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ARTICLE



The pilgrimage to the living mountains: representationalism, animism, and the Maya

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ABSTRACT

In this contribution, I provide an ethnography of the Maya New Year's pilgrimage and sacrifice ritual, in which a delicate relatedness between people and animate mountains is established, enacted, and expressed. Far from the body–spirit, object–subject, and nature–culture dualities, these mountains appear to be bodily-souled and immanent-transcendent beings that participate, together with people, in the ongoing process of shaping a single shared world. The pilgrimage, therefore, is a route along which a larger than human community is being formed and along which the world – in all its contingency, fragility, and precariousness – is continuously brought into existence. This existentially animist cosmology situates humans and nonhumans within the-world-in-formation, rather than the-world-in-representation of some pre-existent cultural and political contents. Finally, I discuss some of the recent attempts to challenge representationalist approaches in Maya studies, arguing that they have escaped the tenets of representationalism just to fall into the trap of western alternative spirituality.

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During one of my visits to Chimbán, the religious centre of Akatek Maya traditionalism,¹ the ritualists had told me that their local church was going to have its roof renewed. I was curious why now and they said: 'Because the church asked the *alkal txaj*² for it in a dream'. I also enquired whether the roof would again be thatched. 'Yes, indeed, the church would not accept a different roof, it wants a roof made of pure straw', was the answer. For the elders, the church is a living being that may communicate and act, just like the saints who inhabit it; the church might 'ask' humans for something, it might or might not 'accept' something from them. Indeed, in this cosmology certain entities, which Europeans would usually consider lifeless, passive and inert, are live, active, and volitive.

In the anthropology of religion, sacred objects and images of deities and saints were for a long time regarded as symbols or references to some sort of spiritual and transcendent entities. In other words, they were considered to be *representations*, symbolising or standing for something else. The rigid separation of the physical and spiritual, immanent and transcendent, objective and subjective offers little room for the view, espoused by the Maya, that statues of saints, churches, crosses, mountains or stones can be important as

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such and that they have their own physical-spiritual particularity as immanent-transcendent beings, whose objective-subjective nature does not prevent them from entering relationships with and becoming full partners of humans, with whom they share a single world.

The material I use here for presenting this particular kind of life and animacy has been collected during my ethnographic fieldwork among the Akatek Maya³ in the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes, one of Guatemala's most mountainous, isolated, and traditional areas. I will be illustrating my point by referring to the Maya pilgrimage and sacrifice ritual which I personally experienced and which expresses and enacts the relationships humans have with landscape, especially mountains. My argument will be divided into three parts.

Firstly, I will provide an ethnography of the pilgrimage from Chimbán to the mountain of K'utataj, where a young turkey is sacrificed. The ritual takes place at the end of a delicate five-day period (*Wayeb'* or *Oyeb' K'u*) before the advent of the Maya New Year.⁴ It is consciously understood as paying respect to the mountains and asking for good weather, a plentiful harvest, and all the best in the year to come. Since pilgrimage is a practice as well as a process and, by extension, a story to be told, I am going to offer both my personal testimony and a coherent narrative of it.⁵

I will then sketch out the ritual's cultural and political dimensions. Following Watanabe (1990) and Fischer (1999), I provide an outline of the boundaries of the anthropological field in which Maya religion is usually interpreted. While for 'primordialists' or 'essentialists' religious phenomena are *representations* of a surviving essential Maya culture, for 'historicists' or 'constructivists' they are *representations* of unequal power relations caused by colonialism. Contrary to these well-established theoretical approaches, I argue that Maya religion should primarily be seen as a response to the condition of an emplaced, embodied, and existentially oriented human being that cannot be fully captured by any representationalist theory, essentialist or constructivist. It cannot be explained (away) by revealing persisting pre-Columbian cultural patterns or by unmasking colonial, postcolonial, and neoliberal politics. Instead, Maya pilgrimage and sacrifice rituals associated with the mountains seem to be an expression of the dynamic relatedness and ongoing formative interdependence between humans and nonhumans as well as an expression of the everyday experience of being in a world that is never fully knowable, predictable, and calculable and whose arrangement is not unquestionable, unshakable, and given once and for all.

In this respect, I share Tim Ingold's view that life is grounded in the encountering and even mingling of many different beings, in shared experiences of attentiveness, correspondence, and commitment that precede representations, which are *a posteriori* conceptual schemes. This is what Ingold has called a 'dwelling perspective', which is 'founded on the premise that the forms humans build, whether in the imagination or on the ground, arise within the currents of their involved activity, in the specific relational contexts of their practical engagement with their surroundings' (2011, 10). In this vein, religious faith is not about representation of the world, but an existential commitment to the world in which we find ourselves and on which we depend. It is based on

participation – ‘the recognition of what we owe to the world for our existence and our capacity to act’ (2016, 23). In short, it is not about concepts of the world, but about corresponding *with* it.

I am also convinced that this phenomenal reality has a distinct existential dimension. As Michael Jackson has put it: it is not so much the quest for the ‘meaning’ of life, but rather simply the quest *for life* that is common to all cultures (2017, 189). The dilemmas of being-in-the-world, full of gratitude and anger, trust and anxiety, hope and uncertainty, life and death are informed by one existential imperative: ‘the age-old impulse to live as if one decided one’s own life from within rather than suffered a destiny imposed from without’ (166). The precariousness of human existence, as Jackson stresses, goes beyond concrete socially constructed cultural descriptions, representations, and symbols, since ‘however being is symbolically expressed, the *question* of being is universal, and constitutes a starting-point in our attempt to explore human lifeworlds as the sites of a perennial struggle for existence’ (2005, xii). Such an experience is existentially ever present, and continues to engender new religious traditions to variously address these existential givens and to make our lives ‘more individually and socially viable’ (2016, xiv).

Bearing all this in mind, I will – in the third part of my argument – briefly discuss some of the recent attempts to challenge representationalism in Maya studies. My intention is to show that despite a number of decolonisation proclamations inspired by animist, material, ontological, and other ‘turns’, such attempts remain dubious. What some Mayanists actually seem to be doing is replacing the obsolete language of representations, symbols, and meanings with a trendy language of ‘vital essences’, ‘divine energies’, and ‘portals of animacy’ through which such noncorporeal, nonmaterial, spiritual qualities are supposed to manifest themselves. To me, this seems much more reminiscent of Eliadean esoteric theology and western alternative spirituality than of any indigenous animist cosmology.

In summary, in this study I propose to consider (not only Maya) religious life associated with animate mountains as establishing the delicate relatedness of people and landscapes that mutually shape and continuously bring each other into existence. This religious sensitivity displayed by people-in-the-mountains is inseparable from their experience of the limits and possibilities of their lifeworld, characterised by a great deal of contingency, fragility, and precariousness. Last but not least, this sort of *existentially animist cosmology* can,⁶ I argue, hardly be adequately understood by replacing the vocabulary of western representationalism with the vocabulary of western esotericism.

The K’utataj pilgrimage

The settlement of Chimbán, with a population of about 1,600, is the religious centre of all Akatek traditionalists inhabiting the municipalities of San Miguel Acatán and San Rafael La Independencia. In their eyes, the importance of Chimbán stems from the rigour with which local ritualists perform *costumbre* (literally the ‘custom’), a set of rites inherited from the ancestors that must be followed. The number of ceremonies and feasts, just as the number of saints in the local church, evidences the ritualists’ good work and justifies Chimbán’s reputation as the ‘real centre of the world’, where there is ‘still something going on’, as I learned from the *mayordomo* who was holding the service.

The Maya use several calendars and so each year brings a slightly different sequence of rites. In 2013, for instance, the advent of the Maya New Year happened on 10 Chinax, according to the Maya ritual calendar (*tzolk'in*), or 17 February, the first Sunday of Lent, according to the Gregorian calendar. As a result, the beginning of the ceremony fell on 8 Txaab'in, or 15 February, the first Friday of Lent. For traditionalists, the parallel performance of the rituals for the arrival of the new Year Bearer (*Cargador del Año* or *Yijomal Aab'il*)⁷ and for Lent merely increases the importance of the period in question.

From the early morning of 8 Txaab'in, the space around the *ordenanza* house (ritual dwelling) had been busy. The traditionalists from the neighbouring settlement had brought a truck full of wood as a gift and everyone was helping to unload it. Meanwhile, other men were decorating the arches over the entrance and the *ordenanza* (sacred coffer)⁸ with freshly plucked palm leaves and hortensias. At noon, everyone was served lunch and then the ritualists went to the church from where the first Lent procession would start. The church, too, was freshly decorated, as were the wooden display cases with the statues of saints lining its walls, with Saint Michael (the municipality's patron) and Saint Eulalia (the neighbouring municipality's patron) in the centre.⁹

In the meantime, Manuel, a ritualist, and his *ayudante* (assistant) Félix arrived in Chimbán. They had come from the settlement of Inconob in the municipality of San Rafael to set in motion the preparations for the New Year pilgrimage to the mountain of K'utataj. Around three o'clock, they began, with great skill and care, to make a wicker cage. The cage, also adorned with palm leaves and hortensias, was completed by about five o'clock and moved before the *ordenanza*, where it would remain for the entire night. The young turkey for which the cage was intended had already been fed high-quality grain in front of the house. Before six o'clock, ahead of dusk, the wife of the *alkal txaj* walked around the turkey with a censer; the bird was then taken inside and tied by the leg to the table with the *ordenanza*. For the whole night, the turkey would be the subject of prayers and the target of smoke from burned copal.

After dinner, the *ordenanza* house was unusually busy. People came and wanted to talk with the ritualists or have their fortunes told. There were also representatives of the Centro Cultural and the Academia de Lenguas Mayas from San Miguel, who had arrived to support the ritualists and to take part, if only for a couple of hours, in the vigil ceremony. As is the custom on other important occasions, *oficiales auxiliares* (Chimbán's representatives of secular power) also dropped in for a short visit. Every visitor was served *kakaw* (a drink made of maize) and *pan* (sweet rolls made of wheat). At midnight, after the *alkal txaj* and his wife had performed the necessary rituals of prayer and smoke, the ritualists briefly went to bed, while the drummer, the helpers, and I lay down on the free space on the floor. Manuel and Félix, however, stayed awake in their chairs to keep the traditional vigil.

After four in the morning of 9 Kixkab', the *regidor* and the *alkal txaj* along with their wives had to get up again. The *regidor* replaced both candles that had been continuously burning on the table and prepared the censer, which the *alkal txaj* and his wife would later use to cense the turkey and *ordenanza* four times. The *alkal txaj* uttered silent prayers and then he and his wife walked to the entrance arch, sat down facing the *ordenanza*, and burned copal and prayed. Afterward, they went to church and to the crosses standing in the village square. Meanwhile, the others, including me, had got up and were waiting for breakfast. The seating arrangement by the fire corresponded to the level of respectability

of the attendees, starting with the wife of the *alkal txaj*, and continuing with the *alkal txaj* himself, the *regidor*, the *mayordomo*, the *alusel*, Manuel, Félix, the drummer, and me. The women in charge of cooking sat opposite, closing the circle.

At about eight, the *regidor* untied the turkey and placed it in the prepared cage, which Manuel loaded onto his back using a *mecapal* (tumpline). Next, the *alkal txaj's* wife walked around Manuel four times with the censer, while the *alusel* set off a firework rocket. Accompanied by the drummer, we marched along to the church, where a second rocket was fired, and then walked out of the settlement, upon which the drummer left us. The pilgrimage to the mountain of K'utataj had begun.

After travelling for two hours, we made a short stop before entering San Rafael. Manuel offered some grain to the turkey, while Félix plucked fresh leaves for the ceremony to come. We then walked through the municipality centre, where Manuel bought *aguardiente* (liquor). Prior to leaving the centre, a local woman and her children stopped us. I learned that she would wait for the pilgrims every year to offer them *pan* and *pichi* (a drink made of maize). We continued walking up a steep sloping path. At one point, we made a halt to allow Manuel to feed the turkey. I noted that it was chirping cheerfully and Manuel gave a nod of satisfied approval.

We reached the goal of our journey for that day, the mountain of K'utataj, at about noon. José, the helper who had carried all the requisites up the slope, was already waiting for us at a small shrine surrounded by the pine forest. He had sprinkled the floor of the shrine with sweet-scented *pino* (pine needles) and decorated the entrance arch and crosses. Manuel knelt down, uttered a short prayer, entered the shrine, and lit a large white candle before the main cross. The turkey was released from the cage and tied up in the corner. José fired off a rocket outside and we all drank a toast of the liquor while traditional marimba music was played on a tape recorder.

José kindled a fire under the nearby makeshift shelter and offered us meat-filled tamales and tortillas. The afternoon was devoted to practical matters – collecting firewood, preparing our night's lodging – but also to talk and rest. José prepared coffee and unpacked the supplies; my contribution amounted to sweet rolls, biscuits, bottled drinks, liquor, and cigarettes. At six o'clock, we ate boiled potatoes and tortillas for dinner, huddled in blankets and awaited the advent of midnight. K'utataj was in the midst of clouds and we only had a small roof and a sheet stretched over two sides of the shelter to protect us from wind and rain. Fog, damp, and cold, the typical traits of the local wilderness, accompanied us throughout the night.

We got up shortly after midnight and headed to the shrine, dimly lit by the white candle. Félix set off another firework and broke the silence of the night outside: the entire municipality now knew that the ceremony had started. Manuel untied the turkey and slashed its throat before the cross, making sure its blood dripped into the waiting bowl. In the meantime, Félix had prepared *pom* (pine resin chips). Manuel dipped these in the turkey's blood and Félix then wrapped them in the green leaves he had prepared. Twelve such packages were made. The first was lit before the main cross, along with a little bit of *pom* and a small wax candle. The next package was intended for the second cross inside the shrine, and the subsequent three were for the cross and two small *witz* (mounds of stones) outside. Manuel then came back for the dead turkey, took it gently in his hands, tenderly stroked its feathers and pressed its head to its breast. Next, he took the turkey outside, placed it on a designated spot and covered it up with stones. Finally, we returned

to the shrine, filled with copal smoke, sat on the bench, drank liquor and smoked cigarettes. Although I soon went to sleep, Manuel, Félix, and José, under the influence of alcohol, began a lively and emotional discussion about the unfavourable current state of *costumbre* and about their personal difficulties.

At about five o'clock in the morning on 10 Chinax, José packed his belongings and set out on the return journey in time to attend the Chimbán market. The rest of us got up an hour later and after breakfast we began our way back. While Félix left us in San Rafael, we headed off for Chimbán with seven stops at different *witz* along the journey. Most of them were located near the cemetery in San Rafael, built over the still visible ruins of a large pre-Colombian site. This historic site may be what makes the K'utataj mountain so attractive to Maya ritualists. The course of the ritual was always the same: Manuel lit candles, *pom*, and the sacrificial package, waited until the fire flared up, and then he and I drank liquor from the bottle. Manuel walked briskly and in silence, focused on his work. Maya ritualists usually do not explain the meaning of what they are doing, but they know the purpose of *costumbre* very well: pleading for rain, good crops, and survival of the community and the world as such.

We arrived in Chimbán toward eleven. The market was drawing to a close; José had managed to sell the tomatoes that he grew, having also given some of them to the ritualists. We headed to the *ordenanza* house, where Manuel had to inform the *alkal txaj* about the course of the journey. He then went to church, kneeled down, uttered a prayer, and lit candles, using hot wax to fix them to the clay floor. As always, the church was dimly lit by twinkling candles and filled with sweet copal smoke and the murmur of endless Maya prayers.

Chinax, the new Year Bearer, generally thought to be favourable, started his rule. In Chimbán he was honoured by a vigil and a special walk around the sacred places, as the custom dictated for the *día de ora*. At noon, a festive *pinol* (a pepper sauce with chicken) was served, along with tortillas, salt, and chilli. Later, Manuel received a new supply of candles and *pom* from the *regidor* and once again set out on a journey through the twelve places of sacrifice to the mountain of K'utataj. That day, he needed to finish his 30-kilometre journey before dusk and return home. Manuel told me he was 73 and had made the pilgrimage 35 times so far. One question kept crossing my mind: for how long would he still be able to fulfil his duty of pilgrimage and serve San Rafael? I would have liked to know who would replace Manuel, but I did not find the courage to ask.

The pitfalls of power and culture representations

It should be noted that the ritual described above entails an indisputable political dimension. Pilgrimage made across a certain area may demarcate ethnic territory, a place shared by a group. The Akatek live in two municipalities, of which one has a more prominent position than the other. Until 1924 San Rafael was a part of San Miguel and, indeed, it is the representatives of the more subordinate municipality (Inconob, a settlement of San Rafael) who travel to the superior one (Chimbán, a settlement of San Miguel). The pilgrimage helps to maintain the common identity of what are two different but, historically and culturally, still related communities, while keeping alive the memory of political and religious dependence. The ritual activity thus reflects social structuration of the area, as is also apparent in other parts of this region (see Adams 1991).

Nevertheless, one more thing needs to be considered with respect to power relations: the way the natives understand the mountains. Within anthropology, the ‘mountain masters’ have been frequently interpreted politically, as a reflection of differences and inequalities existing in reality. It is true that the Maya of the region have tended to regard the *ajaw* (lords, owners, or guardians) of the mountains as *ladinos* – nonindigenous people of European or mixed ancestry (e.g. Siegel 1941, 67). The mountain masters resemble *ladinos* not only in their physical appearance, but also in being rich, powerful, and unpredictable landowners (Watanabe 1990, 141–143). Famously, the mountain lords of the Andes were interpreted as symbols of exploitation and fetishisation (Taussig 1980), but it soon emerged that such an interpretation was a reflection of Marxist, rather than native, cosmology (Harris 1989).

The reality is not black-and-white and Maya folklore usually proves far more complex and ambivalent. Watanabe (1992, 77), for instance, has argued that mountains (*witz*), as perceived by the Mam, are not some personifications of essentialised ethnic ideals or models of absolute good and evil, but rather expressions of spatial and social proximity and distance. Wilson (1995, 53), too, notes that the Q’eqchi’ ascribe both indigenous and nonindigenous attributes to mountains (*tzuultaq’a*), and concludes that their nature is contradictory, as they are seen as both providers of livelihoods and as dangerous destroyers.

However, there is also another framework used to interpret pilgrimages to mountains and caves – the cultural patterns that supposedly survive among the Maya from pre-Columbian times. This framework regards the present-day New Year’s rites, first and foremost, as remnants of ancient sacrificial rituals associated with the turns of calendar cycles and evoking the never-ending creation and destruction of the world. If the start of every cycle symbolises the moment of creation, it seems obvious why Maya New Year ceremonies would be accompanied by pilgrimages to mountains and caves, traditionally connected with the underworld and the mythic beginnings of the world. As Vogt and Stuart (2005, 180) argue, the Maya perceived caves ‘as the abode of many types of gods and as the location of important “creation” events’.

[Caves] are passageways between the visible world of the earth’s surface and the interior of mountains and the nether regions of the Underworld. In this borderline position, caves are prime examples of the boundary between the natural and the supernatural, between the human and the superhuman domains of the Maya cosmos (Vogt and Stuart 2005, 179).

Indeed, the cosmological and ritual importance of the earth, mountains, and caves is evidenced by many archeological findings (Prufer and Brady 2005). Interestingly, Maya pyramids constituted ‘artificial’ mountains that were not perceived as being very different from ‘natural’ ones. Some researchers, then, have begun to interpret the mountain, or the pyramid, in the symbolic context of an *axis mundi* that connects the three spheres of the universe: the underworld, the world as we know it, and the heavens. Another manifestation of the same symbolism is the ‘cosmic tree’, concretised in the form of the ceiba (*yaxche*), with its roots reaching to the underworld and its top the heavens. As for caves, they would now be regarded as ‘portals’ to the sacred and supernatural, to the beginnings of the world and to reality *par excellence*. The impact of the Eliadean intellectual legacy – exemplified by *Maya Cosmos: Two Thousand Years on the Shaman’s Path* (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993) – on Maya studies has been profound, if not always fully acknowledged (Klein, Guzmán, Mandell, and Stanfield-Mazzi 2002; Kostićová 2019; Znamenski 2007).

Mountains as animate beings participating in the course of the world

As I have stated above, in the Mayanist literature mountains and caves are typically interpreted as representing (a) social and political content, i.e. interethnic power relations, subordination, and resistance in the context of (post)colonialism; (b) pre-Columbian cultural patterns, i.e. the place of creation, the underworld, the *axis mundi*, and portals to another, sacred or supernatural, world. Although I do not want to argue that these prevailing interpretations are misguided, I do not think that they are the only, or even the most important, game in town. I would like to demonstrate that there is another dimension to understanding Maya mountains and caves – namely the phenomenal and existential dimension of everyday life. I will be arguing that the mountains are particular bodily-souled and immanent-transcendent beings, and – as far as relations with people, with whom they share and shape a single world, are concerned – full subjects.

I will be drawing on my ethnography. In their prayers, the ritualists I worked with express their respect to God and the World in its two halves, the Earth and the Sky, but they also invoke other beings, such as some kinds of atmospheric phenomena, mountains, caves and stones, rivers, lakes and springs, crosses, ancestors and saints, and various statues of Christ and Mary. These beings are not mere physical objects or symbols referring to some spiritual entities in a different world: they are live body-like as well as soul-like persons.

What goes for the church mentioned in the introduction also goes for the saints in it. These saints (*santos*) actually *live* in the church: the statues in the boxes along its sides are their embodiments. Each of them at some point came to Chimbán to stay – as long as good care is taken of him – and may leave if that is not the case (see Kapusta 2018). The same holds for the cross (*crúz* or *kulus*). Maya traditionalists told me that an old wooden cross may not simply be removed or destroyed. It has to stay on the spot together with the new one, or has to have another place assigned to it. Crosses are ‘planted’ like trees and ‘dressed’ like humans; they are also able to act and communicate with people.

Mountains (*cerros* or *witz*) – which may take the form of a huge massif, small hill, or a mound of stones – are no exception in this respect. They are not inanimate or passive objects, but live and active persons. For the people, they are both boon and bane, bringing devastating wind as well as much needed rain, the bad luck of losing one’s way and the good luck of finding some prey. They are potent and their attitudes are ‘delicate’ (*delicado*), and as such they deserve due respect (*respeto*), with irreverence and recklessness resulting in misfortune and illness for both individuals and collectives. Nevertheless, although mountains are more powerful than humans, they are not essentially different: they live their lives and have their requirements and wishes. Indeed, humans might need mountains to provide soil, rain, and crops in order to be able to survive, but in turn mountains might also need humans to feed them with the blood of sacrificed turkeys. It is a relationship of mutual interdependence (see Kapusta 2021).

In this respect, the ritual accompanying the advent of the Maya New Year is a notable example of the delicate relatedness between the human community and mountains. For the ritualists, the performance of pilgrimage and sacrifice on the K’utataj mountain constitutes, first and foremost, an act of communication with a specific subject. It is a way to negotiate a good relationship and secure favourable weather and perhaps the continuation of the world as such. The sacrificial offering was not directed to some

underworld or heavenly, spiritual or transcendent god. Instead, it was meant for the mountain as a bodily, visible, and tangible being. 'The sacrifice is what the mountains require', I was told.

K'utataj does not seem to be an *axis mundi* and the ascent to its top is not understood as a representation of 'ascent to heaven': it simply means climbing the very mountain. A similar case can be made for local caves (Deuss 2007, 56–59, 263–265; Piedrasanta Herrera 2009, 83–86). In this instance, there is not much evidence that entering a mountain through a cave should have anything in common with the representation of 'descent to the underworld' or some supernatural places. The cave is an opening into the mountain, that is, the *heart* of a concrete being inhabiting this world. Indeed, the word *pixan*, which my interlocutors would use in this context, can be translated as both 'soul' and 'heart'. When travelling to important mountains, ritualists will typically say: 'we're going to visit the mountain' or 'we're going to feed the mountain'. When entering important caves, they will say: 'we're going to ask the mountain for permission' or 'we're going to listen to the message of the mountain'.

In fact, the idea that mountains are akin to persons or humans and that people can communicate with them is not rare. Wilson, for instance, mentions that for the Q'eqchi', mountains are 'living' and distinct by 'sex, name and character':

The *tzuultaq'as* are spirits that have a human form and live in a 'house', the cave, deep inside the mountain. Yet the mountain is also the physical body of a *tzuultaq'a*. [...] The mountain is anthropomorphized, each one having a face, head, and body and a cave that is said to be either a mouth or a womb (1995, 53–54).

This attests the idea, frequently associated with the Maya, that mountains are abodes of specific nonhuman beings, ancestors, animals, etc. However, it also indicates that mountains as such are live persons – an idea much less frequently encountered in the scholarly literature. People have personal and moral relationships with mountains: the 'heart of the mountain' can 'speak' to elders in dreams (Wilson 1995, 57).

Moreover, the way the Maya regard persons as such makes things even more complicated. The 'person' is usually presented as a complex and multiple entity that consists of various parts, some of them more body-like, others more soul-like, and that makes a sharp distinction between body and soul difficult. In this respect what Pitarch (2012, 98) has called the 'presence-body' (*winkilel*) deserves special attention. For the Tzeltal, it denotes the way somebody looks, speaks, walks or dresses. It is a person's 'social body' that enables him or her to engage in intersubjective relations. To a European observer, this quality seems to be somewhere between the dualistic notions of body and soul. Remarkably, the Q'eqchi' apply this sort of 'personhood' (*wiinqilal*), as Wilson (1995, 53) translates the term, to both people and mountains.

Recently, Garza (2009, 49–50) has recorded Chuj conceptualisations of the mountain cave of Quen Santo, visited by pilgrims from a wide surrounding area. The place is associated with creation and local identity, but also with the earth, lightning, clouds, and rain, and thus the agricultural cycle and the day-to-day concerns of peasant farmers. The ritual communication takes place chiefly with the mountain cave itself, as we learn from an interlocutor:

When people come to the celebration the cave looks beautiful because it is well-lit with the candles light and there is so much smoke, and since the smoke cannot go anywhere it has to go back to the entrance and when the smoke is coming out people look at it because it looks like the cave is talking and maybe it is because these sacred places are alive (Garza 2009, 50).

Vogt (1969, 387) once asked where the frequent Maya belief that clouds, rain, and lightning are formed in the mountains comes from. Clearly it might have originated in Maya cultural ideology – in the pre-Columbian concepts of the underworld and rain and snake deities. But, as Vogt observes, the belief can equally well have originated in empirical evidence: looking down at the lowlands, clouds and lightning really appear to come out from the caves on the slopes of the highlands, and hence, the native explanation does make sense. After all, the mountains really play a considerable role in producing rain and storms, at least as far as their frequency and intensity are concerned.

The fact that ‘caves must be understood as being immense, living, sentient, sacred, and powerful to the Maya’ is inseparable from their association with the earth as the giver of livelihood and life as such (Prufer and Brady 2005, 367).¹⁰ Thus, the ‘mountain masters’ should not be perceived as just a political and cultural representation of the world but also as a phenomenal and existential expression of the life *in* the world. In fact, the mountains surround human communities and constitute their innate environment. They determine weather, bringing the much-needed rain as well as destructive droughts, storms, and earthquakes. They provide people with sustenance, particularly by offering fertile soil and sources of firewood.

In summary, the mountains appear to be live and animate as well as ambiguous and indeterminate beings. As such, the way they are conceived of cannot be reduced to power relations between people or to clear-cut cultural ideologies. They should, instead, be regarded as important in their own right, or more precisely, in terms of people’s phenomenally and existentially experienced *relation* to them.

Maya cosmology between animism and esotericism

In the last ten years, there have been increasingly numerous efforts in Maya studies to dispose of western presuppositions and take native cosmologies more seriously and without prejudice, resulting in emphasis being put on the animacy and agency of landscapes, mountains, caves, stones, trees, crosses, shrines, and even some utensils, and drawing on animist, material, ontological, and other ‘turns’ to better understand the peculiar Maya world.

Eleanor Harrison-Buck (2012), for instance, examines the circular shrine architecture of the ancient Maya in Belize and suggests that its shell trumpet adornments served as ‘portals of animacy’ (73), ‘manifest[ing] the vital essence of the feathered serpent the moment they sounded’ and bringing to life the thunderous voice of this ‘generative life force’ (75). Miguel Astor-Aguilera (2010), analysing Mesoamerican quadripartite crosses, trees, and stones, in turn argues that the Maya have always ritually interacted with certain ‘noncorporeal beings’, namely ancestors, through ‘communicating objects’ (98), which ‘are *not* literally considered animate, for it is the invisible nonhuman persons tethered to the material vessel that are sentient’ (216). Finally, Joel Palka (2014), summarising Maya pilgrimage across time

and space, interprets ritual landscapes as ‘communicating places’, where people contact some ‘spiritual essences’ and ‘divine energies’ (302) to ‘enhance the ritual experience and transformational powers of the journey’ and to ‘achieve cosmic balance’ (307).

For these Mayanists, it is not shrines, crosses, or mountains, but rather deities, ancestors, and other spiritual forces that are breathing, speaking, and living. It is really startling how these scholars fiercely resist any inkling of life and animacy of the things themselves and instead resort to a vocabulary that is reminiscent of western spiritual traditions. Although I am well aware that I am venturing onto thin ice here and that I can only briefly outline the problem given the lack of space, I believe it is an important point that deserves attention and would merit further elaboration.

Although Astor-Aguilera criticises Eliadean and Cartesian notions in many ways, it seems to me that he has not moved away from them enough. By considering communicating objects as empty vessels waiting for an unseen animating force to fill them up, he in fact tacitly accepts the most fundamental assumptions of western thinking. As Mircea Eliade famously claimed about the manifestation of the sacred:

what is involved is not a veneration of the stone in itself, a cult of the tree in itself. The sacred tree, the sacred stone are not adored as stone or tree; they are worshipped precisely because they are *hierophanies*, because they show something that is no longer stone or tree but the *sacred*, the *ganz andere* (1961 [1956], 12).

Simply put, the trees and stones are not divine as such, but they refer to ‘something else’, a nonmaterial, spiritual, supernatural quality. The only difference between Eliade and the Mayanists cited above is that for Eliade, what is manifested through the objects is the ‘sacred’ while for the Mayanists, they are deities, ancestors, and other spiritual essences. The content is different, but the way of thinking the same: even though the shrines, crosses, or mountains are not merely ‘symbols’, they remain ‘portals’ serving some noncorporeal, invisible, and intangible agents. After all, what is this if not the application of the Cartesian body–spirit, object–subject, nature–culture duality?

Of course, I am not contesting that the Maya ritualists whom Astor-Aguilera described in his fascinating and provocative book associate crosses with ancestors in such a way that these ‘communicating objects’ serve as ‘material vessels’ for ‘invisible persons’. My point is that this description may obscure the fact that the crosses, stones, or mountains themselves can be seen as being alive and having their own subjectivities by some Maya groups. Even more questionable, in my view, is interpreting this communication between humans and ‘noncorporeal beings’ (Astor-Aguilera 2010) or ‘vital essences’ (Astor-Aguilera 2018) as ‘the core’ of the Mesoamerican, and indeed, the Indigenous American worldview as such.

Recently, Harrison-Buck (2015) has even described the ancient Maya entity of Itzamnaaj as an un-personified ‘central generative life force’ or ‘cosmic force’ (116), and *itz* as ‘energy’ (122). She thus seems to be replacing the life forces of specific beings with a universal life force of the cosmos. Despite Harrison-Buck’s proclaimed adherence to ‘new animism’, to me her description of Maya cosmology rather evokes what Catherine Albanese (2007) has called ‘American metaphysical religion’. Here, and in western esotericism in general, universal life-force energy – the vital essence of the cosmos – is understood as filling and surrounding everything, enlivening the entire world and transforming the individual inhabiting it (see Hanegraaff 2012; Kapusta and Kostićová 2020). It is just

a corollary of this doctrine that specific places, buildings, and objects may become 'thresholds', which can be activated by the life force. Such ideas, very much disseminated these days in various forms of western popular religion, have also been present in Maya studies, enthralled by the Eliadean concepts of the cosmic tree, *axis mundi*, and portals to the otherworld.¹¹

Yet animism, in Ingold's sense at least, is not about the materials that may be charged with some animating forces, but about

the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence. The animacy of the lifeworld, in short, is not the result of an infusion of spirit into substance, or of agency into materiality, but is rather ontologically prior to their differentiation (Ingold 2006, 10).

In such an 'environment without objects', Ingold concludes,

things move and grow because they are alive, not because they have agency. And they are alive precisely because they have not been reduced to the status of objects. [...] In effect, to render the life of things as the agency of objects is to effect a double reduction, of things to objects and of life to agency (2014, 219).

In summary, while finding evidence for the concepts used by some Mayanists is difficult in animist communities, it can be easily found in the Eliadean intellectual legacy and contemporary alternative spirituality, that is, in the tradition of western esotericism harking back to Renaissance and Neoplatonic perennial philosophy (Hanegraaff 2012). The notion of spiritual essences manifesting in physical objects that serve as portals to the otherworld is a case in point in this respect. Nevertheless, traces of this tradition can also be found among the Maya themselves: in *espiritualidad maya*, a turbulently developing religious revivalism, globally and creatively drawing on *costumbre* as well as popular bits of Maya studies and New Age. These 'neo-Maya' strive to return to the 'original', 'pure', and 'authentic' Maya spirituality and redefine local thinking toward a global cosmivision, based on concepts such as cosmic energy, harmony, spiritual cleansing, and personal transformation (Cook, Offit, and Taube 2013; Galinier and Molinié 2013; MacKenzie 2016).

However, my ethnographic experience from the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes is different. I accompanied Maya traditionalists seeking to establish and maintain personal relationships with bodily-souled and immanent-transcendent beings who live and act *on their own* and whom the ritualists know from their everyday lives. For these ritualists, mountains are endowed with many 'physical' and 'spiritual' traits and characteristics that they can express in multiple ways. They also view such 'deities' as concrete, visible, and tangible entities that inhabit a similar lifeworld as humans: they are born and die, they grow and diminish, they eat and starve. Here the human and the divine intertwine and are brought together through mutual feeding, sacrificial giving, and continual becoming. In this context, the Maya New Year's pilgrimage and sacrifice ritual is viewed as the most appropriate way of expressing and enacting people's delicate relatedness with the mountains. It is a tricky and risky work *in* and *with* the ambiguous and precarious world that is never considered to be a constant given, but in continual formation and regeneration.

Pilgrimage in an existentially animist lifeworld

Twenty years ago, Alice Beck Kehoe (2000, vii) complained about the lack of critical thinking in connection with 'shamanism'. When 'Linda Schele's notion that Maya kings had been "institutionalized shamans" was popularized', 'that was too much' for her.

In some sense, not much has changed since. While the Eliadean concepts of shamanism and altered states of consciousness may have been revised (not just) in Maya studies, the ideas of nonmaterial/spiritual/vital essences, cosmic force/energy/balance and personal transformation have become increasingly popular in a way no one could have imagined twenty years ago. The most paradoxical aspect of this development is that these ideas are promoted by authors who explicitly say they strive to face up to and overcome deeply ingrained western presuppositions and begin to think otherness more honestly, faithfully, and free from bias. There is no doubt that more emphasis on ontology, materiality, and animacy is overdue (not just) in Maya studies; I would, however, argue that concepts that start with the assumption of a separation between the physical and spiritual, immanent and transcendent, objective and subjective will not get us very far.

When Eliade was defending archaic religion from reductionist naturalist theories, he felt he was debunking the idea of 'primitives' venerating 'idols'. On the first pages of *The Sacred and the Profane* (1961 [1956], 11–12), he writes: 'The modern Occidental experiences a certain uneasiness before many manifestations of the sacred. He finds it difficult to accept the fact that, for many human beings, the sacred can be manifested in stones or trees, for example'. For Eliade, indeed, it is not the stone itself that is sacred; rather, sacrality is only revealed through the physical object. Now, while Eliade 'justifies' archaic thinking by the western esoteric idea of 'an *absolute existence*, beyond time, invulnerable to becoming' (156), some Mayanists, despite their decolonising intentions, colonise indigenous knowledge with globalised western alternative spirituality.

By contrast, I have sought to show that Maya traditionalism indeed consists in – paraphrasing Eliade (1961 [1956], 12) – the 'veneration of stones as such', since they are considered full partners of humans in participating in the ongoing formation and constitution of a single shared world. I do not think that this amounts to a primitivisation or devaluation that needs to be somehow justified. Instead, I think that Maya pilgrimage shows us certain themes that might be considered universally human. In the context of a distinctly *animist* cosmology, which postulates a respectful 'community of persons not all of whom are human' (Harvey 2006, 11), the reciprocal 'feeding' expresses a fundamental interdependence, interwovenness, and mutual generativity of all beings. In the context of an intensively *sacrificial* cosmology, which takes life as self-sacrifice, giving appears to be a commitment, the very condition of human existence. This emplaced, embodied, and performative practice of giving and taking is, like the simple act of breathing, an indispensable constant of the course of the world, expressing the instability, fragility, and fickleness of being within the existential scope of possibilities and givens, hopes and fears, life and death.

One can therefore only wish that a time will come when it will be permissible, in Maya studies as well as anthropology of religion in general, to describe certain animist communities (without this being taken as an offence) as inhabiting a *live* world that includes people, trees, and stones.

Notes

1. In anthropology, Maya traditionalism (*costumbre*) is understood as a syncretised religion combining indigenous Maya and Spanish Catholic elements and as a local and creative response to colonialism (Cook, Offit, and Taube 2013, 158–159). Although orthodox Catholicism's and evangelical Protestantism's attitudes toward Maya traditionalists (*costumbristas*) have often been suspicious, aggressive, or even militant, the latter see themselves as good Christians.
2. The office of *alkal txaj* is the most important position in the hierarchy of local ritual specialists (*alkal txaj*, *regidor*, *mayordomo*, *mayor*, and *alusel*). These ritualists (sometimes called 'prayer-sayers' or 'rezadores' in anthropological literature) are elected by a group of elders (*principales*) for a one-year term. Their job is to pray for rain, good crops, and the prosperity of the community as a whole, but also to help individuals in need (see Deuss 2007).
3. Participant observation and informal conversations conducted in Maya communities of the Department of Huehuetenango, Guatemala, in 2009 and 2013. This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Czech Association for Social Anthropology.
4. For Maya New Year's ceremonies, see e.g. Vail and Looper (2015).
5. I provided a very brief description of this pilgrimage in Kapusta (2016, 28–29).
6. This contribution echoes the work of researchers who have proposed to envisage Maya religion not as a case of 'analogist' (see Descola 2013 [2005]) but rather (hierarchical) 'animist' ontology (MacKenzie 2009; Pitarch 2012; Zamora Corona 2020). Marisol de la Cadena (2010, 2015) also offers an elaboration on these points in her description of Andean 'earth-beings', focusing on how mountains may become publicly visible when they act and participate in both local and national politics, and thus reconfigure the conceptual field of politics as such.
7. The four Year Bearers are considered 'Chiefs' of the twenty named days of the Maya ritual calendar – and it is always one of them who ushers in the Maya New Year.
8. The *ordenanza* was described by Siegel (1941, 68) as 'beyond question the most sacred object in the village'. As in other Maya communities in the region, Chimbán's coffer, perceived as live and animate by the ritualists, contains some unspecified old documents and valued items and is constantly being taken care of.
9. The saints are perceived very locally, concretely, and tangibly by Maya traditionalists, so that two statues of, for instance, Saint Michael are not regarded as the same being.
10. Caves are also the subject of myths describing the origin of maize. Such myths typically feature mountains, hills or rocks split by lightning and containing grains of maize inside.
11. Eliade's influence on Mayanist scholarship has convincingly been demonstrated by Klein, Guzmán, Mandell, and Stanfield-Mazzi (2002), Kostičová (2019), and Znamenski (2007). Note that I am not arguing that contemporary Mayanists follow – intentionally or unintentionally – Eliade, but rather that they employ a specific way of western thinking of which Eliade was a crystalline example.

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