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**A Maya Trickster: Rilaj Mam
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A Maya Trickster: Rilaj Mam and Resisting Spanishness

Abstract

Within the Kaqchikel-Maya community of Guatemala, the recently popular effigy Rilaj Mam can be understood as a trickster figure, a storytelling trope which traditionally subverts an established order through trickery and/or deception. As we examine his contemporary representation, Rilaj Mam is considered a Maya ancestor, and variations in his origin tales often include his mysteriously escaping and deceiving his Spanish conquerors. In a society that finds itself in this negotiation process due to neoliberal forces of economic and cultural reorganization, Rilaj Mam is a trickster that has come to represent opposition to the invasores, to the colonial Spanish invaders and simultaneously all that is foreign in present day as he mediates a hybrid culture of tradition and modernity. Lacking other means of valorization, he is a way in which the Kaqchikel can negotiate their own position within society: by means of a figure who represents resistance to Spanishness.

Resumen

Un embaucador maya: Rilaj Mam y la resistencia a lo español

Dentro de la comunidad maya-kaqchikel de Guatemala, se puede entender una efigia recientemente popular llamado Rilaj Mam como un embaucador, un tropo tradicional que subvierte los órdenes establecidos por medio de las artimañas y/o la decepción. Al examinar su representación contemporánea, Rilaj Mam se considera un ancestro maya, y las variaciones en los cuentos acerca de sus orígenes a menudo incluyen la evasión y la decepción de los conquistadores españoles. En una sociedad que se encuentra en el proceso de negociación a causa de la influencia neoliberal de reorganización económica y cultural, Rilaj Mam es un embaucador que ha llegado a representar la oposición a los invasores españoles y, simultáneamente, a todo lo foráneo en la actualidad. Sirve como mediador de una cultura híbrida que se sitúa entre la tradición y la modernidad. Careciendo de otros modos de valorización, ésta es una manera en que los kaqchikeles pueden negociar su posición dentro de la sociedad: por medio de una figura que representa la resistencia a lo español.

I. Introduction

Tourist magazines in Guatemala and basic web searches for Maya spirituality inevitably reveal images of a small, cryptic wooden effigy donning scarves, a Stetson cowboy hat, and a fat cigar. Without a doubt an intriguing figure, Rilaj Mam has recently gained popularity among the Kaqchikel-Maya of Guatemala. Traditionally, research on Rilaj Mam has focused on his hybrid nature. The term hybrid in this case historically has referred to instances of religious syncretism that couple him with Catholicism. This approach has appeared mostly in research in the Tz'utujil-Maya community, a separate ethnolinguistic group that is generally credited with the genesis of this figure. Nevertheless, despite these origins, he has become a prominent figure in the spiritual practices of Kaqchikel *ajq'ija*¹. On the basis of interactions with Kaqchikel spiritual

¹ This is the Kaqchikel term for their spiritual leaders, and it is often translated as “Maya priest” or “shaman.” It literally means one who works with the days/sun, a direct reference to the Maya sacred

practitioners who work with Rilaj Mam and his devotees, I propose a different understanding of the use of this figure in the Kaqchikel community. In each instance I have encountered, Rilaj Mam was never seen as the emblem inserted into Catholic tradition, the Judas betrayer or the Christ figure twin, as he is in other interpretations. Rather, he is always representative of the Maya ancestors, and variations in his story often include his mysteriously escaping and deceiving his Spanish conquerors. As we examine his contemporary usage and his characterization in these stories, we see that he can be understood as a trickster figure, a storytelling trope which traditionally subverts an established order through trickery, deception, and/or evasion. Rilaj Mam instead indicates a response to a hybrid social climate, as in García Canclini's model which understands hybridity as a negotiation between tradition and modernity. In a society that finds itself in this negotiation process due to neoliberal forces of economic and cultural reorganization – manifest in increasing religious plurality, economic and ethnic inequality, drug-related violence, and a growing tourism industry which appropriates Mayan culture – Rilaj Mam is a trickster that has come to represent opposition to the *invasores*, to the colonial Spanish invaders and simultaneously all that is foreign in present day. He is a way in which the Kaqchikel can mediate their own position within society: by means of a figure who represents resistance to Spanishness.

II. Rilaj Mam, a Kaqchikel Effigy

The Lord of Looking Good. That's his humorous – yet ironically apropos – nickname as christened by North American researcher Robert S. Carlsen. He has many other names, most frequently known as San Simón, El Monchito, Maximón, Mam, El Tata, and Rilaj Mam². Although these terms are the most common, there are many that are used to name him: he is, without a doubt, a figure of shifting identities. Rilaj Mam is the saint-like figure to whom the Maya of Guatemala appeal for spiritual guidance. His wooden effigy frequently appears on altars throughout the country, and his favorite offerings make a handsome trio: alcohol, money, and tobacco. To understand the importance of Rilaj Mam as a central character in Kaqchikel spiritual practices, we must first examine his contemporary tales of origin. As the story goes, Rilaj Mam was once a man who lived before the arrival of the Spanish. Beyond that, the tale varies. Some say that he was built out of the wood of the sacred and almost magical *tz'ite'* tree or *palo de pito* – whistling tree – by the *nawales*, spirit energies who walked the earth as humans, to prevent their women from having affairs while they were absent from home. Rilaj Mam, however, fell into the same trap he was created to prevent, and he used his shape-shifting abilities to lure women into trysts with him. To remedy this, the *nawales* cut him into pieces and put his head on backwards before reassembling him. Another version explains that he was a Maya *ajq'ij* who resisted the Spanish conquest. The Spanish pursued him, but he repeatedly evaded capture using his transformative powers. Finally, he was caught

calendar which plays a central role in their work. I use the singular *ajq'ij* and the plural *ajq'ija'* where appropriate.

² I use the term Rilaj Mam in this paper because it is common in the town of Tecpán, an important spiritual center of the contemporary Kaqchikel.

and either hung or torn to pieces. Yet another version states that he was captured by the Spanish and locked up for continuing to practice traditional Maya spirituality, but he escaped mysteriously from his jail cell several times before finally being put to death. The root of his perhaps most well-known name, Maximón in the Tz'utujil-Maya language, is indicative of these stories. In each version, Maximón is somehow dismembered and reassembled, usually donning scarves which symbolically hold together the pieces of wood that represent his once-whole body. Appropriately, the etymology of this name, Maximón, reflects these tales: "Ma" in Tz'utujil is a term of address for a male, much like "sir," while "ximon" means "tied up" or "knotted." As a rule, the stories surrounding this figure vary widely. While he is often represented as living at the time of the Spanish conquest, and even said to be the Kaqchikel kings Kaji' Imox and B'eleje Kat who ruled Iximche' when the Spanish first arrived in the 16th century (Rodas Hernández n. pag.), he is also said to appear at other important historical moments, such as amidst Spanish rule and during the late 20th century armed conflict.

Like all of the ancestral, authoritative figures that are invoked in Kaqchikel rituals, the ajq'ija' who utilize him operate based on a two-pronged authority. On the one hand, these historical-mythical figures such as Rilaj Mam, whose name literally means "Mighty Grandfather" or "Great Ancestor," are considered to be authorities themselves. These ancestral figures are the bearers of wisdom, both practical and metaphysical, a knowledge which is accessed via the portal to other realms of existence provided through the sacred fire in ceremonies. We can understand this assertion as not only an artifact of a culture which values the elderly as possessors of the wisdom of life, but also as an interest in ancestral – and specifically Maya – ties. By invoking these figures and asking for their guidance, the Kaqchikel recognize and moreover intentionally utilize a claim to their heritage as descendants of the ancient Maya. On the other hand, the ajq'ija' are themselves figures of authority. In some respects, the responsibility of an ajq'ij to his or her community is precisely to be an authority on the guidance provided by the ancestral figures and supernatural forces. Indeed both ancestral figures as well as contemporary ajq'ija' are considered authoritative guides within Maya communities who, by means of inheritance and an innate gift, bestow the knowledge that will cure various ailments as well as bestow the lifestyle that will maintain health and general well-being.



Figure 1. Rilaj Mam figures, complete with their varas or staffs that represent both their authority and their profession as *ajq'ija'*.

This connection between the authority of the ancestors and the authority of the *ajq'ija'* is deliberate, particularly in the case of Rilaj Mam. The connection that links the ancestral Maya figures to the present-day *ajq'ija'* through an endowed authority is physically evident in the use of a *vara*, or staff. Upon graduating from their training, each *ajq'ij* is given a wooden staff which they not only use to stir the fire when performing ceremonies, but which also serves as a symbol of their authority. Every *ajq'ij* must have a *vara*. Rilaj Mam historically was himself an *ajq'ij*,



Figure 2. The San Simón at San Andrés Itzapa, with Spiderman blanket (probably an offering, as all of Rilaj Mam's clothes are gifts) and flashing welcome sign. Here he wears a black suit, a recurring form of dress on other Kaqchikel Rilaj Mam effigies.

and every proper Kaqchikel effigy of him also includes the staff that symbolizes this authority. Figure 1 displays several Rilaj Mam effigies. In the Kaqchikel speaking region, Rilaj Mam wears either a suit or the traditional dress of a town from the Kaqchikel geographic area. One arm always holds his *vara* that is both the symbol of his authority and the indicator of his profession as an *ajq'ij*. He is sometimes dressed in a Western-style black suit, and he always wears a hat, both of which are generally considered to have been gifts from devotees. It may be Stetson cowboy style – popular among males in Guatemala – as seen in Figure 2, or it may be traditional Maya grass reed style, as seen in Figure 1. His black suit is often attributed to the influence of the well-known Rilaj Mam effigy in San Andrés Itzapa (Figure 2), where he has another confraternity and is more commonly called San Simón.



Figure 3. The altar of Kaqchikel ajq'ij Berta Batzin which bears two Rilaj Mam figures. The larger of the two dons a traditional tz'ute' cloth in the style of Santiago Sacatepéquez, where she resides.

Rilaj Mam most frequently appears on the in-home altars of ajq'ija'. In this domestic context, he serves as one of many tools which ajq'ija' use to treat their patients, once again by means of his role as a bearer of ancestral knowledge which also necessarily implies knowledge of holistic curing techniques as well as a supernatural ability to grant the devotee his or her wishes. Besides his authority as a diviner of justice (hence why he is always seated like a judge), he is also the ancestor to which a person appeals when they are asking for something that is considered necessary yet outside the realm of immediate needs for survival (Stanzione 61): multiple cars, success in business, avoiding a jail sentence, and so forth. Like most tools utilized by ajq'ija', the ultimate goal in these situations is to appeal to a source of Maya wisdom that may have power over a scenario that the devotee feels unable to control otherwise.

Examining Figures 1-4, it is evident that Rilaj Mam's physical form varies; his features are sometimes fine and sometimes more grotesque, his skin color can be any array of colors, and his clothing is not entirely consistent. Although the variation in Rilaj Mam's appearance would seem a mere inconsistency, to the contrary, this flexibility in his physical representation concurrently functions within his schema as a trickster figure, which I elaborate in Section IV. This persona allows him to evade categorization as he slides between identities, thus making his various manifestations seem natural because his changing appearance is expected. It is also of note that while all ajq'ija' are familiar with the basic principles of caring for a Rilaj Mam effigy, such as always placing fresh flowers before him, there is no singular canon which states exactly how he must be displayed, dressed, and utilized. This allows him an added degree of changeability according to the

specific situation of each ajq'ij, which we see clearly in the photographs provided. Rilaj Mam may change dress according to the town in which he resides, indicating a variety of local identity as well as inevitably implying ethnic allegiance. He is seen



Figure 4. The altar of Lidia Marina Ixcajoc of Santiago Sacatepéquez displays Rilaj Mam wearing both a black Western-style suit and a woven fabric often used for a Kaqchikel uq' - corte or skirt. At his side sits the Virgin Mary and a crucified Christ figure.

next to or wearing uniquely Maya items – such as the four-colored Maya cross to the far left in Figure 3. Additionally, the type of cloth draped around his shoulders in Figures 3 and 4 and on his lap in Figure 5 is the product of backstrap loom weaving, a technique still commonly practiced but originating (via archeological evidence and also mythically through the goddess weaver figure Ixchel) with the ancient Maya (Hendrickson 151). It is precisely due to this flexibility that Rilaj Mam becomes a barometer of the attitudes of the ajq'ij and the dynamics of their local situation. Each of these instances illustrates that he is repeatedly constructed as a Maya figure, displayed among other Maya items, as he perpetuates the knowledge of Maya ancestors. Nevertheless, his appearance alongside explicitly Catholic imagery as in Figure 4 is the result of a particular religious ecology of the town Santiago Sacatepéquez in which the Catholic and Evangelical sects are in opposition to the practice of traditional Maya spirituality. The owner of that particular altar explains that she added the Virgin Mary and crucifix to attract more visitors after the church preached against visiting the ajq'ij. Similarly, when I asked ajq'ij Berta Batzin about a word she had used in a ceremony invocation, wondering if it meant “Christ,” she replied that no, she had not mentioned Jesus Christ, but she could invoke him if I wished

to have him present in my ceremony. This spiritual dexterity allows Rilaj Mam to reflect the contemporary religious ambience by serving as a resource which the *ajq'ija'* use to adapt to the changing needs of their community.

III. Celebrating Rilaj Mam

Rilaj Mam's festival day proper is October 28th, which of no coincidence is also the Roman Catholic saint day for San Simón, Saint Simon the Apostle. A celebration in Santa Catarina Barahona which took place on the 27th was intended to usher in that date with much dancing, drinking, and merry-making into the wee hours of the night. At this particular celebration, one of many occurring in towns around the highlands, the ceremony began in the late afternoon, and the wide, corral-style tin doors were propped open, exposing the ceremonial circle and its participants inside. Past the ceremonial area, the once empty dirt patio was now filled with a large tent with balloons and commercially-produced Rilaj Mam cutout banners strung from end to end as well as a quantity of folding chairs. Inside the tent, one end held a platform and lively marimba band, while the other staged four separate Rilaj Mam figures, shrouded in woven fabric and surrounded by flowers, candles, cigarettes, bottles of alcohol, and monetary offerings (see Figure 5). The space under the tent was mostly empty but would soon be filled with dancing participants, first for the ritualistic dance the *baile del abuelo* and later for general celebration and diversion. Inside the tent, devotees lined up as they arrived, kneeling and presenting their offering of choice to Rilaj Mam.



Figure 5. Four Rilaj Mam effigies are displayed on his festival day in Santa Catarina Barahona. Placed on the lap of the central figure is an expensive style of hand-woven *tz'ute'* cloth in the famous style of the neighboring town, San Antonio Aguas Calientes.

On this celebratory day, as the rainy season was beginning to wane, somber and expressionless onlookers stood around the ceremonial fire, indicating the ritual seriousness of this event. As devotees approached the Rilaj Mam altar inside the tent, outside the ceremony continued to drive on, eliciting the direction of six or seven *ajq'ija'* at once. Participants came and went freely into the ceremony, adding candles and alcohol to the flame as they wished. At what was clearly the climax of the ceremony, an *ajq'ij* held a large white rooster high as he stood around the rim of the fire circle before sacrificing and offering it to the flame. Three *Kaqchikel ajq'ija'* participated in this portion of the ritual, each assuming different responsibilities in the repartition of sacred duties and materials. José and Tojil, brother-in-laws whose home was the location of this festival, took turns dancing while holding the rooster, stepping slowly back and forth as they danced to the blaring marimba music. They held it over the fire to allow the smoke to reach the bird, a necessary action to bless the animal and to instill it with the burning petitions of the people, thereby carrying those wishes to the ancestors in its death. The rooster consequently serves as a tool of communication with ancestral spirits, as do all ceremonial materials. The sacrifice of a chicken is a somewhat greater offering than the simpler candles, resin, and incense also provided, reflecting more devotion and reverence and therefore an assumedly more favorable outcome from the ritual. After each *ajq'ija'* danced around the fire with the bird, completing a circle, Tojil kneeled in each of the four cardinal directions. Orienting the human body in the four cardinal directions is a common ritual event in *Kaqchikel* ceremonies, and it is an action which usually symbolizes asking for a blessing as well as permission from the ancestral guardians of each of the four cardinal directions. Actions such as these indicate that the sacrifice of the rooster is deeply embedded within the *Kaqchikel* belief in and reliance on the continued contact with their antecedents. This is, after all, the ultimate goal of the Rilaj Mam festival: to revere and please one of the greatest and most meaningful Maya ancestors. Therefore as we look to understand the meaning in these actions, we must consider their context within a paradigm which necessarily situates them vis-à-vis an ancestral knowledge system which continues to motivate the actions of its contemporary inheritors.

Following their dances around the fire, Tojil held the rooster over the fire as José decapitated it. They signaled for the music to liven as Tojil began a hurried and choppy dance holding the body of the bird, while José suspended the head over the flame, letting the blood drip out before casting it on the blaze. Smoke billowed as the fire crackled, receiving its alimentation of blood as the rooster's body was drained by Tojil's movements. The hazy smoke was complemented by the introduction of incense, burning in an old can that swayed from the end of a wire hanger, as a woman suspended its back-and-forth movement. José and Tojil knelt to the ground, where they placed the chicken and began cutting³. Eventually they emerged with the heart, which Tojil held in his hand, suspended over the flames, as he danced. German and José went about the business of quartering the bird. Once complete, German held the wings in the air, saying a blessing and likely making a petition, and then added the wings as well as the remaining parts of

³ We should note here that the cutting of the bird by the *ajq'ija'* was somewhat unusual, as that task is usually not performed by *ajq'ija'* but instead other participants, often women.

the bird to the fire. After completing his dance, Tojil went into the tent and placed the heart in front of the central Rilaj Mam effigy. He returned to the ceremonial circle, where all three *ajq'ija'* washed their hands over the fire with a bottle of liquor, shaking the excess alcohol from their hands onto the flames before drinking a small amount from a glass and continuing the ceremony.

There are two noteworthy liquid substances at play in this ritual: alcohol and blood. The first, alcohol, must always be present in Kaqchikel ceremonies. It is one of the most vital offerings to the ancestors, who partake in the burning materials as if they were a meal. Giving the ancestors alcohol, and moreover drinking it oneself, is the equivalent of sharing a drink or toasting these spirits, as one would do out of respect for a living person. The use of alcohol in ceremony is also viewed as an inherited practice. Whereas the ancestral Maya made a form of *chicha* using fermented maize, today this is sometimes substituted with *kuxa* (also made of fermented maize) or most often with *aguardiente*, a clear hard liquor which is commercially produced. The ancestral Rilaj Mam in particular consumed *chicha*, and the use of other alcoholic substitutes is an imitation of this preference (Hernández n. pag.). Thus in much the same way that other ceremonial rituals are intended to be a mimesis of ancient Maya practices, so is the consumption of alcohol, particularly in reference to Rilaj Mam. Finally, the washing of hands is a cleansing, both practically and spiritually, which shows the necessary respect for these spirits as well as serving as a ritual manner to symbolize the change (via cleansing) that is expected to take place through performing the ritual.

The letting of blood appears a more troublesome activity to interpret, due to the polemic nature of the topic of sacrifice. In Guatemala there still circulates an array of myths surrounding the use of sacrifice by the contemporary Maya; I was once asked by a Christian missionary whether it was true that “they” sacrifice babies. Besides the lack of knowledge of ecclesiastic foreigners, there is also the view that it is simply a barbaric, pagan, or violent practice. To the contrary, we must understand the practice of animal sacrifice within the cultural context in which it occurs. We acknowledge here, of course, that the goal of a ceremonial ritual is to access the superior knowledge of the gods to assist in remedying the matter at hand. In this framework, Carrasco reveals that the ancestral Maya used bloodletting because it was believed that blood permitted the ancestors and deities to enter into the world of humans (56), thus allowing a direct communion with them and thereby their knowledge base. This cultural logic appears to be utilized and reworked today, as Christenson elaborates, “In Maya society, blood is the most precious substance because it bears within itself the spirit or essence of the ancestors and thus, by extension, of the founding deities from whom they descended. It is therefore the repository of life which transcends individuals to include the ancestral dead” (128). The letting of blood allows therefore not only a connection with the ancestors in a metaphysical sense, but also in a historically referential sense that shows a conscious intent by the Kaqchikel to maintain the practices of their ancestors. Furthermore, because the goal is to help or cure a human, often the animal is offered as a substitute or an alternative form of payment to the gods in exchange for their aid. In this regard, one of two scenarios may be at work. The animal may serve to absorb any negative energy that may be lingering

around the person, thereby expunging that energy in its death, or the animal's death may symbolically take the place of that of the human (Guarcas López n. pag.). In both of these examples of the use of alcohol and blood, we see a highly self-referential system which aims to uphold ancestral Maya epistemology while also promoting a spiritual transformation for the participants.

IV. Rilaj Mam the Trickster

Although Guatemalan society is divided into two categories of ethnicity, Maya and ladino (often incorrectly glossed as *mestizo*), these seemingly ethnic categories are in reality somewhat misnomers. In general it is considered necessary to be ethnically Maya in order to be Maya, but at the same time the other markers of ethnic identity are changeable: dress, language, place of residence or lifestyle. A Maya person may become “ladinized” by leaving behind their Maya way of life and adopting the ladino one – by moving to the city and wearing Western-style clothing, for example. Therefore “what has distinguished Indians and non-Indians over time has not been biological heritage, but a changing system of social classification, based on ideologies of race, class, language, and culture, which ideologies have also taken on difference meanings over time” (qtd in Fischer and Brown 9). Thus the social situation surrounding the question of ethnicity in Guatemala dictates the need for sometimes fluid boundaries. These are provided in part through performative ritual expression which employs a trickster figure.

If we examine the multiple versions of his origin tales, they point to Rilaj Mam's central characterization as a trickster. He is a cunning and deviant character who evades both social and natural laws. He likes vicious substances such as alcohol and tobacco, and he is often portrayed as sexually promiscuous. Perhaps most importantly, he always evades capture by the Spanish through tricks: he mysteriously and repeatedly escapes from his bindings or from jail. This common storytelling image of the trickster is no stranger to Maya culture, as we can observe in the famous twin heroes of the *Popol Wuj*, Jun Ajpu' and IxB'alam Kej. These twin brothers, in this seminal pre-Columbian creation text, descended into the underworld to defeat the Lords through a series of tests. In each instance they had to use some sort of trick, since as humans they were necessarily weaker than the Lords of Xibalba', the underworld. Even their birth was made possible through trickery. Their mother, the goddess Lady Blood, became impregnated with twins when the skull of a previous twin god, perched in a tree, spit into her hand⁴. Believing she had engaged in improper fornication, the other Lords sent owls to retrieve her heart in punishment. Together, she and the owls tricked them by instead sending back congealed red croton tree sap in a bowl, which they mistakenly believed to be her heart. In this way, the twins who would eventually defeat the Lords of Xibalba' were saved.

⁴ Thus their essence as humans is somewhat ambiguous, in accordance with a trickster figure image. Yet, although engendered magically from a goddess and spittle from a tree bearing the head of a previously defeated twin god, they had only human capabilities and defeated the Lords of the Xibalba' through trickery instead of divine powers.

Relating this tradition to Rilaj Mam, we see the trickster figure rearticulated in a contemporary context. His legendary depictions show him to be a trickster in several ways. In addition to escaping from his bindings or from jail, he is also a shape shifter. Some stories portray him taking on various manifestations or professions, having earned this capability through his authority and gift as an *ajq'ij*. Interestingly, his ability to shape shift neatly compliments his ability to evade capture in a miraculous or almost magical, Macandal-like way. Rilaj Mam's legends have also transmuted into the present, where it is not uncommon for people to believe that he still manifests himself under various guises in a myriad of locations. In his contemporary use for spiritual purposes, he is often invoked in ceremonies not one time but rather multiple times as his various professions, most commonly, as a judge, a lawyer, and a mayor. Likewise, he is also invoked in his various locations: Chicastenango, Zunil, Santiago Atitlán, El Quiché, and so forth (Batzin n. pag.). These are also places where he maintains a well-known altar, but invoking him in these diverse locations seems a deliberate reference to his prolific physical manifestations. In a similar manner, Rilaj Mam is sometimes connected to the specific town of the *ajq'ij*, such as in the case of Tecpán, which is situated next to the post-classic period Kaqchikel capital Iximché'. Here he is also represented as Kaji' Imox and/or B'eleje' Kat, the last rulers of Iximché', where he resisted the (eventually successful) Spanish conquest of the city before being killed. These stories, which are repeated and utilized in a contemporary context, appear to promote optimism through the idea of magical evasion. In a seemingly hopeless situation, he is still able to escape. While Rilaj Mam did not defeat the gods of Xibalba', he did attempt to defeat an equally important enemy with superior powers: the Spanish.

Within the realm of traditional tales, the trickster figure as a trope typically represents an inversion of authority or of order, overturning structures and boundaries through his playful yet devious games. Rilaj Mam exemplifies this category, as he is venerated somewhat like the Catholic saints while simultaneously occupying an independent position as an ancestral Maya figure. Specifically, he functions in much the same way as a Catholic saint, in that saints not only provide a model for spiritual life, but they are also capable of interceding for humans with God (Gillis n. pag.). Moreover, his occasional position within a confraternity structure, a religious organizational system originating within Roman Catholicism in the Middle Ages, also indicates that he functions in a saint-like manner, providing a specific place where devotees may come to worship or make petitions. Also of note is his ability to appear in various locations in different forms, a phenomenon seen in saints, most notably the Virgin Mary, whose visage notoriously appears in unexpected places. Similar to the Catholic saints, although he is great he is also human. Rilaj Mam is special in this regard, however. He is not merely human, but rather he is a human who is particularly prone to vice and deviant behavior. Therefore, while he mimics a Catholic saint in the devotional sense and in his ability to commune with a higher power to answer humans' petitions, he also functions as a sort of parody of a saint. His behavior is not an ideal to be modeled, but rather it is behavior that is utterly human. He is simultaneously supernatural and natural.

For the Kaqchikel, Rilaj Mam can be understood as an allegorical figure, symbolizing a continuity of the pre-Columbian Maya ancestors and ancestral knowledge.

Cristobal Cojtí, an ajq'ij from Tecpán, explained that Rilaj Mam has been called “the last prophet of the colonization” as well as the *Gran Abuelo*, “Mighty Grandfather,” the literal translation of his name and a term used by many other ajq'ija'. Appropriately, reverence for this figure has historically provided a means to generate Maya resistance to the Spanish conquest. Referring to the colonial encounter, when, after Rilaj Mam's death the Kaqchikel continued to revere him through ceremonies, Cristobal posited: “This functioned so that the people could continue with their fight for their livelihood, for their rights, so that they could resist and not be exterminated in the colonization.” Here we arrive at the confluence of Rilaj Mam's origin tales, his characterization as a trickster figure, and his contemporary usage. Among all of the variations in his origin tales there is one commonality: transformation. In most versions of the story, he is depicted as somehow evading authority through supernatural transformation of his physical self. He is a trickster that does not merely play the protagonist in a story about how the contact-period Maya deceived the Spanish invaders, a hero who escaped the Spanish as the Maya wished they could have done. Although he was killed, like most trickster figures, he never really dies. Instead, he is continually reborn and transformed, following “a law of human nature: that we come back to life” (Cojtí n. pag.), while at the same time providing a sense of hope that perhaps the Maya can still evade Spanishness and all that is foreign, saving what is continually under the threat of being lost. At this point it is fitting to address his physical form, which is decidedly Western with his suit and medium to light skin tone. We can understand this appearance to be an aspect of his shape-shifting capabilities and a poignant one at that, as Rilaj Mam has effectively shifted into the exact form he seeks to defeat.

Jeanne Smith explains that the trickster simultaneously embodies both tradition and change, capable of maneuvering the complexities and paradoxes presented in the culturally multivalent societies of our postmodern world. The trickster questions the categories of his native culture, accomplishing this criticism through indirect, playful trickery. Just as the twin gods of the *Popol Wuj* could defeat a stronger adversary and as Rilaj Mam could evade the Spanish who had superior belletristic technology, the innate, subversive critique is that these hierarchies can be overturned not by physical force but rather by cunning or astuteness. Tricksters are common in the tales of the subaltern, and they appear in particular cultural scenarios. More specifically: “Mythic and folkloric figures such as the trickster play a crucial role in building and transforming culture; these figures are especially likely to appear when the culture's values or prosperity are threatened, either internally or externally” (Smith 3). With this knowledge, we can begin to understand the emergence of Rilaj Mam in Kaqchikel society. He is serving to mediate one context, the present, in which the Kaqchikel find themselves threatened by referring to another: the conquest.

The nature of the pan-Maya cultural movement in Guatemala, which exploded in popularity after the end of the civil war in 1995, provides a context necessary to understand the appearance of a symbolic image like Rilaj Mam. In my interactions with the Kaqchikel and many ajq'ija', it is clear to me that the awareness of this cultural movement within the Kaqchikel community has informed spiritual practitioners' understanding of

their work. This is not unlikely given that the Kaqchikel are probably the most “urbanized” Maya group due to their proximity to the capital. In general, proponents of the pan-Maya movement understand Guatemala to be in a situation of internal colonialism, and in this scenario they insist that “peoples must seek their human rights through autonomy, pluralism, and decentralization” (Cojtí Cuxil 27). Because a central goal of the pan-Maya movement is the legitimization of Maya culture as a valid and autonomous group within the nation-state, control over the production of history both distant and recent becomes of great interest to the Kaqchikel. We often see a reshaping of history and folklore into a contemporary usage for the purpose of expressing Maya culture as it is lived and determined by the Maya. It should be noted that these goals are in a direct dialectic with outside influence, as it has historically followed a trajectory from Spanish contact through homogenizing nation-building projects and ending contemporarily with the globalized tourism market. For this reason, the way in which Maya history is reshaped often attempts to emphasize what is distinctly Maya, while at the same time it implies a legitimacy of their culture through emphasis in its ancient epistemological credibility. Rilaj Mam is one of the most salient images exemplifying this phenomenon.

Specifically, what do these tales of transformation and inversion in which Rilaj Mam plays the protagonist mean in contemporary Guatemala? What is the order that must be overturned in this trickster tale? As a symptom of its condition as both a post-colonial and internally colonial nation, Guatemala is built on differences. It is a country of plurality, comprised of a more Westernized ladino population, while there is, by most estimates, an even larger contingent of Maya peoples at around 42 to 87 percent of the total population (Warren (a) 151). Although the Maya likely dominate the country in numbers, they have not been the group that holds power in any official or unofficial capacity. The Kaqchikel, again as a somewhat more urbanized and therefore mediated group, seem to view themselves as negotiating a specific condition of what amounts to internal colonialism. This is where the pan-Maya movement has stepped in and sought to foment the revitalization of Maya culture. In this post-war scenario, “revitalization is not simply a process of reasserting older cultural forms. Rather, it is a self-conscious cultural resynthesis in the face of extraordinary pressure and conflict, when older models no longer orient people in an increasingly unstable reality” (Warren (b) 102). Rilaj Mam as a trickster is an apt example of the ways in which we are seeing a “resynthesis” of cultural forms when the previous forms do not accurately serve the goals of people. Rilaj Mam becomes not just any spiritual saint-like image of reverence, but one whose meaning is primarily found in his distinctly non-Spanish origin. As a historically dominated group of people, the Maya populations of Guatemala are able to claim Rilaj Mam as something that is their own, inherent to their native culture, both past and present. This origin is then reworked in ways that are meaningful to the contemporary Kaqchikel, as he represents not just a non-Spanish figure but more importantly a figure that actually tricked and, in that way, defeated the Spanish. Thus Rilaj Mam fulfills the characterization of a trickster who exists at the seams, “where things are joined together and, thus, can also come apart” (Reesman xiv). As a trickster he calls into question not simply the categories of a culture, but rather the whole hierarchy within the culture, the structure that is responsible for maintaining the dominance of one group over another (Reesman xvi). These

characteristics mean he is uniquely capable of overturning this stratification in a profoundly corrupt and violent country, a playful inversion of authority in the absence of a real ability for the Maya to prompt social change.

Looking at the current history of Guatemala, we find a very recent civil war ended in 1995, and the continued presence of violence as drug trafficking, murders, lynchings, and government corruption keep Guatemala on the list of Latin America's – and even the world's – most dangerous countries. Within the variation of practices in which he is used, Rilaj Mam is seen, above all, as a positive force that is capable of helping the people who seek his guidance. We must recognize that reverence for this image is a part of ritual practice, and all ritual can be understood as primarily being about transformation. As Fernández theorizes, through metaphor ritual serves as a religious experience which allows the subject to feel that they have effected some change on themselves or on the world around them. The person enacting the ritual “exits” the ritual state into a new one: “[b]y persuasion and performance [ritual metaphors] operate upon the member allowing him eventually to exit from the ritual incorporated, empowered, activated, euphoric” (23). We often turn to ritual when we need to change things that we feel are out of our control – such as grave illness, love, money problems, crop growth, rainfall, and so forth. This makes Rilaj Mam a powerful figure in the way in which he provides his followers with a means to continue having faith that their desires will be granted, their problems will be rectified, and their lives will be abundant, especially in the face of change and great adversity.

V. Rilaj Mam's Hybridity: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity

Previous research on Rilaj Mam in the Tz'utujil community typically considers him a prime example of religious syncretism, a blending of two religious symbolic systems, a confluence which is posited to have originated with the conquest. To examine his origins, historic documents dating to the time of Spanish contact record the presence of a bundle of rocks⁵ that was wrapped in cloth, which the Maya revered and called their ancestor (literally “Mam”), and which some researchers have suggested may have been the genesis of the present-day Mam (Vankirk 203). Similarly, he is sometimes cited as having manifest as a stick (or perhaps more appropriately a staff) which the contact-period Maya again called “Mam.” After the conquest, the theory is that this figure became blended with the Catholic San Simón, Simon the Apostle. It is noteworthy, however, that this claim is questionable because there is no written evidence indicating that this dynamic ever took place (Pieper 54). Even if he may not be the result of a mixing specifically with Simon the Apostle, there are many other proposed theories of his hybridity among the Tz'utujil. Mam, according to legend, is often portrayed in varying professions and with diverse appearances, and Morales suggests that this confusion is the result of religious

⁵ Although the Spanish interpreted the bundles as merely rocks, it is likely that these were in fact the sacred bundles which are still used by *ajq'ija'* today and which contain various kinds of *sacra*, such as jade stones and red beans from the magical *tz'ite'* tree.

coalescence: he claims that it emerges from the contact-period Mayas' confusion about the difference between "deities" (their own concept) and saints (a foreign concept) (335)⁶. Indeed the term for "deity" and for saint, with the exception of the term for the supreme creator of the universe, *Ajaw*, remain the same at least in the K'iche'an branch of Mayan languages. Even in the absence of an elaborate theoretical orientation, simple ethnographic evidence, most notably the work of Vincent Stanzione, shows that among the Tz'utujil, Mam is deliberately and patently paired with a Christ-like figure and appears in Holy Week processions. My conversations with Vinny have elaborated this connection with Catholicism; he maintains that Mam is not Catholic himself, but rather he was inserted into the Catholic framework because he did not fit in anyplace else ideologically. In each of these research cases, the Tz'utujil Mam operates within a dual framework of Mayan and Catholic, emerging as an example of religious hybridity in that he shares activities and symbolism between the two frameworks. While this may be an accurate description of how Mam came to exist, and although there are certainly noteworthy similarities among the two communities - most prominently the name as well as his trickster characterization - where we see a difference between the Tz'utujil-based analyses and my own among the Kaqchikels is in an examination of their contemporary practices. This is not surprising given that the Kaqchikels have adopted him more recently, and that the two groups have utilized him independently under different circumstances.

Although archeological evidence suggests that the origin of the figure that has come to be known as Rilaj Mam may, in actuality, be pre-Columbian, of greater note is the way in which stories about this figure have evolved in Kaqchikel society. In fact, the exact historical evolution of Rilaj Mam is somewhat tangential to the task at hand. It is important to recognize that any supposed historical origins, whether they are pre-Columbian or forged in the contact period, have been entirely replaced by the tales that are transmitted among the Kaqchikel community itself. In these stories, Rilaj Mam is portrayed as a human figure who actually lived at the time of the Spanish conquest and who worked to defend his people from foreign invasion. It is fitting to add that, with this knowledge of Rilaj Mam's contemporary significance, we can attest to the importance of evolution in the articulation of communal cultural practices. The truthfulness of his origin tales is once again irrelevant if we are looking at how these acts serve as indicators of cultural belief systems. It is, in fact, more interesting to see how they have evolved and changed according to new situations. This is not to say that these practices cease to pertain to the Maya, or that the Kaqchikel versions are inauthentic, because they somehow become transculturated in their evolution. Rather, the continued adoption of these forms of belief and their accepted significance as Maya, regardless of the whether or not they are actually "purely" Maya in some way or pertain to a specific group, continues to indicate their use in building cultural meaning. What is interesting here is the message transmitted in this cultural meaning. The symbolism that has evolved in stories about figure's life underscores his contemporary significance in society; he has acquired a social and political

⁶ If he is in fact the result of religious syncretism, there is archeological evidence of effigies comparable to the present-day Mam dating as far back as the 18th and 19th centuries (Pieper 15), indicating his emergence in his present-day form by that time.

message. He represents not just a simple “saint”⁷ to whom one makes petitions, but rather he is imbued with multiple layers of meaning that reference resistance to colonialism.

Cultures that are a part of the globalized world system are not immune to the influences of other cultures, and specifically in the case of Guatemala, they have not been immune to the influence of Western cultures. This foreign – or to use the Kaqchikel term, *kaxlan*, which simultaneously means “Spanish” and “foreign” – element provokes reactions and changes within cultural expression. We can then look to these cultural practices to understand the how the Maya adapt in ways that continue to articulate what the Kaqchikel consider a uniquely Maya form of expression when presented with threats to their way of life. These changes thus serve as an indexical system of meaning, pointing to the foreign influence itself but also the ways in which the Maya imagine themselves, and how they produce and reproduce that imaginary. Thus Rilaj Mam can be understood as an attempt to narrate that which is Maya in a country that does not have a public space for the Maya to self-determine otherwise. In the face of an internally colonial society which still does not provide a space for direct political representation of the Maya and which simultaneously appropriates their way of life to serve the Guatemalan nation in their tourism campaign, the Kaqchikel have sought new ways to self-represent. Supporting this supposition is the fact that Rilaj Mam has gained popularity in recent years (Maxwell (a) n. pag.), after the civil war ended and the Kaqchikel began to experience post-war society and gubernatorial structures.

In regards to Rilaj Mam’s origins and his contemporary usage in this social environment, it is fitting to address the concept of hybridity. I argue that among the Kaqchikel he is not an example of religious syncretism. The Kaqchikel do not believe they are practicing a type of Catholicism as they revere Rilaj Mam, nor have they adapted Rilaj Mam to fit into their pre-existing Catholicism. I do not wish to ignore the Catholic context of Guatemala, so I will clarify how we can understand Rilaj Mam in his contemporary milieu. First, it is important to clearly state that we are dealing with the way that the Kaqchikel imagine their community at present. While it is clear that many Maya stories can be understood as common ecotypes⁸ that were passed around and elaborated throughout the entire Mesoamerican region (Stanzione 17), the presence of this “impurity” does not disqualify these stories as appropriate representatives of the Kaqchikel’s worldview. As stated previously, precisely the opposite is the case. By observing which characters and tales are equipped, adapted, and encouraged, we can better come to understand how the Kaqchikel use these stories under specific conditions.

⁷ It is difficult to find an appropriate word in English (or Spanish, for that matter) to categorize a figure like Rilaj Mam. He is not really a deity, as the Maya religion is monotheistic, with the supreme *creador y formador* bearing the name *Ajaw*. In reality Rilaj Mam falls under the Kaqchikel term *tyox*, which is usually translated as “saint,” a term that is nevertheless not quite accurate because of its Catholic connotations. However, it is noteworthy that it is, in fact, a linguistic borrowing that comes from colonial-period encounters and the way the Maya heard the Spanish term *Dios* (God), resulting in the loan adaptation *tyox* (Maxwell (b) n. pag.). I will explain that while his origins hint at religious blending, his contemporary usage does not.

⁸ Although somewhat underused, I find this term (first adapted to folklore by Carl Wilhelm von Sydow) to be the most precise to refer to a common storytelling trope that is present across cultures.

Although some Kaqchikel who practice Maya spirituality are also Catholic, their discrete practices generally do not overlap. That is to say, the Kaqchikel will never enter a church and expect to see a Rilaj Mam effigy. They will also never use a Catholic saint to disguise a Maya “deity”; for example, they do not pretend to revere the Catholic Simon the Apostle while tacitly understanding that they are really praying to Rilaj Mam. These have been the traditional models of religious syncretism in Latin America, and it is not what we are seeing in this case. Furthermore, Maya who are Evangelical, a relatively recent religious influence in Guatemala, operate in an even more truncated scenario, as the Evangelical churches do not tolerate partaking in Maya spirituality in the slightest. This sharp division means that for the Kaqchikel, the Maya elements of their spiritual practice have an entirely different function, and indeed an entirely different set of signifiers. This is an important distinction, as religious syncretism is identified first and foremost by its mixing of religious symbols, which would conflate sign systems and use Saint Simon to signify Rilaj Mam, for example. Given this absence of symbolic substitution, we therefore cannot say that Rilaj Mam himself in his contemporary significance is syncretic nor the outcome of a religious mixing. This is evidenced in his solitary stance as a primarily Maya figure, never being coupled with a Christ figure or with Judas as he is sometimes portrayed in Tz’utujil-based research or in popular rumors. Although he shares a festival day with San Simón and even evidences some overlap in name in at least one community (San Andrés Itzapa), not one story I was told explaining his significance ever placed him with the actual Catholic Saint Simon⁹. Simply put, Rilaj Mam’s spiritual symbolism is not combined with the symbolism of any other religion. For these reasons I propose that it is more accurate to understand Maya spirituality and Catholicism among the Kaqchikel as parallel religions, not syncretic or hybrid ones.

As coexisting belief systems, it is not uncommon to find Kaqchikel who do not consider it contradictory to engage in traditional Maya rituals as well as attend Catholic mass. Some Kaqchikel, in fact, explain that they believe they are praying to the same God, and that churches are often built on top of Maya sacred spaces (Ajquijay n. pag.). The long tradition of coexistence of these two religious systems has resulted in this parallel structure in which each scheme informs the other, a flexibility that reflects the contemporary needs of the community to be able to negotiate these various social environments. Once again, Rilaj Mam as a trickster figure is the perfect vehicle to carry out this mediation. It is obvious that these categories of Catholic and Maya are unstable and fluid, and we might expect that in a post-colonial yet still violent country like Guatemala. This is precisely what is interesting and important about the presence of a figure such as Rilaj Mam among the Kaqchikel. Rilaj Mam is nuanced, multifaceted, and complex, and he exemplifies the fluid categories that the Kaqchikel themselves must mediate. As they struggle with their place in Guatemalan society, they make use of a folk

⁹ This name mixing can seem troubling at first. However, it is important to understand that this merely an issue of verbage. No one believes that the San Simón of San Andrés is the Catholic Saint Simon, and strict Catholics and certainly Evangelicals would never visit his altar there. San Simón sounds like Maximón, as many Kaqchikel who I interviewed pointed out. It is therefore likely that this name is an artifact of the colonial period and the Catholics’ attempt to proselytize by reworking Catholic ideas in ways they thought the Maya could understand. The name likely stuck in this one community, but his identity as Rilaj Mam remains one and the same.

figure like Rilaj Mam which allows them to slide between their parallel religious beliefs and, most importantly perhaps, continue exerting what it means to be Maya to them. Unlike the Tz'utujil version, the Kaqchikel Rilaj Mam was not a colonial adaptive technique to survive the Spanish conquest, resulting in his insertion into a Catholic framework. Rilaj Mam has appeared among the Kaqchikel much later and was likely borrowed from the Tz'utujil on a wide scale fairly recently, a phenomenon assisted partly by the pan-Maya movement which promotes and facilitates the shared usage of previously group-specific symbolism (such as important figures from the *Popol Wuj*, technically a K'iche' text). Instead it seems that among the Kaqchikel, he has largely remained a separate entity from the Catholic canon, existing as a tool in traditional spiritual practices that, although they are inevitably informed by their Catholic surroundings, are considered by the Kaqchikel as pertaining to the Maya. Rilaj Mam can mediate the difficult and sometimes contradictory categories that the Kaqchikel must also navigate, and to them he does so as a Maya man. If we really understand how Rilaj Mam functions in Kaqchikel society, the issue of his name conflation with San Simón is actually an example of this function. We must remember that he is a shape-shifter and a trickster, and so his cunning ability to slide between these identities is fundamental to his usefulness as a devotional figure. We can understand him to be a character who simultaneously represents both traditional Maya and Catholic interests, switching roles when appropriate. He therefore both is and isn't ladino (Stanzione 43). Thus is the trickster. Only recently have the Kaqchikel used Rilaj Mam as a mode of resistance to colonialism, not disguising (as syncretism would do) but rather emphasizing his Maya characteristics, as they adapt his origin tale of deceiving the Spanish to their contemporary situation in which they assert their authority and validity in society¹⁰.

Because he arises in the process of the Kaqchikel's negotiation of societal discourses as they seek a means of representation, he is indeed a tool to mediate a cultural scenario. Therefore, what is instead hybrid is not Rilaj Mam, nor the religion, but rather the cultural milieu that surrounds him. It is in response to this environment of hybrid culture that a trickster figure such as Rilaj Mam is a particularly poignant mode of expression, as he necessarily occupies multiple identities. To approach the concept of a hybridity, instead of viewing the Kaqchikel practices as an example of transculturation or heterogeneity, I rather find it more accurate to reference hybridity in the sense that García Canclini elaborates as a society that is both traditional and modern. He explains, "today we conceive of Latin America as a more complex articulation of traditions and modernities (diverse and unequal), a heterogeneous continent consisting of countries in each of which coexist multiple logics of development" (9). As in many Latin American countries, the cultural practices of the Maya are relegated to the realm of the "folkloric," even officially so in Article 62 of the Guatemalan Constitution. The Maya are generally viewed as

¹⁰ It is fitting to add that it is indeed very interesting that Rilaj Mam is likely a Kaqchikel adaptation of a Tz'utujil figure, as these two groups have historically been in conflict. The Kaqchikel are even given the fault for the Tz'utujil defeat at the hand of the Spanish conquerors (Recinos 101). Yet these historical conflicts are at odds with the contemporary pan-Maya movement, which seeks to unify all Maya groups under a common cause and cultural similarities. While my field data for this project did not delve into the issues of cross-group attitudes in regards to borrowings of spiritual practices, it would make for a very interesting study.

backwards and as an obstacle to progress and the modernization of the country (Rodríguez Guaján 77), while at the same time their way of life is folklorized, valued only in that it is considered “authentic” as it is appropriated for tourism. Nevertheless, despite their “folkloric” or “traditional” way of life, these populations still exist within modernity. Although at times not modernized in the Western concept, they are necessarily modern because of the time period in which they live (Trigo n. pag.). This is precisely the hybridization to which Canclini refers: a population like the Kaqchikel of Guatemala find themselves positioned in between tradition and modernity. Their cultural logic is not that of the dominant culture in which they reside, and as such in this liminal and indeed hybrid society, they try to find ways to negotiate that position, a flexibility which Rilaj Mam offers.

As Morales explains, building on Canclini, modernity does not necessarily substitute or replace traditions, but rather it transforms them into “*lo local globalizado*” – the globalized local (329-330). Rilaj Mam resists not just the Spanish conquerors through historical tale but also, therefore, the Western influences running rampant in the country presently by the invasion of tourism, Evangelical religion, and international actors who sensationalize the 2012 apocalyptic phenomena. While Guatemala has historically been one of the most Catholic countries in Latin America, it has recently experienced a wave of Evangelism which has attracted nearly half the population in believers. Meanwhile, traditional Maya spirituality has been growing in popularity, but it has been appropriated by the state for tourism and by international venues such as Hollywood, seeking to profit from the 2012 prophecies. These recent changes in societal organization and religious ecology point to a context that provokes the Kaqchikel, as a marginalized population, to claim to their inherited Maya knowledge system and thus assert their legitimacy. Within the context of the recent civil war and continued presence of violence in Guatemala, Rilaj Mam emerges in Kaqchikel society as a means to negotiate a contemporary scenario in which the Kaqchikel find their way of life continually threatened. Therefore the practice of spirituality becomes a much larger issue than mere religion: it can be understood as a reaction to a cultural context, an attempt by the Kaqchikel to mediate their existential quandary. The contemporary scene provides the forum for tradition and modernity to confront and negotiate, resulting not always in an explicit verbal outcome but often in an encoded dialogue, manifest in ritual and popular festival celebrating a trickster Maya effigy.

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