dress, were never lost to the Maya, despite the fact that they were constantly assaulted by Spanish and Guatemalan authorities. It stands to reason that recent Maya revitalization efforts have marked out Maya spirituality as something to be validated, studied, and restored to the public sphere. The way that many Mayas have spoken respectfully of Maya spirituality, including those who do not personally identify with it, is very telling. It suggests that a broad spectrum of Mayas see it as a part of their history, and accept some of its filial and ecological aspects. Other Mayas who more actively embrace their ancestral spirituality, though, frame their embrace in terms of religious self-determination, as did the late Pop Caal (1992). Mayas aligned with this approach speak of reclaiming a basic right to worship as they please, and see this right as another step toward achieving Maya cultural autonomy (COMG, 1991). But even more than is the case with language and dress, discussions of Maya spirituality arouse strong emotions in many Mayas. A very vocal sector of Catholics and Protestants has spoken out against it, setting the stage for what may be the biggest challenge yet faced by those who want to establish genuine religious pluralism in Guatemala.

If Mayas decide that ancestral forms of spirituality will have a future in Guatemala, they will need to determine if and how these forms of spirituality can coexist with other religious traditions that have attacked them in the past. Mayas must address this because different Christian traditions will almost certainly have a future in Guatemala, and they will not surrender their influence easily. Supporters of Maya spirituality, though, are well aware that their interests might seem controversial to some Mayas, and may even drive a wedge between themselves and

Mayas who otherwise support cultural revitalization goals. By emphasizing the sacred landscape and a non-Christian theology, supporters of Maya spirituality also risk pushing some Mayas further into Christian congregations. Some Mayas may respond by taking a more defensive religious stance. But while a big part of the discussion deals with the unintended effects of promoting a Maya spiritual message, the discussion is not limited to this. It also reaches into more basic issues of Maya identity. A more constructive framing of the issue of Maya spirituality thus might require having uncomfortable discussions that go beyond whether Mayas are switching congregations or drawing lines in the sand.

This might require enlarging the discussion to consider the question of religious alienation. Pop Caal (1992) voiced this very strongly when he stressed that the object of debate should not be whether Mayas are moving away from traditional religiosity through Protestantism, but that Christianity as a whole is a deviation from, and a violation of their true nature as Mayas. Of course, not all Mayas would agree that Christianity is inherently at odds with a Maya view of the world. Many Mayas with a strong sense of the sacred landscape also identify with one or other Christian church. But over the last two decades numerous Mayas have questioned whether institutions long bent on their spiritual eradication deserve a place at the table when the future of Maya life in Guatemala is being decided. For some Mayas, however, there may be no choice but to include the strongest state players at the table. Cojtí Cuxil (1994), for example, has stressed that, to increase a Maya autonomy that can translate into religious autonomy, the state should confer upon Maya peoples an official status within its purview and bureaucracy. The Ladino control of state institutions notwithstanding, he argues that by formalizing the status of Maya groups by regions or possibly languages, they will be in a better position to make claims of the state.

Among these claims is that the state should designate Maya religious sites to Maya peoples in perpetuity, offering unlimited access to Maya people. This might begin to placate the affront to Mayas of having to pay to enter places that were built by their ancestors, and where they continue to be treated like third class citizens by site personnel (Cojtí Cuxil, 1994). The road to full access to religious places by Maya people and Maya ritualists may be a long one, though. For example, when the government tried to get local commissions to conserve and administer archaeological places, the effort failed because commission members, including many Mayas, could not agree on how to do it (Molesky-Poz 2006). Neither has the state's plan to regulate access of Maya *aj q'ijab'* to sacred places been well-received by Mayas.

Conclusion

With Maya spiritual knowledge and practice facing so many structural obstacles, we must ask whether and how it can survive. For it to have a viable future, Maya spirituality will need to involve the younger generation. Young Mayas must be encouraged to value their Maya heritage in general, including their ritual knowledge, and to seek out the knowledge of the older set before it passes away. This kind of encouragement must be done very carefully because of the way the Guatemalan state apparatus, even today, associates Maya rural life with insurgency and criminality. Maya languages must be taught, at first to preserve them, but also to set the stage for long-term transmission of Maya forms of knowledge (Brown, 1996). Many Mayas today are committed to making this happen (Warren, 1998), even if they have been pushed into exile (Batz, 2009-2010). There can also be developed other ways to teach Mayas their ancestral religion, perhaps involving the vehicle of folklore. A museum of Maya traditional music in

Antigua, Guatemala, shows how the vehicle of folklore can be useful when applied in consultation with local stakeholders. This approach might make the process more innocuous and acceptable to religious, educational, and military authorities since in Guatemala, “folklore” does not carry the social justice connotations of anthropology, sociology, or even history.

To be clear, though, the framing of Maya spiritual activities as “folklore” is itself problematic. Institutions that have used the “folklore” classifier in the past, like the Instituto Indigenista Nacional, have often used this vehicle as part of a program that either consigns Maya life to the background of the “nación guatemalteca” (Cojtí Cuxil, 1994) or disparages the intelligence of Maya peoples (Sam Colop, 1991). Any effort to employ a folklore-informed recuperative project must be mindful of why outspoken voices of the Maya revitalization movement have resisted folkloric templates. At very least, the assimilationist aims of indigenist projects of the mid twentieth century should be kept in mind (López Raquec, 1989), as well as how these aims still color how the state officially views Maya spiritual activities.

It is important in a basic sense to reach out to evangelical Protestant and even Catholic congregations to suspend judgment about Maya spiritual traditions. These Maya spiritual traditions should be acknowledged in their far-reaching cultural importance in local society. Members of formal congregations can re-assess their common ground with Maya religion, for example, by re-evaluating what all kinds of congregations already do: they bless the seeds to be planted, they pray for rain, and they receive the “first fruits” of the harvest. Different churches also pray collectively for the sick. These are things that Maya spiritual practitioners have done for a very long time. While the decades of tension between institutional religions and Maya ritualists cannot be undone overnight, a basis for dialogue can be gradually built, and anthropologists and other social scientists should have a role in this.

For better or worse, institutional leaders in Guatemala are usually more attentive to westerners, like anthropologists, than to fellow Guatemalans, especially underprivileged ones. Social scientists can emphasize to these leaders how all Guatemalans can benefit from a society that upholds global standards of religious pluralism, and how Guatemala’s rich cultural legacy, if respected, can generate ever more tourist dollars and employment opportunities. Social scientists skilled at listening to, and speaking with, different kinds of people in different settings can help communicate how Guatemala can enjoy long-term benefits if Maya cultural elements like language and religion are safeguarded. The political environment in Guatemala, however, requires that Mayas still be watchful for how their native spiritual practices are perceived by existing religious congregations and other institutions, some of which have a vested interest in selectively appropriating elements of Maya religion. Mayas may have to temporarily prioritize their immediate safety over their spiritual practices, and supporters of the Maya have to understand this. If recent centuries have taught us anything, it is that Mayas can indeed turn setbacks into opportunities for self-determination.

References:

Batz, Giovanni (2009-2010) Expressions of Maya Culture and Identity in Los Angeles: Challenges and Success among Maya Youth. *In* Portal, No. 5, pp. 44-47. Austin: Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies, University of Texas at Austin.

Bode, Barbara (1961) *The Dance of the Conquest of Guatemala*. New Orleans: Tulane University, Middle American Research Institute, Pub. 27.

Brown, R. McKenna (1996) The Maya Language Loyalty Movement in Guatemala. In *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*, edited by Edward F. Fischer and R. McKenna Brown, pp. 165-177. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Carlsen, Robert S. (1997) *The War for the Heart & Soul of a Highland Maya Town*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Carot, Patricia (1989) *Arqueología de las cuevas del norte de Alta Verapaz*. Mexico: Centre D'Études Mexicaines et Centraméricaines, Cuadernos de Estudios Guatemaltecos, Cuaderno 1.

Chacach Cutzal, Martín (1990) Una descripción fonológica y morfológica del kaqchikel. In *Lecturas sobre la lingüística maya*, edited by Nora C. England and Stephen R. Elliot, pp.145-191. La Antigua Guatemala: Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica, Plumsock Mesoamerican Studies.

Cojtí Cuxil, Demetrio (1994) *Políticas para la reivindicación de los mayas de hoy: Fundamento de los derechos específicos del pueblo maya*. Guatemala: Seminario Permanente de Estudios Mayas, Editorial Cholsamaj.

Consejo de Organizaciones Mayas de Guatemala [COMG] (1991) *Rujunamil ri mayab' amaq'*: Derechos específicos del pueblo maya. Guatemala: Cholsamaj.

Cook, Garrett W. (2000) *Renewing the Maya World: Expressive Culture in a Highland Town*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Eliade, Mircea (1974) [1951] *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series LXXVI.

Fabrega, Horacio, Jr. and Daniel B. Silver (1973) *Illness and Shamanistic Curing in Zinacantan: An Ethnomedical Analysis*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

García Escobar, Carlos René (1989) *Detrás de la máscara: estudio etnocoreológico*. Guatemala: Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala.

Garrard-Burnett, Virginia (1998) *Protestantism in Guatemala: Living in the New Jerusalem*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Garzon, Susan, R. McKenna Brown, Julia Becker Richards, and Wuqu' Ajpub' (Arnulfo Simón) (1998) *The Life of Our Language: Kaqchikel Maya Maintenance, Shift, and Revitalization*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Hart, Thomas (2008) *The Ancient Spirituality of the Modern Maya*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Hinojosa, Servando Z. (2006) Divination Bowls and Blood Simulacra in Colonial and Contemporary Mesoamerican Curing. *In Acta Americana*, Vol. 13, pp. 79-99.

_____(1999) *Spiritual Embodiment in a Highland Maya Community*. Doctoral dissertation. New Orleans LA: Department of Anthropology, Tulane University.

Hutcheson, Matthew Fontaine Maury (2003) *Cultural Memory and the Dance-Dramas of Guatemala: History, Performance, and Identity among the Achi Maya of Rabinal*. Doctoral dissertation. Buffalo NY: Department of Anthropology, State University of New York at Buffalo.

_____(2008) Memory, Mimesis, and Narrative in the K'iche' Mayan Serpent Dance of Joyabaj, Guatemala. *In Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 51, pp. 865-895.

Kab'lajuj Tijax (Martín Chacach), Ixq'anil (Judith Maxwell), Ixchayim (Marliny Son Chonay), Pakal B'alam (José Obispo Rodríguez), and Tz'unun Ya' (María del Carmen Tuy) (1995) *Rukemik K'ak'a' Taq Tzij: Criterios para la creación de neologismos en kaqchikel*. Guatemala: Maya' Cholchi' aj Iximulew and Kaqchikel Cholchi'.

López Raquec, Margarita (1989) *Acerca de los idiomas mayas de Guatemala*. Guatemala: Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes, Colección Literatura Guatemalteca Siglo XX, No. 2.

Luján Muñoz, Luís (1971) Notas sobre el uso de máscaras en Guatemala. *In Guatemala Indígena*, Vol. 6, pp. 127-147.

Madsen, William (1955) Shamanism in Mexico. *In Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol 11, pp. 48-57.

Molesky-Poz, Jean (2006) *Contemporary Maya Spirituality: The Ancient Ways are not Lost*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Monaghan, John D. (2000) Theology and History in the Study of Mesoamerican Religions. *In Handbook of Middle American Indians, Supplement 6: Ethnology*, edited by Victoria R. Bricker and John D. Monaghan, pp. 24-49. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Ortiz Martínez, Lesbia (1993) *Máscaras y religión*. Guatemala: Subcentro Regional de Artesanías y Artes Populares.

Otzoy, Irma (1996) Maya Clothing and Identity. *In* Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala, edited by Edward F. Fischer and R. McKenna Brown, pp. 141-155. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Pop Caal, Antonio (1992) Li Juliisil Kirisyaanil ut li Minok ib': Judeo cristianismo y colonización. Guatemala: Seminario Permanente de Estudios Mayas, Cuaderno 2.

Saler, Benson (1970) Sorcery in Santiago El Palmar. *In* Systems of North American Witchcraft and Sorcery, edited by Deward E. Walker, Jr., pp. 125-146. Moscow ID: University of Idaho, Anthropological Monographs of the University of Idaho, No. 1.

Sam Colop, Luis Enrique (1991) Jub'aqtun Omay Kuchum K'aslemal: Cinco siglos de encubrimiento. Guatemala: Seminario Permanente de Estudios Mayas, Cuaderno 1.

Tedlock, Barbara (1992) Time and the Highland Maya. Revised ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Tedlock, Dennis (2003) Rabinal Achi: A Mayan Drama of War and Sacrifice. New York: Oxford University Press.

Tum, Gregorio and José Sanic (n.d.) El idioma como elemento de la identidad del mayahablante. *In* Situación actual y futuro de la Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala. Guatemala: Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, Documento del Seminario, pp. 39-50.

Warren, Kay B. (1998) Indigenous Movements and their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Watanabe, John M. (1992) Maya Saints and Souls in a Changing World. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Wilson, Richard (1993) Anchored Communities: Identity and History of the Maya-Q'eqchi'. *In* Man, (N.S.) Vol. 28, pp. 121-138.

