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Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern Pilgrimages among the Maya2-24

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Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern Pilgrimages among the Maya

Abstract

The act of pilgrimage intertwines physical hardship with spiritual quest and in so doing it creates a memorializing event in which people, space, time, and movement articulate images of the sacred. Such journeys through an energized landscape create social connections, obligations, and hierarchy. Pilgrimage shrines emerge and develop through a process of humanization of geographical locations with unique qualities derived from their associations with striking natural features such as mountaintops, waterfalls, whirlpools, caves, or cenotes. The choice of location is based on the belief that certain locations are different from other locations thanks to their history or spiritual magnetism. They may also be connected to healing substances such as hot springs, medicinal clay, sand, salt or with a numinous power. Pilgrimages have been undertaken for hundreds of years by Mayans and continue to function as important spiritual exercises. A new type of traveler has recently become involved in postmodern pilgrimages among the Maya in Yucatán.

Resumen

El peregrinar entrelaza las dificultades físicas con la búsqueda espiritual. De este modo se crea un acontecimiento conmemorativo en el que las personas, el espacio, el tiempo y el movimiento se integran armónicamente con lo sagrado. Estos viajes a través de un paisaje revitalizado crea conexiones sociales, obligaciones, y jerarquías. La peregrinación a los santuarios surge y se desarrolla a través de un proceso de humanización de la geografía por su asociación con características muy peculiares tales las cimas de las montañas, las cascadas, los remolinos de agua, las cuevas, o los cenotes. La elección de los lugares sagrados se basa en la creencia de que ciertos lugares son diferentes de otros gracias a en virtud de su historia o su magnetismo espiritual. También se puede conectar con sustancias curativas presentes en las aguas termales, en las arcillas, arenas, o sales medicinales; o por su conexión con un poder sobrenatural. Los mayas han practicado las peregrinaciones por cientos de años y aún hoy siguen siendo importantes ejercicios espirituales. Con la era postmoderna un nuevo tipo de viajero se incorporó a las peregrinaciones de los mayas de Yucatán.

Ancient Mayan oracle shrines were located on mountaintops and in caves, sinkholes, and cenotes (Brady and Ashmore 139). Historical documents reveal that in precolumbian and postcolonial Yucatán there were three major pilgrimage centers—Chichén Itza, Izamal, and Cozumel—that housed oracles. The oracular power of Chichén Itza originated from its sacred cenote. A paved highway, known as a *sacb'ë*, leads north from El Castillo to the edge of this cenote (Sharer 398). During the thirteenth century the oracle there prophesized the upcoming reign of Hunac Ceel, who founded the Cocom dynasty (Tozzer 182 n. 949). Early in the twentieth century the American consul to Mexico, Edward Thompson, purchased a hacienda which contained the cenote and set up dredging apparatus. Among the objects he recovered was a gold disk with Ekchuan, a merchant deity, embossed in the center; wooden scepters, weaving tools, cotton textile fragments, pottery figurines, balls of copal, rubber in tripod bowls, carved jade beads, imported sheet-gold pendants, cast gold figurines and bells (Coggins and Shane).

Archaeological evidence suggests that many urban centers were designed to receive crowds of visitors at regular intervals (Kubler 316). There is also historical evidence that nobles went on pilgrimages to visit the rulers of distant polities to sanctify their ruler ship. In the *Popol Vuh* we learn that in two different generations lords renewed their royal status by undertaking pilgrimages to cities with the status of Tulan, or “Place of Cattails.” The first pilgrimage, which contained words from a Ch’olan language, fits a visit to Copán whereas the description of a later pilgrimage, which contains Yukatek and Nahuatl words, fits a visit to Chichén Itza (D. Tedlock, *Popol Vuh* 151, D. Tedlock, *2000 Years of Mayan* 303). The Mayan founders of the K’iche’, Rabinal, and Cakchiquel lineages obtained images of their main deity Tojil, as well as ax scepters, royal titles, and the right to establish their kingdoms during pilgrimages to a great eastern city. The *Annals of the Cakchiquels* records that the city was the eastern member of a group of four whose insignia was a bat (Brinton, Recinos and Goetz). The original name for the city was written with an iconographic sign of a leaf-nosed bat (Marcus 12). In hieroglyphic writing the bat’s head stands for the syllable *xu-* which is surrounded by other syllables giving the reading *xwukpi*, the brown-backed solitaire, the heraldic emblem glyph for the city of Copán (D. Tedlock, *Breath on the Mirror* 13).

Other pilgrimages to distant ceremonial centers were recorded in the Mayan dance-drama known as the *Rabinal Achi* (D. Tedlock). Here one of the main protagonists, Man of Rabinal, calls attention to his noble status by pointing out his ax and shield together with his armband, snail-shell bracelet, and gourds of white paint and tobacco. Several K’iche’ and Cakchiquel authors of the sixteenth century also mention these emblems of lordship and assign their acquisition to a pilgrimage that came later than the one in which founders of royal lineages obtained their symbols of leadership (D. Tedlock, *Popol Vuh* 179). In order to renew their right to rule, descendants of the founders went northward to the shore of the Caribbean to the court of Nacxit. The two most likely sites for this pilgrimage were Chichén Itza, where a foreign lord whose names included Nacxit established himself during the tenth century, and Mayapan, whose lords promoted their thirteenth-century rise to power as a restoration of their prior glory.

Evidence for precolumbian Mayan pilgrimages also includes material remains and narrative accounts. In 1688 Diego López Cogolludo noted that in Yucatán:

There are remains of paved highways which traverse all this kingdom and they say they ended in the east on the seashore where it crosses an arm of the sea for the distance of four leagues which divides the mainland from that island. These highways were like the *caminos reales*, which guided them with no fear of going

astray so that they might arrive at Cozumel for the fulfillment of their vows, to offer their sacrifices, to ask for help in their needs, and for the mistaken adoration of their false gods (Tozzer 109 n. 500).

During the late-classic to Postclassic transition, decentralized factions redistributed political authority among them and pilgrimages to oracles took on a special importance in creating and maintaining alliances and exchange networks. Broken and reset classic period stone steles at the site of La Milpa in Belize indicate a revitalization pilgrimage movement during the Postclassic. The evidence includes incense burners in association with reset Classic stone fragments that were so damaged they no longer carried coherent messages (Hammond and Bobo). Historical documents reveal that seaborne dugout canoe trade, intertwined with pilgrimage practices, brought prosperity to Yucatán. Bishop Diego de Landa mentioned both the well at Chichén Itza and the Island of Cozumel as pilgrimage sites. Many centers of trade throughout Mesoamerica were major pilgrimage sites. The primary economic event in ancient Mayan civilization was the pilgrimage fair: a periodic gathering in central places for the purpose of religious celebration and economic exchange (Freidel).

The Oracle of Cozumel

According to sixteenth-century Spanish accounts elderly Mayan priestesses living on a set of eastern islands acted as oracular intermediaries delivering favorable or unfavorable pronouncements regarding warfare (Antochiw and Dachary 205). On the island of Cozumel (*cusamil* or “place of the swifts”) women gathered to ask for help in conceiving, birthing, and delivering babies from Ixchel, the moon goddess (Roys 154, Miller 96). A large baked-clay sculpture there served as an oracle answering requests from the pilgrims.

Anciently all this country and the Indians went ordinarily to the island to worship an idol which they had in certain ancient buildings and which they venerated greatly. . . they came to see and to worship the said idol and there was an old Indian who was an Alquin (Ah Kin) which means in our language cleric or priest. And the Indians went to see the idol spoke with him telling him why they came and that which they wished. . . . this idol was called Ischel (Landa 54).

Although neither this account, nor that of Diego Lopez Cogolludo, reveals the gender of the sculpture, since Ixchel is a goddess we can assume that her material representation was feminine.

It was very singular and different from the others; its material was baked clay; it was a large hollow figure joined to the wall with mortar. At its back was something like a sacristy, in which the priests had a small hidden door opening into the back of the idol. Into this one of the priests entered, and from there he replied to the requests which were made. The unhappy dupes believed that the idol spoke to them and credited what was said to them; and so they venerated it more than the others with various offerings; sacrifices of blood, birds, dogs and sometimes even men. Since, as they believed, it always spoke to them, they came together from everywhere in such great numbers to consult it and to beg for help in their troubles (Cogolludo ix, in Tozzer 109).

At the time of the Spanish invasion of Yucatán the island was famous for her shrine, which was visited by canoe annually by hundreds of pilgrims from Tabasco, Tixchel, Potonchan, and Xicalango, as well as from the seaports of western Yucatán (Scholes and Roys, 57, 77). But Hernán Cortes objected and ordered his men to roll the image down the stairway and replaced it with an image of the Madonna and Child (D. Tedlock, *2000 Years of Mayan* 240). After that there were no long-distance pilgrimages to Cozumel for more than five-hundred years.

Other Pilgrimage Sites

Naj Tunich, a two-mile-long painted cave in the southeastern Petén region of Guatemala, was active as a pilgrimage site since at least the first century BCE when stone platforms were erected inside its entrance and ceramics and jadeite pendants were deposited atop platforms adjacent to large stalagmite columns (Stuart). There are 35 hieroglyphic texts, 44 figures, and 80 drawings that portray facets of Mayan ceremonial life from the Late Classic period. Calendar notations on the walls show evidence of peoples with different notational systems visiting to commemorate New Year and Katun (twenty-year) anniversaries and emblem glyphs from a number of Mayan cities (Stone). Today's pilgrims, mostly from the Q'ekchi' Maya village of Tanjoc, burn incense there early each spring to ask for a good harvest (Schuster).

In highland Guatemala Mayans also undertake pilgrimages to shrines within their own communities as well as visiting shrines located in other communities.



Figure 1. Daykeepers on pilgrimage to Paxkwal Ab'aj shrine in the K'iche' Mayan community of Chichicastenango.

The training and initiation of *ajk'ijab*, or “daykeepers”, involves a series of pilgrimages to hilltop shrines, waterfalls, and caves where participants gather crystals, tree seeds, copal incense, and sacred water. During the past thirty-five years dozens of shrines in Chichicastenango and Momostenango have become important pilgrimage sites for the initiation of new daykeepers, from all over Guatemala.



Figure 2. Daykeepers on pilgrimage to Ch'uti Sab'al shrine in Momostenango

My Momostecan mentor, Andrés Xiloj, explained his own selection as a lineage head as resulting from a dream.

Two women were standing across from me, but there was a deep canyon between us. I was on one side, they were on the other, and they were laughing at me. I wanted to pass over but I couldn't because of the canyon. It was a few days later when the patrilineage met. "What'll we do? We're getting done in by the *warab'alja*." "Very well, let's look for someone to be put in charge of this." And when the time came, I had to do it.

A Tz'utujil Mayan daykeeper (*aj'kun*) by the name of Nicolás Chiviliu Tacaxoy related a dream in which he heard a voice telling him to visit a statue known as Mam, or "Grandfather." This well-known deity is made from the wood of the Coral Tree (*Erythrina Corallodendron*) indicating that he was a survivor from a previous creation.

I'm ordered to make a pilgrimage counter-clockwise around Lake Atitlán. We go to San Lucas, San Antonio Palopó, Santa Catarina Palopó, San Andrés Semetabaj, Panajachel, San Jorge, Tzununá, San Marcos, San Pablo la Laguna, San Pedro la Laguna and back here (Santiago Atitlán). There are Mam statues in San Jorge, Santa Clara, San Pablo and San Lucas and there is a Mam head in San Andrés Semetabaj (Tarn and Prechtel 90).

When he told this dream to his elders he learned that he must make such a journey by foot and dugout canoe as well as visualize the trip three times during the day and once at midnight. Throughout the remainder of his life he followed this intertwining of physical and virtual pilgrimages. A similar pattern is undertaken by Q'eqchi' Maya pilgrims living in the Alta Verapaz. During the agricultural cycle young men dream of visits to cave shrines and undertake journeys to thirteen important hills and caves known as Tzuultaq'a, or "mountain-valley" (Adams and Brady). Likewise, Tojolabal Mayans living in Mexico make such intertwined physical and virtual pilgrimages to neighboring Tzeltal and Chuj Maya shrines (Mattiace 10).

In other communities pilgrimages are undertaken to shrines that are perceived to have an abundance of spiritual energy. Some have predominately local appeal; others draw supplicants from several regions and nations. Pilgrimage sites include waterfalls, caves, volcanoes, archaeological ruins, individual stones, rock cairns, stone-and-pottery altars, and religious icons. Some of these locations are strictly Mayan in appeal while others attract hundreds of people who

do not identify as Mayans. Natural locales and archaeological ruins such as Zaculeu attract K'iche' Mayas from several communities.



Figure 3 Pilgrimage to the archaeological site of Zaculeu in Huehuetenango

Similar effigies, called Maximón, appear in Mayan hand-woven clothing in Sololá and Santiago Atitlán. Mannequins, known as San Simón dressed in smart black woolen suits wearing broad-brimmed hats and Ray-ban polarized dark shades sit on thrones in Zunil



Figure 4. Image of San Simon in Zunil

and San Andrés Itzapa.



Figure 5. Image of San Simon in San Andrés Itzapa

Many pilgrims also visit the ruins of Tikal, Iximche, Zaculeau, and Q'umark'aj as well as the caves, basilica, and statue of the Black Christ at Esquipulas. There are pilgrimage shrines commemorating important historical events and altars in rock cairns on territorial boundaries. A shrine, known as Canchavox, is located in the mountains surrounding the valley where in 1524 the Samala River ran red with the blood of the slain.



Figure 6. Valley where Tecun Umam and Pedro de Alvarado did battle.

There the great Mayan warrior, Tecun Umam, was killed by Pedro de Alvarado. Lineage shrines for the leaders of the K'iche' kingdom are situated on a hill overlooking the valley.



Figure 7. Warab'alja or foundation shrine on the mountaintop overlooking the valley

Another pilgrimage shrine, known as Joyan, is a rock cairn located on a mountain pass between the municipalities of Momostenango and San Francisco el Alto.



Figure 8. Joyan, the mountain shrine on the boundary between Momostenango and San Francisco el Alto

It serves as both a boundary-marking shrine and an outdoor altar used by Momostecans to welcome the year-bearer, Mam No'j, when he takes over leadership once each four years on a No'j day (B. Tedlock, *Time and the Highland Maya* 100). Momostenango is an important pilgrimage site; during the past thirty-five years the shrines there have become a location for the initiation of daykeepers from all over Guatemala. As one recent Mayan pilgrim explained, “these shrines are like a book where everything—all births, marriages, deaths, successes, and failures—are written down. We come here once a year to write in this book.”

The name Momostenango was given by the Tlaxcalan allies of the Spanish invaders to the community. In Nahua *mumuztli*, means altar and *tenango* means town; thus the name of the community translates “Altar town.” This is descriptively accurate given that there are dozens of public and private stone and pottery altars located at strategic places near springs, waterfalls, and on hilltops throughout the community. These shrines are used as places of prayer and healing by hundreds of initiated daykeepers. Initiation involves a series of pilgrimages by teacher and pupil to hilltop shrines, waterfalls, and caves in their own and other communities where they gather sacred water, copal incense, crystals and tree seeds (B. Tedlock, “Momostenango: Town of Shrines”).

Patrilineage heads known as *chuchkajawib* “motherfathers,” construct and worship before *meb'il* shrines, small wooden boxes filled with stone amulets in the shapes of jaguars, snakes, deer,

and other animals. These shrines are concerned primarily with improving financial wellbeing. Motherfathers also visit family *warab'alja* or “foundation” shrines on certain day names from the 260-day ritual calendar. They make pilgrimages to a set of five directional shrines located on wooded hills within the community. Two of these lineage heads, known as *chuchkajawib rech tinimit* or “motherfathers of the town,” make a pilgrimage once each 260 days, on the consecutive days Wajxakib' K'ej (8 Deer) and Belejib' K'anil (9 Ripeness), to the main *meb'il* shrine for the entire community. It is located to the north of the town center in the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes.

The shrine has two parts: the upper section is in the basilica in Chiantla, a small community near Huehuetenango. It is dedicated to the Virgin of Candelaria. The lower part of the shrine is located above Minas,



Figure 9. Lightning-struck tree growing around a granite rock near the entrance to Minas, a colonial silver mine in the Cuchumatanes mountains of Huehuetenango

a caved in entrance to a silver mine marked by a twisted lightning-struck tree growing around a granite rock. The five-foot tall wooden figure of the Virgin was carved from local hard wood and her robes were made of silver extracted from this mine.



Figure 10. Our Lady of Candelaria in Chiantla, the meb'il shrine for the K'iche' community of Momostenango

It was discovered and exploited in the early colonial period by Juan de Espinar, a distinguished soldier and one time *alcalde ordianario* of Santiago de Guatemala. During the 1530s he was given a large *encomienda* by the crown, consisting of labor from local Mayas who hauled ore out of his mine (Lovell 120). Legends say that after he donated the silver robes for the Virgin the veins so swelled with ore that he became fabulously wealthy and decided to return to Spain. On the day before he was to leave Guatemala, he made a farewell visit to the mine; when he was far inside a worker shouted to him to come out and as he left the mine caved in. This was interpreted as a miracle performed by the Virgin to save the life of her benefactor and to make it impossible for anyone else to ever mine silver there.

On days named Ik' (Wind), K'iche' pilgrims travel in their dreams to a man-made cave under Q'umarkaaaj, the capital of the K'iche' kingdom. The site, which was constructed in the 1400s, is built on a mesa which is underlain by fine-grained volcanic ash (Wallace and Carmack). Beneath the central plaza lies the 90-meter long man-made cave. It ends directly below a round imprint in the plaza floor that may have been the base of a circular temple.



Figure 11. A Momostecan lineage head on pilgrimage to a shrine in the central plaza of the archaeological site of Q'umarkaaj

The cave opening is approximately three meters high and one meter wide (Brady and Veni). It sanctifies the site and defines it as a place of pilgrimage. According to historical documents the site represents the seven-chambered cave of origin which carries the connotation of power, ruler ship, wealth, and sacred space (B. Tedlock, “Momostenango: Town of Shrines”).

Today the cave can only be visited by pilgrims after the announcement of their intention to make the journey followed by 40 days of fasting, sexual continence, copal burning, prayers to the ancestors, and asking of formal permission. Pilgrims light candles and walk into the cave where they listen for omens.

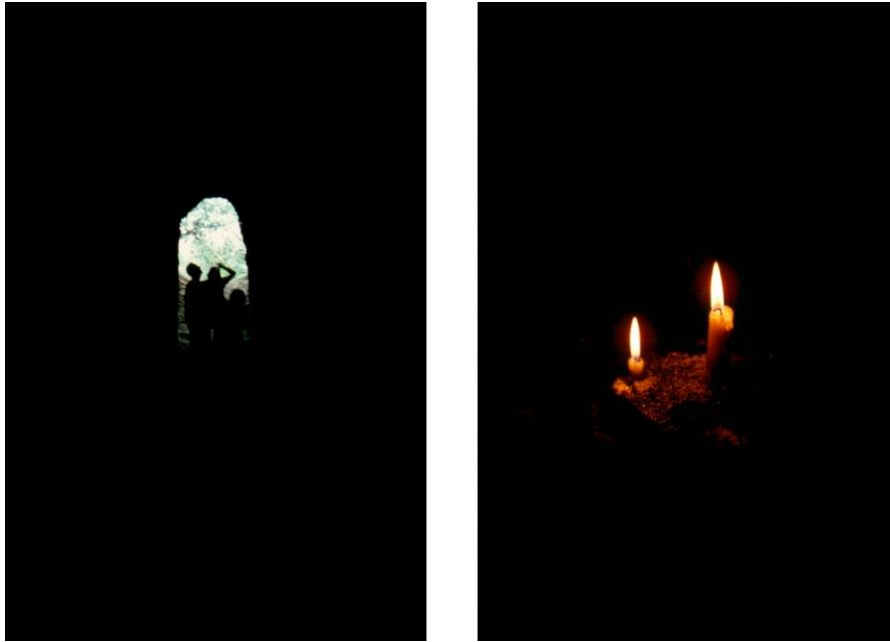


Figure 12. Cave directly below the main shrine in the plaza at Q'umark'aj

If a bad omen does not appear, they proceed further inside until they reach a fork in the tunnel where they burn candles and copal incense, asking permission of Jujub' Takaaj, or “Mountain Valley” to enter. They take the narrow left path and go down to a corral where they find small stones in the shape of deer, mountain lion, sheep, and goats and attempt to pull one out. If they are lucky, a tiny game keeper dressed in silver, appears and allows them to do so. When they take home the stone animal and place it in a small wooden box on their altar it magically multiplies. Most pilgrims visit Q'umark'aj but once in a lifetime and then revisit it later in waking reveries and dreams.

Modern Mayan Pilgrimages to Esquipulas

Not far from the ruins of the ancient Maya city of Copán, at the center of a Precolumbian pilgrimage route, near the junction of the boundaries between Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, is the village of Esquipulas. Several large stone carvings resembling those found at Copán, are still at the site. Anne and Alfred Maudslay, who visited the shrine in 1894, noted that the fair which took place there was the most important commercial event of the year in Central America. “Thither the English merchants from Belize brought their wares and carried on what was practically the whole of the foreign business of Honduras, Salvador, and Guatemala, taking in exchange the native-grown indigo” (Maudslay and Maudslay 49). Erna Fergusson and Mary Butler made the journey from Guatemala City to Esquipulas in the mid-1930s and reported that

The atrium was packed so tightly with people that we were plastered up against the railing. A procession was pushing through from one church door to the other. Over a sea of jet-black heads floated the silken canopy that shaded the image and the priests. And above that slowly moving mass of heads a multitude of candle flames flickered redly in the sun (Fergusson 56).

To this day, during the Feast of Esquipulas, the basilica is filled by thousands of pilgrims from communities throughout Central America. The sidewalks opposite the church are crowded with vendors selling candies, woven bags and baskets, woolen blankets, leather sandals, straw hats decorated with moss, yellow gourd-like fruits, and flower garlands. While some visitors drink late into the night others go about their devotions in the church. The town was named after the Ch'orti' Mayan chief, who greeted the Spaniards and offered them no resistance when they arrived in 1530 (Borhegyi). Esquipulas, is the Spanish rendering of his Mayan name Kipurha in which *kipur* means "raised or lifted," and *ha* means "water," or spring. There are many springs surrounding Esquipulas. The "es-" prefix was probably added to make the word easier for Spanish speakers to pronounce (Wisdom, *The Chorti* 211).

In 1594 a Mayan reported his vision of Jesus Christ hanging on the cross at the spot where the basilica now stands. Community leaders commissioned Quirio Cataño, a Portuguese carver working in Antigua, to produce a wooden sculpture of a Crucified Christ. Today, a five-foot-tall bronze replica of the original dark-brown wooden statue stands in its place (Fought 521). After gaining local fame for removing curses and curing illnesses, a small chapel was built to house the image and the Vatican authorized its veneration and established January 15, 1596, as the first feast day. The church again recognized the powers of the icon in 1737, when Archbishop Pedro Pardo de Figueroa visited the shrine and was cured of a contagious skin disease. As a thank offering he ordered the construction of a church for the Black Christ. When he died he was buried beneath the sanctuary at the foot of the main altar (Pasinski109).

In 1954 Monseñor Maríano Rosell Arrellano, the Archbishop of Guatemala, removed the image from the basilica and toured the country with it to organize popular opposition to the liberal Arbenz government. Since then the National Liberation Movement (MLN) and other right-wing parties in Eastern Guatemala have used the icon as a national symbol to initiate electoral campaigns (Kendall 155). For many years the Ch'orti' Maya in the Guatemalan state of Chiquimula made an annual sequence of pilgrimages to Esquipulas beginning on January 4. They brought candles and presented them to Pastora, the sheep herder wife of the Black Christ. Today,

while some Ch'orti' go on pilgrimage early in the New Year, most wait for his Saint's Day on January 15th. For those who cannot visit in January they make the pilgrimage during Holy Week, at which time they arrive with small bags filled with red-corn kernels and curled-neck squash that they hang on the arms of the cross. This practice is based on traditional narratives in which the devil appeared to Christ and challenged him by saying: "Let us perform a test. We will see whose blood is better." The devil cut himself first, and in his blood were snakes, poisonous lizards, iguanas, worms, and lizards. Then Christ cut himself, and from his blood came seedlings, corn, beans, squash, and sugar-cane (Fought 439, 491).

Other Mayan groups who live farther from Esquipulas have different traditions. In my research in Momostenango I found that when the copal blackened figure is mentioned he is described as the protector of merchants. Once a year the privilege of dressing the icon in his white satin robes, embroidered with gold and gems, falls to a group of K'iche' traveling merchants from the municipalities of Chichicastenango, Nahualá, San Francisco el Alto, and Momostenango. They consider Don Esquipulas to be, like themselves, a traveling merchant. Some of them walk each year with huge loads of merchandise on their backs all the way from their highland villages (a two to three week walk). Others travel in trucks with their woolen blankets and grinding stones to sell during the week of fiesta. As they approach their destination they stop at dozens of stone altars and cairns on nearby ridges along the way to pray. They adorn the stone altars with flowers and pine needles, then open corn-husk incense wrappers, light bees-wax candles, and burn copal as an offering to their ancestors. As the incense and candles burn they study the fire for omens and ask for health and luck in trading. Then they leave to visit Sesecapa, a nearby spring, where they bathe in its curative water and gather some to take home. Then they pray, light more candles, and enter a man-made cave where the walls and ceiling are covered with soot and the floors are littered with pine needles, flower petals, matches, and corn-husk wrappers. After praying for good health and business they study the walls for images and listen for omens, then leave to visit the church where they purchase *tierra santo* (sacred earth) also known as *pan del Señor* (bread of the Lord). These healing tablets made from locally mined white earth bear embossed images of the sun, flowers, hearts, St. Andrew's crosses, the crucifixion, and rosary beads.

Mayan pilgrims at the site explained their reasons for eating the clay tablets as a remedy counteracting nausea, diarrhea, and hunger pains from fasting. Women say that they eat earth in order to counteract morning sickness and ensure a safe delivery. Scientific testing has revealed that the tablets supply key mineral nutrients and trace elements including iron, calcium, selenium, magnesium, copper, potassium, manganese, nickel, cobalt, and zinc that are especially useful for

pregnant women and their growing fetuses. The amounts of such minerals and trace elements found in each tablet compares favorably with industrial pharmaceutical products used for mineral supplementation during pregnancy (Hunter and de Kleine 165). They dissolve a tablet in a glass of water and drink it asking permission of the day lords to enter the church. Dropping to their knees they cross the threshold and crawl into the immense basilica lighted by electrified silver chandeliers. They make the long approach down the nave on their knees holding in one hand either 13 candles and in the other 20 candles since 13 times 20 equals 260 days, the length of the Mayan earth calendar. On their way out they back down a side-aisle facing the statue as they leave.

Patterns of Accommodation and Resistance

This combination of ancient religious worship with colonial Christian pilgrimage has been documented elsewhere. Charles Wisdom, a scholar of the Ch'orti', discussed what he saw as "an end product of the combination of Spanish Roman Catholicism and the indigenous religion and magic," noting that "what we have is not a mere combining of two elements, a grafting of one upon another, but rather what might be called a complete fusion, to the extent that the Indians themselves are unaware that any such historical process has taken place" (Wisdom, "The supernatural and curing" 119). If one pays attention to the details of these pilgrimages, one finds conscious and unconscious resistance against superimposed value systems. Coexistence of antithetical religions does not lead to synthesis as so many scholars thought; instead of fusion there was friction. Members of global religious and political hierarchies mask indigenous resistance by creating a hegemonic discourse declaring a timeless, genderless, nation-less common identity among all pilgrims. This has been the case since the fourth century when Jerusalem was constructed as a pilgrimage site by Constantine who unified his empire by providing a visible topography for the legends, sacred books, and liturgy of the newly adopted state religion, Christianity.

The Roman Catholic Church has a long history of capitalizing on popular pilgrimages which blend local with Christian symbols as a form of "inculturation" in which the gospel is said to be dressed in local cultural clothing (Beaver 57). This concept of inculturation combines the anthropological concept of acculturation with a theological understanding of incarnation (Angrosino 825). However, rather than adopting either the social science concept of "acculturation" or the Christian concept of "inculturation" we might do better to compare Ch'orti' with K'iche' and other pilgrimage practices. Ch'orti' Maya make the one-day walk as family groups several times a year. A small all-male delegation of K'iche' Mayan merchants make the long two-to-three-week trip across Guatemala but once a year. This difference is revealing in that

while the Ch'orti' are following the popular Christian pattern of egalitarian family pilgrimage, the K'iche' are following a Precolumbian hierarchical pattern of all-male royal pilgrimage.

An image of the crucified Christ was planted in a church built on top of a Ch'orti' shrine in 1596 as part of the spiritual conquest of the Maya. Thus, the Ch'orti' participate in a form of mystical materialism in a location that was sacred to them in Precolumbian times, but one where Roman Catholic priests during the colonial period encouraged them to assimilate Christian spirituality with European life styles. The end result of five centuries of visits to this shrine, where masses and sermons are said nearly every day of the year, is that the Ch'orti' now embrace the strongly dualistic worldview espoused by Roman Catholics. In their current religious cosmology, as expressed in prayers and oral narratives, the devil, whose blood carries stinging insects and biting animals, is purely evil while Christ, whose blood carries the seeds of useful plants, is purely good (Fought 491). This oppositional emphasis, leading to ritual exorcism of the negative pole, is the main performative mode wherever Christianity has imposed itself on other faiths (Fox 326). When we examine the figure of Christ, or Ih'pen in the Ch'orti' language, we find that he is actually a hybrid indigenous solar-earth deity (Girard 273). Although Ch'orti Mayans do not include a cave visit to the earthly Christ as a formal part of their pilgrimages they adorn the statue with agricultural icons including red-corn kernels and squashes (Fought 498).

K'iche' merchants and other Mayans who make the pilgrimage to Esquipulas believe that the Black Christ is a powerful being who can impoverish or enrich, and cause as well as cure illness. He is not compatible with Christian oppositional dualism where God is totally good and must be worshipped while the devil is totally evil and must be exorcised. Further, the wooden image of the crucified Christ in the basilica is neither a representation of a Christian deity nor a Mayan ancestral deity. They point out that if this were so, his skin should be either the color of Caucasians, the pink of *conquistadore* dance masks, or the color of ancestral powdered bones, ash white. Instead, his skin is deep earthen brown. Further, as an important earth deity he is worthy of respect and even fear, so before they undertake their annual pilgrimage they undergo eighty days of prayer, fasting, and sexual abstinence. These beliefs and pilgrimage practices contain very little Christian symbolism or theology; instead, they are forms of resistance to the hegemony of Christianity. But perhaps the most telling observation of all is that of Audelino Soc Coy, a K'iche' Mayan daykeeper from the town of Zunil who observes "At the church of Esquipulas you see a person lighting 13 or 20 candles. It's not just an accident, but a way that the Maya calendar (13 x 20 = 260) still informs people's spiritual practices" (Molesky-Poz, 25).

Postmodern Mayan Pilgrimages

In the spring of 2007 Mayans from seven villages—Acalán, Conil, Ochtakah, Zamá, Xcambó, Xamanhá, and Ichpatun—reenacted their ancient long-distance pilgrimage by canoe to the island of Cozumel seeking rain, abundance, and fertility. During the first crossing one hundred and eighty rowers in thirty twenty-six foot dugout canoes undertook the arduous six hour 50 km roundtrip from Polé, or Xcaret, to the island of Cozumel, and back to Xamanhá, or Playa del Carmen.

Over the past four years this pilgrimage to honor the Mayan goddess Ixchel has been elaborated (Patel). It is advertised on the Internet and reenacted by local inhabitants of the Mexican states of Yucatán, Campeche, and Quintana Roo for themselves and their international visitors (Leperi). The canoes, costumes, dances, and makeup are researched by members of the National Institute of Anthropology and History, and the Maya Centre of the National Council for Culture and the Arts of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Rodríguez). Choreographers and composers, as well as makeup and costume artists are hired by staff members of Xcaret, an eco-archaeological park in Yucatán (Mallin). Non-Mayans can view videos of the past journeys, read testimonial statements, and register on-line for a future pilgrimage in order to become members of the “cast.” http://www.xcaret.com/sitios/sacred_Mayan_journey/home.html.

Participants have included the mayors of Cozumel and Solidarida and the CEO of Xcaret, who wish to support Mayan culture and strengthen the cultural identity of local people. Spanish and Mexican couples who hope to become, or are already, pregnant also participate in the three-day pilgrimage.



Figure 13. Dugout canoe on its way to the Island of Cozumel, Yucatán bearing women representing the Moon Goddess Ix Chel

Each year the canoe numbered 13 in the ancient Mayan bar-and-dot notation carries five women dressed in red clothing, each representing a phase of the moon: new, first quarter, half, full, third quarter. During the pilgrimage the participants run history in reverse (Sutherland). By so doing they link inner techniques of self-transformation, suffering, and desire to landscapes of collective memory of the conquest and colonization of the Maya, and their remarkable resilience and cultural florescence today.

Conclusion

The range of Mayan pilgrim activities and the diversity of the cultures within which they occur reveal that while pilgrimage is a public event, it is connected with personal needs, emotions, and other inner states. As such, it blends spiritual journey with social action. Mayan pilgrimage sites carry meaning at a wide variety of organizational levels from the individual with a vow or request, to the local community where the shrine is located, to the nation with its political agenda, to an international church that encourages pilgrimage to demonstrate and bolster faith. These sites are places of contested meaning, visited by pilgrims with a wide range of purposes, carrying a variety of symbolic messages that are not necessarily the same for all who visit the site. Thus, at Esquipulas, Cozumel, and other large pilgrimage shrines there exists a diversity of views about the value of pilgrimage, depending on the activities performed there as much as the social and ethnic identity of the participants.

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