Sacred Inheritance: Cultural Resistance and Contemporary Kaqchikel-Maya Spiritual Practices

DISSERTATION

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By

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Abstract

The Kaqchikel Maya inhabit the fractured and dissonant society of contemporary Guatemala: increasing religious plurality, economic and ethnic inequality, drug-related violence and the legacy of military violence and discrimination. The Mayas face ongoing lack of recognition and voicelessness in a society that values them only insofar as their culture can be appropriated for a growing tourism industry. The Kaqchikels respond to this environment by using their spirituality to generate legitimacy. Mayan spirituality with its pre-Columbian episteme, when viewed in this social context, becomes a means by which the Kaqchikels articulate their agency. Both Mayas and foreign tourists regard the knowledge communicated through spirituality as one of the great achievements of the ancient Mayas. The contemporary Mayan populations consider this knowledge to be inherited, as they expertly wield its tools in a manner that sometimes, in their assessment, even supersedes the abilities of Western knowledge. This indexical past and relevant present make spirituality a salient practice for the contemporary Kaqchikels to utilize as they seek to redefine the relationship between their group and the state, as well as vis-à-vis foreign influences brought about by increasing tourism.

This research posits that contemporary Kaqchikels utilize spirituality as a means to resist continued domination and the lingering effects of colonialism. For these reasons, although the revitalization of Kaqchikel spiritual practices is not generally discussed in the pan-Maya cultural movement, it should be understood as a parallel initiative to...
rearticulate constructions of Mayan culture. I analyze Kaqchikel ceremonial practices that seek to reclaim, rearticulate, and (re)traditionalize ancient Mayan episteme. Moreover, I examine how the trickster Rilaj Mam challenges models of religious syncretism, instead helping the Kaqchikels to process what is felt as hybrid in their social world. Finally, the Kaqchikels have responded to the tourism industry’s appropriation of Mayan spirituality and the 2012 “apocalypse” by asserting the accuracy of ancient Mayan wisdom and thereby valorizing their ways of life. Unable to achieve social and political representation and recognition in a highly stratified postcolonial society, the Kaqchikels negotiate meaning and achieve legitimacy by using the very tool which sets them apart: their culture.
Dedication

To my son Rho, whose genesis coincided with the genesis of this project. K’iy yatinwajo’

\[ ti \text{ wal, yalan jeb’êl ak’u’x, yalan nkikot nuk’u’x roma at k’o wawe’ wik’in jantape’}. \]
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Chapter 1

An Introduction to Kaqchikel Spirituality: Origins and History

Stories give meaning to the present and enable us to see that present as part of a set of relationships involving a constituted past and a future. But narratives change, all stories are partial, all meanings incomplete. There is no fixed meaning in the past, for with each new telling the context varies, the audience differs, the story is modified, and as Gorfain writes, “retellings become foretellings.” We continually discover new meanings. All of us, then, anthropologists and informants, must accept responsibility for understanding society as told and retold. -Edward M. Bruner

1.1 Introduction

This dissertation examines the ways in which the practice of traditional spirituality within the Kaqchikel-Mayan community in highland Guatemala has responded to contemporary social dynamics which place the Kaqchikels in a plural society still rife with colonial structures. The resurgence of the public practice of traditional Mayan spirituality has occurred most notably after the end of the brutally violent civil war in 1996. In the post-war climate, however, the violence is far from over. Guatemala is repeatedly named one of the most dangerous countries of Central America, as drug trafficking and government corruption make murder and lynching a pervasive occurrence. Nevertheless, these are not the only ways in which the people find themselves continually threatened. Since the end of the war, neoliberal political forces
have opened Guatemala to the international market. Fueled partially by the impending doomsday date of 2012 on the Mayan calendar, an influx of tourism has simultaneously given economic value to Mayan culture while at the same time appropriating it from the poorest citizens without enabling them to reap the benefits. Meanwhile, in this same time period, the largest Evangelical movement in Latin America has taken hold in what is also Central America’s most Catholic country. These two religious groups are not the sole spiritual orientations in Guatemala, as they also exist in tandem with a cultural movement that has grown the practice and popularity of traditional Mayan spirituality. The central question this work will attempt to answer is: in a culturally multivalent society, how do the Kaqchikels negotiate meaning and achieve legitimacy through spiritual knowledge and practices?

Although the revitalization of Kaqchikel spiritual practices is not generally included within the “canon” of cultural expression considered to comprise the pan-Maya cultural movement, it indeed coincides with the movement chronologically and thematically. While it has not been discussed by the prominent intellectuals of the movement nor served as the primary impetus, I propose that it should be considered a cultural expression which emerges from this same mobilization of increased awareness of Mayan cultural expression. Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil, one of the most prominent thinkers of this movement, explains one of its central intellectual tenets:

At present, in law and in fact, the national culture is Ladino culture; Maya cultures are only rural, domestic cultures, part of Guatemalan folklore. The commercial exploitation of Maya cultures for the tourist industry
demonstrates the moral cynicism of Ladino leaders, who deprecate and exterminate Maya cultures, on the one hand, while selectively utilizing and exploiting them at the political level (as symbols of Guatemalan identity) and at the commercial level (in the tourism industry), on the other. (42)

It is precisely this ladinized perspective which the pan-Maya movement hopes to de-center. Not desiring an external voice to control and represent their cultural expression, the Kaqchikels have found in their spirituality a means by which to produce autochthonous discourse that affirms and reconfigures their Mayan identity and their place in society. It is, in that sense, a true rewriting of history. Like all storytelling, its discourse has the creative ability to generate meaning in the present by analogizing to the past. In the dynamics of a pluralistic society, Kaqchikel spirituality has become a means to create not just individual meaning but also a collective agency.

1.2 The Arrival

I discovered from my friend Aq’ab’al at the last minute – so serendipitously that I merely ran into him on the street on his way to work in the busy streets of Antigua – that well-known Kaqchikel spiritual guide Calixta Gabriel Xikin would be in Ciudad Vieja, where I lived, that afternoon only and was willing to meet with me for an interview. I got her number from him and called her. We agreed on a time that would work relatively well for my impending parental duties, and she gave me directions: take one of the buses from Ciudad Vieja towards Escuintla, and the friend’s house where she was staying was
frente al cementerio, facing the cemetery. A couple of kilometers, did I hear that right? Perhaps she meant a couple of kilometers past the center of town, since I had the impression from our hurried conversation on less than optimal mobile reception that she was telling me to get off at the cemetery.

As the afternoon approached, it became obvious that the buses weren’t going to get me there in time after my son went down for his nap, so I called a friend to see if he would be able to give me a ride. He agreed happily. Believing we were only going to the other side of town, we left twenty minutes before my meeting. I wasn’t sure of the exact location, but I had the name and description of the colonia where Calixta’s friend lived, our meeting place. As we approached the cemetery by car, we saw a police checkpoint on the road, a frequent practice at this part of the roadway. That’s when I remembered that my young friend did not have his license, although he drove regularly. He pulled over suddenly into the entrance of the cemetery, telling me that he was sorry, but he couldn’t take me any further. I told him that I of course understood and thanked him for the ride, explaining that I was sure the house was close.

I got out of the car and put my toes on the edge where gravel touched asphalt, peering down the road. I saw only fence and trees, followed by a curve in the roadway. I decided to cross towards one of the police officers and ask for directions, and I told him the name of the gated community that I was looking for. The officer spoke into his radio and after a minute or so told me it was about a kilometer or a kilometer and a half down the road. I asked him if it was safe for me to walk. He replied that it was safe and offered a blank stare.
So I set off down the road in my sandals, t-shirt, jeans and shoulder bag, the empty open road surrounded by trees and a breezy silence broken only by my footsteps on gravel and the occasional speeding pickup or diesel-driven camioneta. The weather could not have been more pleasant, a sunny day with the occasional cloud and temperatures that made the walk entirely agreeable. As I headed down this road in a foreign country, I marveled at its similarity to the farm roads in my hometown in Ohio, where I lived during my early childhood until I broke simultaneously into adolescence and suburbia. I imagined myself from a satellite’s view, wondering if a foreign girl would seem out of place here, or if it would merely look like she was walking home.

Finally, about a kilometer later and ten minutes after our scheduled meeting time, I found a teal-colored concrete gate across the street from a roadside stand selling Coca-Cola, cake, and phone cards (although I would later discover that they did not, in fact, have any phone cards.) I called Calixta and asked her if I was in the right place. She put her friend on the phone, who replied that no, I was not. I explained that I was walking down the road towards Escuintla, hoping that I was going the correct way. She replied confidently that that was the way, and, with brusque encouragement urged, “sí, sí, sigue caminando, sigue caminando.” Keep walking.

A kilometer or so down the road, I found the correct gate, guarded by a large, snarling black dog. A man came to open the lock for me. The dog, who was an intimidating guard, calmed and turned into a goofy, slobbery beast hungry for my attention. The man led me into a doorway which opened onto a sun porch, where there was a seating area and a table. I met a woman there and introduced myself. She replied
that Calixta would be with me shortly, offering me a mandarin orange in the meantime. I accepted with a thank-you and sat down to wait, while I watched the woman work in her garden outside. Her house was very different from the homes I’d seen in town, with its large spaces and flat adjacent land, covered not with mud but with grass and growing produce. Subsistence farming is common in Guatemala, but most families in Ciudad Vieja have land elsewhere where they do their farming. In contrast to this more rural area, the “urban” home is most commonly surrounded by other houses, in notably tight quarters. Calixta appeared sooner than I expected her, and we made our introductions. We talked for over an hour, and once we had finished, I thanked her for her willingness to meet with me and exited through the same gate, back onto the roadway. Although I would have liked simply to take one of the buses that came roaring down the open road, I had forgotten to bring small bills, and the bus ayudantes would never be able to change my large one. Walking again became my mode of transportation.

Once I rounded all of the curves and climbed the inclines heading back the way I’d come, I reached Ciudad Vieja proper some two kilometers later. As my attempt to obtain smaller bills at the roadside stand had been thwarted by their lack of phone cards, I bought a drink in a tienda to break my bill and waited for the next bus, which came in a matter of minutes, as expected. I got off only a few turns later, on the other side of town, at my usual stop. I walked up the familiar road into San Miguel Escobar, zone 7 of Ciudad Vieja, climbing the gradual incline that, with a glance upward, reveals its geography at the foot of a hazy volcano. I returned to my house but had forgotten my key, and there was no answer. I decided to walk our usual routes in town to find my husband
and 14-month-old son, choosing the road heading up to the church instead of the one heading down towards the river and to the pile of rocks where my son liked to dig. It was again a serendipitous choice, as I saw them immediately after rounding the corner in front of the church. My husband was pointing upwards, crouched next to my son in his stroller. They watched as young boys flew kites that lofted up and over the façade of the cathedral and its statue of San Miguel, tiny circles in the distance. It was October. Kite season. When wishes fly up into the sky and ancestors are remembered. And just like that, I had arrived home, my impromptu and yet unexpectedly aligned journey having brought me to one point on the map and back again.

One of the prime difficulties in a field situation is finding a sense of place. This is true not just in how we come to ascribe meaning to physical location as we reside there, but also in how we situate ourselves within the life we take on in the foreign environment. In a sense, we are creating a new subjectivity for ourselves, as we begin to take on new “technologies of the self,” to use Foucault’s term (177), in the form of new habits, new routines, new ways of relating to the people around us. I have come to understand what we commonly call homesickness as actually the sense of loss we feel when we leave behind our old subjectivity. At the very least, a foreign situation requires a change in how we position ourselves in our immediate world, since that world necessarily changes. These subjective struggles combined with the hurdles of achieving success in the fieldwork we seek can create quite a challenging situation in which the individual struggles to find their place and to uphold the idealism with which they entered the field.
As Clifford Geertz describes, the position of the fieldworker is dual: while they arrive in the field from a foreign land which necessarily orients them as an outsider, they also arrive seeking a certain degree of insider status. This dual identity places the fieldworker not solely on one shore or the other, but rather as the occupant of a liminal space. Not quite native but also not entirely foreign, the scholar in the field must learn to negotiate between both emic, intrinsic to a culture, and etic, extrinsic to a culture, perspectives. In this way the fieldworkers seeks to be enculturated to an extent, in much the same way as the children of a particular culture. Although the degree to which a researcher is encultured can be considered to represent the degree of their success, it is never really possible to become anything other than a fieldworker. Even if the person is accepted and cherished by their community, and even if they come to call that community a semi-permanent or permanent home, they are still distinct because ultimately their goal will be to write, to represent from an outside perspective. This is an interesting dilemma. Most of the researchers I know in Guatemala have a great deal of affection for the country and the people they know there, and thus we strive to manifest that consideration while ultimately being forced to balance our academic endeavors.

As a researcher, I found myself contemplating this in-between space, where I sought information needed to complete my work but also desired to find a means to repay the time and care I had been given. A career in academia tends to instill a sense of social obligation and liberal thought, and as a faithful follower I cautiously worked to demonstrate respect and understanding both in my community and with the individuals I interviewed. Furthermore, I found it important to attempt to accurately represent the
information individuals shared with me, and I came to understand that also as a part of showing respect: for the time they had given me, for their ideas. On separate occasions, two different ajq’ija’\textsuperscript{1} with whom I spoke referred to me as a mensajero, a messenger. Not only was I pleased by this display of approval of my work, but I also began to view this as a kind of charge and sought to transmit at least an accurate message. This goal of accurate portrayal is partly reached through careful attention to language use. In my writings here I attempt to adhere to the community’s metalanguage, the language the people themselves employ to refer to the events being observed. Charles Briggs in Learning How to Ask explains, “The point is to discover the linguistic and social-cultural knowledge that underlies the ability to participate in and interpret such events” (95). In this regard, a certain degree of communicative competence, as termed by Dell Hymes (Foundations in Sociolinguistics 79), is required on the part of the observer. My nine months in the field while on a Fulbright as well as my three prior summers in the country helped me to build this communicative competence. By making use of the language used by the group itself, the fieldworker both generates respect and remains as close to an emic interpretation of the cultural practices as possible.

As a subject that does not squarely occupy either sphere, Briggs describes the various ways in which the fieldworker, despite any insider status that they may have achieved, ultimately serves as a contaminant to the system which they are observing: “In other words, the presentation of materials in such an artificial situation transforms the

\textsuperscript{1} This is the Kaqchikel term for their spiritual leaders, and it is often translated as “Mayan priest,” “shaman,” or “spiritual guide.” It literally means one who works with the days/sun, a direct reference to the Mayan sacred calendar which plays a central role in their work. I use the singular ajq’ij and the plural ajq’ija’ where appropriate.
overall structure and the stylistic details of the traditions. Worse still is the collector’s lack of awareness that such a transformation has occurred, thus distorting the process of interpretation” (11). While here he is referring to artificially created situations such as the interview, even in more organically-occurring scenarios, the presence of the outsider can still influence the outcome of the discourse that is produced. To use a more accurate term, the outsider influences the formation of the cultural text, a term I use in the tradition of Geertz and which he refers to as a performative experience created through action. We come to understand this as true when we realize that a cultural text is not a prescribed script that is simply read without variation. Rather, the cultural text is created in situ, as a result of the dynamics of both text and context. Briggs once again explains, “Contexts are not given, a priori, before the event begins. Contexts are interpretive frames that are constructed by the participants in the course of the discourse” (12). Due to its performative and oral mode of production, the cultural texts that the field researcher of festival and ritual seeks to observe are not static entities but rather movable, dynamic ones.

Furthermore, Johannes Fabian in Power and Performance reveals that the interaction between the scholar in the field or the ethnographer and the group must be dialogic. No longer an ethnography of calculating scientific observation, ethnography is generally considered to be both communicative and dialogical (4). In this sense, Geertz serves us once again with his idea of “thick description.” Ethnography is not interested in a mere description of the event, but rather the underlying forces that explain its presence and meaning: “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of
significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (5). In these ways we come to understand that the work of the field researcher is centered around the acquisition of the text, its meaning, and an understanding of the conditions under which that text is produced. An understanding of these inevitable dilemmas and dichotomies that exist in the field is a crucial scenario to keep in mind when undergoing any analysis.

1.3 Field Placement and Methodology

My somewhat happenstance introduction into the Kaqchikel community eventually evolved into the research which produced this dissertation. While accurate demographic statistics are difficult to obtain due to their political nature, there have been estimates that the Mayan population of Guatemala is between forty and sixty percent, and the Kaqchikel-Maya are generally considered the third largest of about twenty-three Mayan linguistic groups in Guatemala. The Kaqchikel-speaking region of highland Guatemala abuts the capital city to the east, mountains to the south, Lake Atitlán and the Tz’utujil area to the west, and the K’iche’ and Achi speaking regions to the north.

Between 2006 and 2010, I spent significant amounts of time in Guatemala, which culminated in a 9 month field experience under the auspices of a Fulbright research grant. I first traveled to the country in 2006 as a part of The Ohio State University program Summer Seminars Abroad for Spanish Teachers (SSAST). The program allowed us to take an indigenous language class, and it was common for graduate students in the
department at Ohio State to participate in the program to fulfill their language requirements for the PhD. I enrolled, and the language that was offered happened to be Kaqchikel. This offering was opportune, as during my undergraduate education at Case Western Reserve University, I had taken a linguistic anthropology class with a professor who had worked with the K’iche’s, an early experience which had piqued my interest in Mayan languages and cultures. That summer of 2006, I studied at the Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín (PLFM) for two weeks, and our group had the opportunity to participate in a ceremony at Iximche’, the Kaqchikel contact-era capital city. This began my research interest in Guatemala, and I made plans to return the following summer. I enrolled in Kaqchikel classes at the PLFM again, this time for four weeks. After two weeks, the Tulane Kaqchikel program Oxlajaj Aj began, and, much to their credit, they learned I was studying Kaqchikel by myself and invited me and my teacher to join their class. I enrolled in the Oxlajuj Aj course formally the following summer in 2008 with the help of a FLAS grant. This was a pivotal experience in my course of study, as the course promotes a stimulating and fun learning environment as well as allows the students and teachers to form meaningful friendships. After that summer, I applied for a Fulbright and was informed of my award the following winter in 2009, for the 2009-2010 school year. I gave birth to my son in July of 2009, so I did not travel to Guatemala as I had the three years prior. Instead, I took my PhD examinations in the fall of 2009 and attained IRB approval for my research. I traveled to Guatemala in early 2010, staying through the beginning of November for just over 9 months.
Throughout this prolonged stay during which all of my data was collected, my family and I took up residence in one of the outlying zones of Ciudad Vieja known as San Miguel Escobar. Historically, Ciudad Vieja was the second seat of the capital of Guatemala, known as la Ciudad de Santiago de Guatemala, capital de la Capitanía General de Guatemala. It was established by Teniente Jorge de Alvarado on November 22nd, 1527. It remained the seat of government until September of 1541, when four days of torrential rain and mudslides destroyed the city, at which point the capital was moved to the nearby Valle de Panchoy, the location of present-day La Antigua Guatemala. (“Ciudad Vieja” n. pag.). It had a projected population of just above 30,000 in 2006 (“Municipio de Ciudad Vieja” n.pag.), and the majority of its inhabitants are involved in agriculture at around 70%. The next most numerous category of employment at 10% are repair and bodywork shops. Ciudad Vieja is well-known for refurbishing the famous camionetas or “chicken buses”, old Bluebird school buses utilized for public transportation and which bear characteristically flamboyant paint jobs and decorations. The remaining population is divided among casket makers, artisans, and other professions (“Municipio de Ciudad Vieja” n.pag.).

My residence in San Miguel during my Fulbright was the result of a series of consultations with my Guatemalan contacts. Because my son was 6 months old at the time of arrival, I had to balance my research objectives with his safety and well-being. As such, I found it important that we not reside in a town that might have the possibility of being cut off from the nearest hospital, in Antigua (which commonly occurs in locations such as Tecpán, for example, due to mudslides during the rainy season). Per the advice of
my former Oxlajuj Aj professor, I contacted one of my instructors from that program who lived in San Miguel Escobar, Ambrosia Cuma Chávez (Ixnal). My friend Ixnal helped to locate a house for us in San Miguel before we arrived in Guatemala. On her recommendation, we made arrangements down the street from where she lived, on the lower level of a house owned by a local doctor and his family. Understanding that I wanted a secure environment for my infant, she explained that she was convinced that this was the house for us, emphasizing the added safety of a doctor at hand who was, in fact, the doctor who treats her children. This sounded like a favorable arrangement, and I was exceedingly grateful to have a place to go when we arrived in Guatemala with a baby in tow.

As I began to build my field life in San Miguel, I experienced a period of disillusionment once I realized it was not like the other Kaqchikel towns I had visited during my summers in Guatemala. In fact, it was not particularly Kaqchikel at all. I worried as to how this would affect my research, a preoccupation that stemmed to a degree from my own liminal state as a cultural studies student doing what was ethnographic fieldwork. At the same time, however, I was not conducting an ethnography of a particular town or a whole ethnic group. Eventually, however, the internal conflict passed as I began to realize the value of being in an area with such plurality. There were many Kaqchikels in town to be sure, and interestingly the tourism brochure produced by the municipality of Ciudad Vieja claims that “the inhabitants of Ciudad Vieja are descendents of the Tlaxcalas, Mexicas, and Cholulas that accompanied Don Pedro de Alvarado when he arrived in Guatemala in 1524” (n.pag., my translation). I never found
this to be the popular sentiment among the people I knew, but nevertheless there were many families in town who did not speak Kaqchikel and/or considered themselves ladinos. Because Ciudad Vieja is somewhat close to Antigua, there were various properties, particularly in the outlying areas down the road towards Antigua, which were slightly more affluent. I came to view Ciudad Vieja and San Miguel Escobar as somewhat of a middle ground for ladinos who couldn’t afford to buy property in Antigua or Guatemala City, or who perhaps did not want to live in the city. I came to appreciate the perspective that this plurality, along with the religious diversity in the form of Evangelical churches and a central Catholic church, gave me in my understanding of the type of social dynamics that take place in Guatemala.

Additionally, because I was not conducting an ethnography dependent on a specific location, I felt that the very nature of my work necessitated a method that drew information from spiritual practitioners all over the Kaqchikel-speaking region. For that reason, where I was located was not as important as it would have been if I were focusing my investigation on a particular town. To achieve a representative sample, I spent five days in Tecpán, the modern town adjacent to the pre-contact Iximche’, doing an intensive series of pre-arranged interviews in Tecpán proper as well as the outlying hamlets. I also took day trips to Chimaltenango, Santa Catarina Barahona, Santiago Sacatepéquez, San Andrés Itzapa, as well as repeat trips to Tecpán. At times I used Guatemala City or Antigua as a rendezvous point with ajq’ij’al from the capital, Patzicía, San Juan del Obispo, Santa Ana, and Santa María de Jesús. The majority of the ceremonies I observed took place at Iximché outside of Tecpán, as it is probably the most popular public site in
the Kaqchikel region, but I also observed/participated in public ceremonies at Kaminal Juyu’ in Guatemala City. On a smaller scale, I observed/participated in ceremonies in Antigua Guatemala as well as Santa Catarina Barahona, San Andrés Itzapa, and Santiago Sacatepéquez. The total number of ceremonies I observed during my primary research period was 19, in addition to the 3 I had participated in on previous trips to Guatemala. I formally interviewed 17 ajq’ija’ and 2 community members who serve on spiritual guide councils or were highly involved in their activities, in addition to an informal interview with an ajq’ij I had conducted in 2008. This information was, of course, rounded out by informal conversations I had with ajq’ija’ and community members who did not enter into a formal interview with me. Lastly, I organized a symposium with another Fulbright grantee, which involved a panel of six spiritual leaders: a Catholic Priest, an Evangelical Pastor, an Evangelical youth leader, a Kaqchikel ajq’ij, a K’iche’ ajq’ij, and a ladino ajq’ij. This event was a public forum during which each leader spoke on the role of religion in the country and took questions from the audience.

1.4 “Theoretical” Methodology: Cultural Studies Informed by Folklore and Religious Studies

In general my work takes a very folkloristic turn. This was the case even before I initiated my fieldwork, when I began simply to learn about the process: the course which trained me in fieldwork methodology was offered through the folklore program at Ohio State. This field of study has influenced my work on the most basic level of not only the method of data collection, but how to go about handling that data. I find that Folklore
Studies has a unique ability to remain grounded in an academic world often littered with obtuse buzzwords and theories-du-jour, a refreshing perspective which it accomplishes by remaining as close to the people (“the folk”) as possible. Dorothy Noyes makes a plea for an understanding of folklore studies as fundamentally driven by work conducted “on the ground”; she explains that, unlike highly theorized traditions such as literary studies, folklore studies requires ethnographic fieldwork in order to function, since it must remain connected to the activities of groups of people. Therefore, while historically we have separated the roles of the ethnographer, the practitioner, and the theorist into separate institutions, successful folklore studies in fact engages all three (“Humble Theory” 39).

Involved and isolated as I was with my research, I had not entirely realized to what degree I had subscribed to this manner of investigation until a class of my fellow literary and cultural studies peers gave me feedback on one of my dissertation chapters. The experience resulted highly useful in clarifying for me how to position my work within academic disciplines. One of the comments I received was that there was something methodologically unsound with using the opinion of an “informant” to prove the analysis I had elaborated in that particular section, because my role was different from theirs. I recalled that this was the classic view of the relationship between ethnographer and informant, as opposed to the now favored idea that local actors should be considered more “collaborators” than “informants.” In my research, I have tried to position myself in this contemporary framework which views ethnography as a dialogic process between the researcher and the collaborators, a method which I believe to be more aligned with tendencies in Folklore Studies.
The anthropological tradition taken up by folklorists, in my assessment, has often found itself obligated to support the populations with which they work, while cautiously avoiding the tendency to romanticize. Noyes explains these intentions, which have become my own, in characteristically poignant prose: “We long to be creative writers or makers of the revolution, not parasites upon such endeavors” (“Humble Theory” 38). Contemporary folklorists often struggle to descend the ivory tower of the academy in order to be “on the ground,” an idea that is valuable yet difficult to attain, since no matter how close to the ground we position ourselves, we will always be outsiders to the communities which we inhabit. Starting on the ground with these admittedly problematic longings, Noyes explains that the folklorist should strive to occupy the middle rungs, recognizing that they cannot be a maker of revolution but also that they should not occupy the loftiest novelistic heights either. Through comparison and description, they should work their way up to theory to describe what cannot been seen on the ground. The value in this orientation is that it is a methodology which produces a more accurate and less convoluted explanation of actual social phenomena. As I wrote the pages of this dissertation, I came to view myself not as a theorizer – although I admit that in my eagerness some theorizing does occur – but more accurately as a writer seeking to transmit, organize, and explain the practices which I participated in and observed. Noyes clarifies the methodology of the folklorist in the following way, describing how folklorists must work in the middle rungs between the local and the theoretical:

They are not Why-questions but How-questions, about the life of forms in society. They are our old topics: transmission, performance,
differentiation. How do forms move across time and space and remain recognizable? How do the people who recurrently interact in a given situation generate forms in common, and how do these forms work back again upon their makers? (41-2)

I have tried to present and answer this sort of How-question, particularly the central one that ties these chapters to together: How do the contemporary Kaqchikel dialogue with their present social context through the use of spirituality and ritual? I have attempted to work from the ground up and not “leapfrog from the local into the transcendent” (Noyes 41). My positioning myself in this way effectively places me on the margins of my official discipline, literary and cultural studies, where high theory is commonplace and indeed the ability to display communicative competence of the big names in the “posts” – postmodern, post-structural, and postcolonial theory – is an almost unavoidable requirement to attain respect from colleagues. I think one could certainly conduct a reading of the practices I describe here from any of those orientations. And, perhaps not wholly escaping my four years of formalized classroom education in these matters, I find it productive to wet my toes with them (particularly Nestor García Canclini, Walter Mignolo, George Yúdice, and Homi K. Bhabha) here and there throughout these pages.

A central organizing concept for me throughout this investigation has been performance theory. Noyes explains that performance theory is really a method, not a theory – although method is what “takes us to theory” (41). This is a helpful orientation in our understanding of what I hope to accomplish through analysis of the forms of expression described in this work. The goal is not to make use of a grand theory which
imposes itself on practices which are, in reality, wholly removed from that theory, but rather to find a method by which we can explain and understand – to put it simply – what’s going on here. I often found myself taking this orientation throughout my organization and analysis, as I simply tried to identify and organize events in a way that would convey coherence and significance. Performance is a good way to do this, because performative means of expression, such as festival and ritual understood as dramatizations of culture, have a uniquely reflexive quality that allows a community to comment on their own reality by means of these forms of expression (Bauman 41, Guss 9). In the case of the research presented here, the performative events which I observed are mostly Kaqchikel-Maya ceremonies. As elaborated in Chapter 2, these ceremonies are in fact a densely packed set of cultural signifiers, which have an important referent in pre-Columbian Mayan traditions. Practitioners of Mayan spirituality view themselves as inheritors of this ancestral knowledge system, and as such they consider themselves the inheritors of an extremely important tradition.

As a discipline which historically has been the main source of analysis of daily practices which are somehow in danger of being “lost” or which exist on the margins, folklore studies has generated very helpful methodology with which to approach the topic of tradition. If we view this inheritance, as in the case of the Kaqchikels, as the transmission of a particular tradition, it is fitting to situate it within an understanding of tradition as a process of handing down something that originated in the past (Ben-Amos 99). This is a good place to start, but we must be vigilant to keep in mind a conceptualization of tradition not as a stagnant and inert series of petrified practices, but
rather we seek a means to understand how tradition is resignified in contemporary contexts. Dell Hymes defines tradition as a “process” which is “not so much a matter of preservation, as it is a matter of re-creation, by successive persons and generations, and in individual performances” (“Breakthrough into Performance” 355). In this regard, the usage of traditions by contemporary practitioners also involves a degree of “traditionalization,” which implies the process by which tradition is molded and reshaped according to local context to fit contemporary needs. We therefore understand that, for our purposes here, traditions are not artifacts of the past, but rather can be summoned by a group of people when it is most relevant or suitable to their current needs. Furthermore, this variety of tradition must be performed or enacted, constituting a “living tradition,” in order to endure these processes of traditionalization. In this manner, the practice both represents and reenacts the practices that a people purport to inherit. At once symbolic in a contemporary context and indexical to a past, this tradition then becomes a highly charged means of communication.

This is where tradition and performance meet. In this dissertation, as we examine the various ways in which Kaqchikel spirituality is performed, we should be vigilant to keep in mind the nature of performance, which is uniquely capable of being both reflective and reflexive of culture (Bauman 42). That is to say, it both reflects the culturally relevant milieu in which it emerges while it is also self-referential, making a commentary on the practice that is being performed and subsequently sometimes changing that practice. In these ways, tradition is not something that is hermetically preserved, but rather it is enacted through performance and thus serves as a way to
construct symbolic meaning about the past. This is precisely why the study of these practices is significant: these performative traditions are uniquely capable of revealing the manner in which marginalized or subaltern (“folk”) populations respond to their contemporary environment. Once again, this is my central How-question, a query which Folklore Studies has been indispensable in helping me to answer.

Studying religious practices presents a unique set of challenges, as it is a field with an extensive history of study following wildly varying orientations. From the classic phenomenologist like Mircea Eliade to the more socially-minded Cornel West, the study of religion has been a rhetorical argument utilized in a variety of disciplines. As a researcher entering into a field of Religious Studies, I feel the need to elucidate the way I view religion in society. I have not necessarily used the following writers as a theoretical approach which I apply in the chapters comprising this study, but rather I explain them here for the reader in order to position my research within the academic trends of the study of religious practices. I fully admit that the following descriptions have been cut using a rather blunt knife and their intricacies are exceedingly more complex than I present them here, but they serve the purpose at hand.

While the phenomenologists such as Mircea Eliade present useful orientations to begin to understand the function of religion in society, unlike this trend, I am mostly not interested in religion as a possible means to bear an essential truth, nor do I view religion as a sui generis phenomenon outside of the influences of historical and social context. Although I utilize Eliade’s observations on the characteristics of shamanism in Chapter 2, I find his criteria useful because it is descriptive and not ideologically bound to
phenomenology. I admit that some of my explanations dialogue with work that has been conducted by phenomenologists, such as Lawrence Sullivan, and as such I am not condemning that orientation as wholly in error. Instead, I find these accomplished thinkers to be some of the first who attempted to understand how religion interfaces with greater society, and as such they provide a point of departure. More extensively, however, I find orientations such as Gavin Flood’s postmodern hermeneutics useful, in that it offers a way to understand religious practices using a dialogical model, as in Chapter 3. Flood assesses the value of this approach to the study of religion as “[t]he recognition by the study of religions that the self is embodied and embedded within personal narratives that articulate with the wider narratives of culture” (219). This dialogical hermeneutic\(^2\) approach to the study of religions is useful to this study, as it explores the concept of performative narrative as a crucial way in which a group utilizes ritual performance as a form of cultural expression. Lawrence Sullivan similarly engages a hermeneutic approach in examining the way in which we draw meaning from cultural texts such as performance, and he also questions the standard definition of text, emphasizing the use of non-written and oral texts in religious practices. Drawing on Huston Smith, what is “postmodern” about these approaches is their insistence that religion cannot be bracketed and isolated from other social phenomena, as the

\(^2\) The hermeneutic orientation has a long tradition, but it generally refers to the idea that our contemporary interpretation of a given text (religious or secular, written or non-literary) is necessarily informed by the position of the reader, regardless of the intentions of the original author. Anthony Kerby explains it best: “Hermeneutical understanding is the result of an authentic dialogue between the past and our present which occurs when there is a ‘fusion of horizons’ between the two. In the end this is an act of self-understanding, of understanding our own historical reality and its continuity with the past” (91). This is also revealing in terms of our discussion of authenticity, since what becomes central is not the conditions under which the original text was created, but rather how it is utilized in its current context.
phenomenologists would have it, and that what is considered “religion” is really an amorphous and changing conglomerate of beliefs and attitudes surrounding a particular practice or event. Indeed, this is what makes religion useful for our purposes: as a changeable and adaptive expressive form, it is a valuable point of observance to understand a people’s responses to a given social scenario.

And so the question arises: why religion? Why look at religious forms of expression in an attempt to understand the response of the Kaqchikels to their contemporary social scenario? On the one hand, the approaches of Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner reveal that religion is fundamentally a social framework. Following this tradition, I am interested in how religion has arisen as a way in which humans and their communities resolve the “problem of meaning.” Unlike the phenomenologists, who see religion as a response to an innate human sense of that which is sacred or holy, these cultural researchers instead view this response as arising out of the conflicts of community. These conflicts are the result of either the human ethos in confrontation with a world view, or the structure of society in confrontation with the individual’s ability to exist outside social boundaries. Thus, with this context, we can (and indeed it is highly useful to) understand the practice of religion as necessarily a social phenomenon. This is a growing and popular trend within Religious Studies, as Burton-Christie explains, “it is increasingly understood that such spiritual awareness arises in response to concrete social, political, economic, sexual, or ecological dimensions of existence and in turn informs a person's capacity to respond to these realities” (n. pag.). As I elaborate in the following chapters, religion is in fact a very functional form of expression with which to
navigate a changing social environment, due to the ability of ritual to serve as in-between space where social categories can be suspended, as Turner posits.

On the other hand, religion is relevant to my goals not just in a broadly comparative sense but also in the Guatemalan context in particular. As I discuss in each of the following chapters, the knowledge communicated through Mayan spirituality (which I have glossed as religion for the purposes of this discussion but will clarify shortly) is regarded as one of the great achievements of the ancient Mayas. This knowledge is then considered to be inherited by the contemporary Mayan populations, as they expertly wield its tools in a manner that sometimes, in their assessment, even supersedes the abilities of Western knowledge. This indexical past and relevant present make spirituality a salient practice for the contemporary Kaqchikels to utilize as they seek to redefine the relationship between their group and the state, as well as vis-à-vis foreign influences brought about by increasing tourism.

A few ajq’ija’ independently explained to me that Mayan spirituality is not religion, it is spirituality. This is revealing in how it gives us insight into what social dynamics may be taking place. This distinction between religion and spirituality is fundamentally a Western dialectic, as these categorizations are based upon the Western conceptions of what differentiates these sorts of practices. Spirituality is considered to be something that transcends daily experience, and at its most general conception, spirituality would be a term that is broader than “religion” and would describe all such experiences of the transcendent: “spirituality often refers to the felt sense of the transcendent grounded in the deepest part of one's being” (Burton-Christie n.pag.).
However, Burton-Christie continues to explain that spirituality is now commonly used as the counterpoint to religion; an individual sometimes says that they are spiritual in order to clarify that they are not religious. Therein lies the contemporary distinction between religion and spirituality: spirituality is sometimes used to refer to the “unchurched,” the practices which lie outside a formalized doctrine. This is an important distinction in a country like Guatemala, where Mayan spirituality, Catholicism, and Evangelism co-inhabit nearly every highland community. Moreover, these dynamics are especially noteworthy given the immense influence of the Catholic Church in the country, having served as the primary institution of colonialism since the conquest. Some ajq’ija’ explained their use of the term “spirituality” in precisely that way, using the Catholic Church as a polar opposite; they claimed that spirituality was not dogmatic, like the Church. Mayan spirituality has become, at the very least, a way for them to distinguish themselves from the dominant religious experience of their country.

1.5 Historical and Contemporary Contexts

1.5.1 Mesoamerican cosmovision

Let us first become familiar with the Mesoamerican cosmovision, or way of understanding the universe, in order to provide proper context for the ritual and ceremonial acts that we will attempt to explain throughout this dissertation. While it is too easy to generalize existing Guatemalan religious life as colonial Catholicism invaded by Evangelism, in fact the pre-Columbian spiritual background of Guatemala proffers a context that we should consider as we seek to map the religious ecology of the country.
As an originally non-Western society, we can, at one level, understand the contemporary indigenous spirituality of Guatemala as an adapted continuation of this pre-contact viewpoint, a confluence which López Austin also claims: “Today, despite the shock of the Conquest and the difficult conditions of colonial life, many elements of the hard nucleus [of Mesoamerican cosmovision] have survived among Mesoamerican descendants” (n. pag.). It would be inaccurate to assert that indigenous spirituality is unfettered by colonialism and foreign religious dogma, certainly, so that is not the claim here. Rather, we should identify how the Mesoamerican episteme continues to mediate the contemporary development of spiritual beliefs of the Kaqchikels. This set of beliefs is actively and deliberately employed by the Kaqchikels in their contemporary ceremonial traditions, and as such it is a necessary framework for us to understand precisely what is going on in ritual practices.

Generally speaking, Mesoamerican cosmovision positions human beings as playing a central role in the physical and metaphysical universe, and they are understood to contain vital energies which have the capability of affecting natural and supernatural events. The ancient Mesoamericans, a broader geographical grouping which included the pre-Columbian Mayas, imagined this structure as represented by a three-layered World Tree which was also manifested in the human body. Because of humans’ ability to access all dimensions of existence, even the realm inhabited by the deceased, rituals became (and still are) a means to tap into these energies to commune with the ancestral dead.

A primary concern of Mesoamerican cosmovision is maintaining a balance of vital universal energies. Duality is an important dynamic, although not in the same way
as it is in Judeo-Christian religions. There is not a clear-cut “bad” that is countered to a universally understood “good,” but rather every dualism is inseparable. Each half cannot exist without its other half, thereby making each simply a reality of the other without labeling one as bad or good, evil or divine. These dualities must be maintained, but due to their mutually dependent nature, it is possible that the forces of the universe could become imbalanced. It is the responsibility of human beings to make sure that the equilibrium is upheld. Human beings are capable of carrying out this task due to the nature of their physical and metaphysical self, as “[t]he Mesoamerican person was not divided into categories of ‘body’ and ‘soul,’ but instead consisted of multiple vital forces that extended into the natural world. The religious task was not to achieve salvation, but to strive for balance in the world, in part by understanding one's destiny” (Sarat n. pag.). Human beings were ultimately both a manifestation of important vital energies, some individual and some shared with other living beings, as well as shepherds of them. As we will see below, this responsibility is a result of the inextricable connection that humans have to the process of universe’s creation.

In the Mesoamerican cosmovision, the human and the divine were not entirely distinguished from one another, as Sarat describes, they “did not separate the universe into sacred and profane realms; rather, they saw the earth as a living entity infused with religious significance” (n. pag.). These beliefs are what enable us to characterize the ancient Mayan cosmovision as a type of animism, which purports the existence of sacred energies in all living things. As such, the ancient Mayas believed that the sacred was readily accessible through daily experience, and they elaborated specific rituals to tap
into that sacred energy. David Carrasco has described the various ways in which the Mesoamerican peoples duplicated the existential realms through their architecture, building cities and pyramids to imitate the structure of the cosmos. This structure was vertical and indicated the three plains of existence: an upper “heavens,” the earth, and an underworld known as Xibalba’. All of these three realms were not isolated but instead were interrelated, continuously connected along an axis and capable of mutually informing one another. As Schele and Freidel (66) explain, these realms were connected and accessed through a vertical access called Wacah Chan or the axis mundi, which was symbolized by a tree. This World Tree is sometimes represented in the ancient Ceiba trees that speckle the lowlands of the Yucatan Peninsula area. This vertical axis imagery facilitates our understanding of the manner in which the Maya interpreted the confluence of the human and the divine. As each of these worlds was capable of communicating and mutually informing the others, they were considered imbued with sanctity in their manifestation of these sacred energies which crossed between them.

Moreover, the human body itself “was considered the nexus and unifying structure of the universe. In cosmology, ritual, social structure, and art it is a religious conception of the human body that gives Mesoamerican religions a powerful focus” (Carrasco 21). The World Tree is most sacredly manifested in the human body. One can imagine a human being standing with their arms outstretched to form a cross shape, indicating the three dimensions of spatial existence, with their heart in the middle. Indeed, in Kaqchikel, k’u’x signifies “heart” but is also used to indicate the center of something – for example, ruk’u’x tinamit is literally “the heart of the town,” but which
indicates the town center or central plaza. The human body was a physical manifestation of this spatial configuration of the universe. More broadly, a person’s body was understood to be driven by a series of vital forces, all of which could extend into the other non-earthly realms. For these reasons it is generally considered that there is no accurate equivalent of the Christian “body” and “soul” in Mesoamerican cosmovision. There was also no code of individual moral behavior which would determine one’s destiny after death, but rather human beings consisted of these vital forces which were physical and metaphysical, individual and communal. Some of these forces could extend beyond death, a concept that functions somewhat like the idea of the afterlife, but instead with the variation that the continuation of a person’s energy after death is dependent on the circumstances of their demise, not their actions in life (Sarat n. pag.). Not only can human beings pass into one realm or the other, but all realms are able to interact through these different vital energies. This is fundamental to our understanding of contemporary Kaqchikel ritual as it is informed by the Mesoamerican cosmovision, because this belief means that deceased ancestors inhabiting other realms can be readily accessed by the living, given the proper circumstances and energetic invocations. It is fitting to note that when I discuss “ancestors” throughout this dissertation, I am referring to the dual nature of this term. The concept of ancestors references the actual familial living beings who, while considered to exist in another realm, are not isolated from the living (a belief which is central to All Saints’ Day celebrations, for example.) However, as we see here, it also refers to the spirits and historical figures that came before the contemporary Mayas, as they created and passed down a culture and a way of life. This conceptualization is a
conflation of ancestors with heritage, as their cultural past becomes their personal inheritance.

All of this is central to understanding why and in what manner the ancient peoples of Mesoamerica elaborated complex and abject rituals. The human body’s key role in bearing these energies means that “Mesoamerican peoples saw the human body as the nucleus and unifying body of the cosmos, which was permeated – in fact, ‘loaded’ – with specific supernatural powers and entities” (Carrasco 53). These forces were interpreted as most acutely located in the head, the heart, and the liver, each of which held a different characteristic or type of energy. This conceptualization of the human body is useful to our purposes for two reasons. First, it is a central aspect of the functioning of shamanism, as the shaman is able to “feel” divine energies in the persons who seek their guidance. The intermeshing of energetic and physical forces provides the necessary forum for a display of shamanistic abilities. Second, it explains the usage of these body parts, as well as other physical materials - most notably blood – in ritual sacrifice. Among the Classic-period Mayas, the kings were also considered shamans who were uniquely capable of tapping into and accessing these energies. We must remember that energies were considered to connect the three worlds by means of the World Tree, so managing these energies fundamentally implies the ability to access these worlds and the deities and ancestors who reside there. The kings as shamans were, in fact, considered to be responsible for maintaining the balance of energies, a task that was carried out through specific rituals. From the earthly plane of existence, the World Tree axis, while especially potent in specific geographical areas such as mountains or caves, “could be materialized
through ritual at any point in the natural and human-made landscape” (Schele and Freidel 66). For the ancient Mayas, human bloodletting was the most powerful (and has become the most infamous) ritual capable of manifesting this axis. What is thereby implied in the summoning of this axis was an ability to access the other worlds found along it. This served the dual purpose of maintaining the necessary balance of these potentially dangerous energies, as well as achieving communion with spirits and ancestors inhabiting the other realms. In fact, in their art, the ancient Mayas depicted the materialization of these bloodletting rituals as the manifestation of an ancestor or a god (Schele and Freidel 87). While the blood of animals is sometimes but not always used in contemporary Kaqchikel ceremonies, the sacred fire which drives the ceremony is indeed considered a sort of portal which allows communication with the ancestors.

Due to the interconnectedness of human beings and the earthly world, it was considered that humans were capable of influencing the outcome of natural occurrences. Carrasco describes: “These rituals and mythic traditions were not mere repetitions of ancient ways. New rituals and mythic stories were produced to respond to ecological, social, and economic changes and crises” (22). Human actions maintained the balance of these vital energies and literally kept the sun rising each day and brought the rainfalls. Rituals were considered sacred recreations of mythic stories of interactions between gods and humans, not in an imitative sense but rather they literally recreated the event. Schele and Freidel posit that, by understanding the ancestral tales of the Popol Wuj, we are able to understand why sacrifice is so necessary in Mayan ritual. The hero twins of the Popol Wuj are trickster figures who defeated the lords of Xibalba’ not through superior force
but through trickery. After passing a series of tests, these twins willingly jumped into a fire pit, knowing that the lords would grind and throw their bones into the river, an act which enabled the self-sacrificial twins to be reborn as catfish. The next day they became human again and disguised themselves as performers. They presented themselves to the lords of Xibalba’, claiming to be able to perform a trick in which they could be dismembered and then come back to life. After seeing the twins enact a round of sacrifice and resurrection, the lords of Xibalba’ demanded that they be sacrificed and resurrected as well. The twins killed them and simply did not bring them back to life, and in so doing they defeated the gods and established the order of humankind. From this story we gain the particular perspective that “resurrection and rebirth came through sacrifice – especially death by decapitation. The Hero Twins were conceived when the severed head of their father spit into the hand of their mother. They defeated death by submitting to decapitation and sacrifice” (Schele and Freidel 76). The ancient Mayas believed that sacrifice was the only way to achieve eternal life, and as a result it became an inextricable part of their ritual practice.

We can only understand the deep meaning of sacrifice in Mayan ritual through an examination of the concept of toj. Contemporarily, toj is perhaps most closely translated as “debt” or “payment.” The Popol Wuj narrates the creation of the current universe, a process which saw four failed attempts, as we currently occupy the fifth manifestation of the world. Humans were brought into existence by the gods who sought to make beings

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3 The details and importance of the trickster trope is elaborated more thoroughly in Chapter 3.
capable of revering them, a relationship which establishes the mutual interdependency of
gods and humans. This means that:

   Humanity upheld its end of the relationship through prayer and offerings.

Yet humans and gods were also related at an even more profound level,
for they were understood to exist in a dynamic, cyclical relationship of
nourishment and consumption. The *Popol Vuh* tells that humans are made
of corn, a divine substance. As humans consume corn and thus receive
nourishment from the gods, they in turn feed the gods by offering the
blood of their own bodies in sacrificial and autosacrificial rites. People
knew that as beings who lived by eating, they too must at some time be
consumed. (Sarat n. pag.)

In order to create a universe that could support life, according to Mesoamerican myth, the
gods had to throw themselves into a fire (Sarat n. pag.). For this reason, human beings
were always energetically indebted to the gods as a result of their unalterable connection
brought about in the creation of mankind. Rituals which required some sort of sacrifice
were a means by which this energetic debt could be continuously repaid.

   While these ancestral ritual practices do not exist today in the same formulation,
the concepts which drive them are nevertheless central to understanding how Kaqchikel
ritual functions. These concepts will be most explicitly expressed in Chapter 2.
1.5.2 *The Popol Wuj and the Mayan Calendar*

A central claim within the Pan-Maya cultural movement, which serves as context in this dissertation, is ownership, or at least an inherited right, to the intellectual property of the ancient Mayas. In preparation for these discussions in the following chapters, here I provide a brief background of the two most central intellectual achievements utilized by present-day Mayan spiritual practitioners: the historical and mythical *Popol Wuj* and the sacred calendar, commonly called the Tzolk’in, as well as the Long Count calendar.

The *Popol Wuj* is an intriguing text not just because of its enduring importance to the contemporary Mayas, but also because of its dubious origins. The Pre-Columbian writing systems at the time of Spanish conquest and prior were glyphic, and the Mayas had recorded extensive histories onto codices, in one instance at least dating back 800 years. These books were largely lost during the conquest under the control of Bishop Francisco Marroquín, who ordered the books destroyed as to divert the Mayas from their old religious belief systems. What remains, however, are transcriptions of the destroyed texts, made by the highland Mayan elites in an effort to preserve what had been extirpated (Christenson 20-1). The *Popol Wuj* is one such example of this type of text, having been transcribed using the Latin alphabet. This text was then hidden by elders for nearly two hundred years when the Spanish priest Francisco Ximénez learned of its existence and was able to make a copy sometime between 1554 and 1558 (Christenson 22). The original text of the *Popol Wuj* has since disappeared, and all that remains is the copy made by Ximénez. As such, it is impossible to know what influence this friar may have had over the surviving version of text he transcribed, an uncertainty which is
complicated by the fact that the original author is unknown. Nevertheless, it is a captivating narration of the origins of the supernatural and human worlds, and more importantly it is considered to be *the* authoritative text exemplary of a tangible Mayan intellectual creation. As Christenson explains, it is “*u xe’ ojer tzij,*” the root of the ancient word (24). This text indeed bears this characterization by the contemporary Mayas, who have claimed it as a part of their intellectual and cultural heritage. In the following chapters, I will elucidate several specific moments in which the *Popol Wuj* is referenced by the Kaqchikels as a part of their claim to its inheritance.

The ancient Mayas elaborated several calendars, and prior to recent years, they were perhaps best known for their accurate astronomical observations which led to a very accurate solar year calendar. Although a technological achievement, this calendar is generally not employed by the contemporary Mayas. Instead, the sacred calendar and the Long Count calendar are of the most importance for the information contained in these chapters. Although much more in-depth analyses of these timekeeping systems are possible and indeed have been conducted by other scholars, for our purposes it is not necessary. We merely need recognize their structure on a basic level to better understand their contemporary usage. Like all of the Mayan calendars, these are both circular and cyclical. The sacred calendar is 260 days long and is comprised of 20 “month” spirit energies, each with a specific name and associated with particular characteristics. These 20 months are accompanied by a “day” coefficient which progresses from 1 to 13. There are variations in the day names and the count between different ethnolinguistic communities, but to the best of my knowledge it remains the most important ritual
calendar among all of the groups. It serves as the unifying structure of most ceremonies, as described in Chapter 2. The second calendar of importance to this research is the Long Count calendar. The Long Count was used to count periods of time greater than 52 years, the limit imposed by the other Mayan calendars, and it is divided into iterations of various lengths. An iteration of 144,000 days is called a B’aqtun, and December 21st, 2012 marks the completion of 13 B’aqtun, after a beginning date of August 11th, 3114 BC. Because the calendar iterations only progress from 1 to 13, this means that the count will begin again at 1. This is the phenomenon which has attracted international attention and apocalyptic claims, a dynamic which I elaborate in Chapter 4. In addition to manifesting a uniquely Mayan worldview that the contemporary Mayas consider to be inherited from the ancient Mayas, at the very least, these calendars are indeed an adaptation of knowledge that was created by the pre-contact Mayas.

1.5.3 The Battle for Souls: A Brief History of Catholicism and Evangelism in Guatemala

Although it is a somewhat brutal reduction of a highly researched field, this section is intended to give an overview of the histories of both Catholicism and Protestantism in Guatemala. The dynamics that have occurred during the establishment and continued promotion of these two religious orientations in the country serve as the stage for the contemporary resurgence of traditional spiritual practices. The social reality of the Guatemalan highlands is such that autochthonous religion must coexist, and indeed enter into dialogue with in some cases, the influence of these originally foreign religious institutions. Importantly, however, in the literature regarding the development of these
religions in Guatemala, it is almost always mentioned that the ultimate goal of mission work by both of these groups was a transition from foreign-implemented institutions to locally maintained ones. This is indeed what occurred, and Catholic Mayas and Evangelical or charismatic Catholic Mayas are no less considered “Mayan” than those who practice traditional spirituality. Although it is tempting for the researcher to seek some sort of essential quality of pure Mayanness when describing a revitalization movement such as the one that is at the center of this research, I have attempted to resist such a temptation. This leaves me with a difficult task, however, which is explaining how these religious systems can coexist within the central claim of my investigation, that traditional spirituality is utilized by the Kaqchikels as a means of resisting continued colonialism and conflict, and moreover as a means to dialogue with their plural and quite complex social scenario. The possibility of this coexistence is perhaps best elaborated in Chapter 2, but it is a relevant context in all of the following chapters.

Shortly after the conquest of the area that now comprises Guatemala, the Spanish crown began to send missionaries to the new lands to establish parishes. Because the Catholic Church was closely tied to government and to politics during this period of Spanish history, the ecclesiastic endeavors were tied to the interest of the monarchy both politically and economically. On the one hand, the New World offered the promise of new riches and new lands for those who were not afforded land in Europe, but at the same time it offered the promise of expansion of Christianity. Adriann Van Oss explains simply that the Spanish understood the conquest of the Americas as God’s will and gift to the Spanish, and as such the Spanish crown repaid Him by incurring the expense to send
boatloads of missionaries to the New World. Moreover, the Catholic monarchs of Spain all “dreamed of a New Jerusalem to crown their reigns” (2), and this is precisely what they believed the New World to be.

Once Pedro de Alvarado had arrived in 1524 and defeated the ruling K’iche’ empire with the help of their subordinated rivals the Kaqchikels, who Alvarado then betrayed, the subsequent decades saw the implantation of missions within the Mayan highland towns in a manner that fundamentally changed the structure of their society. Van Oss’s research on the K’iche’s shows that pre-conquest town formation was divided between a tinamit stronghold atop a hillside where the elite resided, while the rest of the population lived in scattered hamlets throughout the rest of the hillsides. The friar Francisco Marroquín told the Spanish king that the conversion of the indigenous populations could never take place with this configuration because the population was too dispersed. Instead, he suggested that they be relocated to compact towns, built in Spanish style with a central plaza faced by a church. A royal decree of 1538 and 1540 ordered that Indians be moved to these towns by persuasion or by force, and they were made to pay tribute to the Church.

To overcome this geographic hurdle, the missionaries developed a method for proselytizing by focusing on the indigenous nobles, the caciques. They offered impressive gifts unknown to them (such as rosaries, knives, rings, mirrors, etc.) and thereby formed an allegiance. The cooperation of the caciques then helped the missionaries convince the rest of the population to move to these newly established, centrally-organized towns. This use and reinforcement of native hierarchy made
conversion processes relatively peaceful at this time, which had the effect that: “Through the agency of the religious orders even the most remote highland communities were thus marched one by one into the church and, therefore, into the Spanish empire” (Van Oss 17). The conversion processes were peaceful in some cases, as Emery explains that parallels between Catholicism and pre-Columbian beliefs facilitated the reception of these new ideas: “Both religions emphasized ritual purity, had ceremonies which stressed sacrifice and the spilling of blood, and used fasting and purification as means for sanctification. Confession and baptism were rites practiced by the two, and the use of pageantry, incense and holy water was similar” (2/4 – 2/5).

After these initially successful strategies, there were a few decades of setback, as many Mayas ended up fleeing the centers, and the region experienced some bickering between the various sects of Dominicans, Franciscans, and Mercedarians. Moreover, many of the proselytizing efforts were not entirely successful. Francisco Ximénez, the famous friar who transcribed the Popol Wuj, expressed that he “was convinced that the Indians secretly conserved ‘very pretty memories’ of their earlier rites, and interpreted their Christianity as a ‘transposition of names and titles behind the personages of the new creed’” (Van Oss 22). Nevertheless, although not all attempts to transfer the Christian doctrine to these populations was successful, “[w]hat was new was Spanish rule in the Guatemalan highlands, and for this the religious orders could claim primary responsibility” (Van Oss 36-7). Even if the conversion of the Mayas to Catholicism was not a fully realized process, the efforts of the Catholic Church led to the Mayas’ inculcation into the Spanish colonial framework.
Many “traditional” ways of life came under scrutiny in the early 17th century, including dress and language. Several royal decrees demanded that the natives be forced to learn Spanish. This was a matter tightly tied to conversion, as it was felt that they could not properly understand the intricacies of the faith nor put an end to their “idolatries” without it (Van Oss 143). This was one way in which the Church and the schools worked together in their ultimate goal to Hispanize the Indians and integrate them into dominant culture. Nevertheless, it is recorded that pre-Columbian beliefs persisted, such as the practice of “rituals which demonstrated animistic survivals from an ancient past” (Van Oss 150), evidence of early partial conversions. The establishment of confraternities is the best-cited example of the ways in which this partial conversion was perpetuated. These organizations typically house saints’ effigies and serve as a guiding force of community organization, and these revered saints at times have been the product of religious blending. As early as 1637 there were enough confraternities in the country for the audiencia to criticize their prevalence, an attitude which stemmed from these institutions’ loose adherence to official Church doctrine. Nevertheless, the confraternities began to possess a great deal of power, and they maintained blended religious practices in the countryside, overriding the attempts of the newly-dispatched secular priests to change the activities which deviated from official doctrine (Van Oss 140). These confraternities were intended to worship the saints, as was the case in their European counterparts, but they also included other figures which were understood to have pre-Columbian origins: "Maximón and Saint Paschal, King, reign symbolically over Guatemala's synthetic rural Catholicism, a system of beliefs and customs which withstood the reformism of the
Enlightenment and all subsequent attempts to impose a stricter orthodoxy" (Van Oss 152). These partial conversions were never fully resolved by the Church, although it claimed that the “pagan” meanings were forgotten as the people were incorporated into Catholic belief systems. The Church viewed this situation as tolerable because it nevertheless still accomplished the goal of including the Indians in the Church (Emery 2/3).

The political and economic power of the Catholic Church grew steadily until the beginnings of the nineteenth century; by that time, the Church paid no taxes on its land holdings, which comprised more than half of the real estate of Guatemala (Emery 2/8). The influence of the Church only decreased once the Barrios government came into power and adopted a new liberal Constitution in 1889. These reforms were followed by the expulsion of the Jesuits and the Archbishop, the secularization of the monks and nuns, and the confiscation of church property (Emery 2/8). This created space for the entrance of Protestant missionaries, a trend which was encouraged by the liberal Barrios government in a political move, for the Catholic Church had always been associated with conservative politics. Furthermore, the inclusion of Protestant missionaries in Guatemala was encouraged for the sake of the goal of development and progress, something the Protestants accomplished through medical clinics, schools, and translation projects (Garrard-Burnett xi).

Early Protestant missionaries’ interest in coming to Latin America was not entirely distinct from the goal of the first Catholics. They, too, believed Latin America to be a type of New Jerusalem. However, as with the liberal Barrios government, the
Protestants viewed Catholicism as their adversary in this process, and they set about proselytizing people away from it. Therefore Protestant goals in Guatemala were theological but also, in a subset, political and cultural:

In the missionary context, conversion required not merely the rejection of Catholicism, but also the renunciation of a cultural identity that in effect sentenced new converts to a life permanently severed from the coherent and internally logical corpus of custom, kin, and economy that had once defined their world. It is not surprising that the early missions’ few converts – often former drunkards, jailbirds, victims of ‘witchcraft,’ adulterers, and other malefactors – tended to be those who had good reason to insulate themselves from society at large within the protective cocoon of the missions. (Garrard-Burnett xii)

This is a particularly revealing and useful assertion to aid in our understanding of the fracturing of contemporary Guatemalan highland society. Not merely a shift in religious practice, conversion to Protestantism implied, and still implies, a shift in cultural and social configuration.

The Evangelical churches in the latter half of the twentieth century, when the movement possessed its greatest momentum, still functioned this way. The attraction to these churches was augmented by the tragedies during and following the civil war, as people searched for a safe haven and a way to make sense of their reality. Protestantism required a break with old community-orienting structures, a change which was disadvantageous to most until relatively recently, when the movement experienced a
steady growth in the 1960s and 70s followed by a steeper growth period in the 80s. This is a result not only of the war which felt its greatest force in the 80s, but also of increasing global conflicts:

But when the center began to give, through the erosive processes of ‘development,’ migration, and war, many beliefs, practices, and institutions that shaped identity gave way with it. It is, at least in part, the attempt to re-create some sense of order, identity, and belonging that has caused so many to turn to Protestantism in recent years. (Garrard-Burnett xiii)

Religious experience, then, became a coping mechanism for a particularly atrocious reality. Garrard-Burnett elaborates that Protestantism was able to fill that gap not only because of its timing, but also due to its entertaining (by means of contemporary music and displays of ecstasy), attractive, and emotionally charged aesthetic (118).

Combined with the efforts of Catholic Action after 1935 and throughout the subsequent decades, which saw an even greater attack against traditional Mayan spiritual customs, the efforts of new Protestant missionaries of the charismatic variety post-1960s presented a much more concentrated effort to eradicate traditional beliefs. Because conversion never happens in an even manner, even when it is mandated, not all members of Mayan society adopted this new stance. This had the effect of creating a very fractured social structure in most highland towns, which still persists today. Partaking in any sort of Mayan custom (spirituality, dress, language) was also dangerous, as it left one a suspect of the military during the armed conflict. Once the civil war officially ended in 1995, it
became much more acceptable and safe to practice traditional beliefs. This resurgence of Mayan spirituality in recent decades has caused even more strain on the fissures already present.

While most Evangelicals possess a highly negative view of traditional Mayan spirituality and do not partake in its activities, it is much more common to find a lapsed Catholic who has begun to visit ajq’ija’ and participate in Mayan ceremonies. Were those who adopted traditional spiritual beliefs after the war in fact hiding behind a Catholic guise, waiting for their opportunity to practice publicly without fear? Perhaps there are cases in which this is true. It is likely more accurate, however, that a large number of Kaqchikels are beginning to practice traditional spirituality actively for the first time, seeing no direct conflict with their Catholicism, a coexistence which has been possible historically since the conquest. They find themselves attracted to the manner in which traditional spirituality affords them a means to assert their knowledge and authority as members of millenarian culture and its knowledge productions. However, this assertion requires sorting out beliefs from practice, a task that is nearly impossible since people rarely share their inner beliefs. For that reason, I have largely attempted not to speculate on the sincerity of beliefs and instead have looked only to practice and the discourse that surrounds it. In the case of traditional Mayan spirituality, this practice basically boils down to ceremonies and visitations with ajq’ija’. That is not to say that these actions are not informed by an over-arching conceptualization of their culture; in fact, it is quite important that these practices in fact likely stem from a change in the Mayan cultural
imaginary, a change which is described more broadly as a part of the pan-Maya cultural movement in the following two sections.

A Protestant statistician speaking of Guatemala explained, “[…] the simple fact is that some people will always remain Catholic no matter what” (Garrard-Burnett 162). Catholicism has a manner of continuously informing the spirituality of Guatemalans, a fact which cannot be overlooked yet may seem difficult to resolve. On the one hand, this is evidence of an effective colonization that occurred not just geopolitically but religiously as well. At the same time, as in much of the New World, Catholicism has possessed the ability to coexist with indigenous beliefs in a relatively non-conflictive manner, a fact which is still the case in many communities and with many practitioners of traditional Mayan spirituality. As we examine throughout this dissertation the practices of traditional spirituality among the Kaqchikels, we then can perhaps understand the pull towards this traditionalism as another inflection point in the dynamic of forces acting to orient the daily, and indeed the transcendent, lives of the Guatemalan population.

1.5.4 Reshaping Kaqchikel: The Pan-Maya Cultural Movement

Contemporary Guatemala comprises a bifurcated population of Mayas and ladinos, terms that are, in reality, a reduction of what are actually more heterogeneous groups than they are portrayed. The Mayan population is comprised of approximately 23 (depending on how linguists define them) ethno-linguistic groupings. The Kaqchikel population is usually considered the third most numerous Maya group in the country and a member of the K’iche’an branch of Mayan languages. They have also been a rather
politically active group, credited with several scholars who have contributed to the development of the recent pan-Maya cultural movement. The term ladino, on the other hand, is often incorrectly glossed as a synonym for mestizo, assuming a mixed Spanish and Maya ancestry. This category also includes the white population of Guatemala—many of whom are descendents of Germans who came to Guatemala around the turn of the 20th century looking to establish coffee plantations—and they are simply lumped together with all ladirnos regardless of their actual ethnic ancestry. For this reason mestizo is not really an accurate synonym due to its implied ethnic mixing; in Guatemala the categories of Mayan and ladino are not ethnic boundaries, and indeed the term “ladino” was never intended to be, even though they are often portrayed as such. While it is difficult to ascertain exact census data in Guatemala due to the informal economy, the geographic isolation of many Mayan groups, and the highly political implications of such information, we can estimate that the Mayas comprise 42 to 87 percent of the total population (Warren “Language and the Politics of Self-Expression” 151), while 60 percent is generally the accepted number among researchers. Nevertheless, even though the Mayas dominate in numbers, they are not the group that holds political power in the country. Rather, control of the government and its politics is maintained via an oligarchy of a few prominent ladino families (Fischer and Brown 11-12). This dynamic creates a fairly hostile social and political environment in which both parties participate in a general distrust of the interests and lifestyle of the other.

In this regard, the dynamics of these two different social groupings have produced discourse surrounding ethnicity and group identity. This is the scene out of which the
pan-Maya movement has emerged, an important framework that informs practitioners of Mayan spirituality. But first, the political climate of the country helps us to understand the way in which group identity is being defined in the Kaqchikel communities of Guatemala. Colonial practices sought to “ladinize” the Mayan populations of Guatemala, a process which took various forms during different times periods. The crown was concerned that friars were becoming too sympathetic to the Mayas and too divergent from Catholic doctrine. In fact, the Catholic Church was directly involved in the execution of these rules:

In 1646 Royal Visitor to Guatemala don Antonio de Lara outlined the crown’s Castilinization policy, decreeing (among other things) that Indians had to adopt patronymic surnames; that in Indian towns there had to be a teacher to teach Spanish every day to children age five to eight; that only those Indians who learned Spanish would be entitled to the privilege of wearing Spanish dress, wearing a cape, and riding a saddled horse with bridle and spurs; that the courts not allow speech in any other language but Spanish under threat of public lashing; and that all official and ceremonial recitations be done in Spanish. (Becker Richards and Richards 209)

From the colonization through independence, the Catholic Church managed to maintain a good deal of power, both economically and politically. Closely tied to the conservative political factions, the Church also possessed the majority of the land in Guatemala until the liberal turn of the tides with the Barrios regime.
If we examine Guatemalan nation building, it is evident that, while other Latin American nation-states attempted to formulate a cohesive and homogenous national identity after independence, Guatemala was an exception to this classic andersonian notion of the creation of a national imaginary that is often utilized when discussing Latin America. Carol Smith explains that nineteenth-century nation building in Guatemala was not formed through cohesive inclusion, but through division due to the persistent partition between an elite class and an indigenous peasantry. This model, in part, was caused by the geographic isolation of the small towns in Guatemala, which meant that the state and religious powers at the time permitted the indigenous groups a much greater deal of segregation. As a result, the Mayas were not able to take advantage of the liberal attempts to provide social mobility due to lack of opportunity, and the conservative integrationist projects were largely unsuccessful as a result of the geographical and communicative separation of the highland Mayas from the rest of the country. The casta system of miscegenation as it existed in Guatemala came to fruition in what is now considered the ladino group. Members of both ladino and Mayan groups could easily move between the two if the division were based solely on lineage; thus, these two groups are not demarcated through ethnicity. Rather, the differences in social class in present-day Guatemala are categories defined by community and by practice (Smith 18, Fischer and Brown 9). This is an important consideration in the public comportment of groups within Guatemala. It is precisely through the practice or the performance of “being Mayan” - through dress, office, place of residence, language, religion, and so forth - that one is placed into the Mayan groups and subsequently, most often, into the lower class.
After a series of national projects that attempted to reform the country, this already difficult dynamic of discrimination coupled with economic interests of the government eventually manifested as a violent civil war stretching almost 40 years, resulting in part from the 1954 *coup d'état* that deposed the Arbenz government with the support of the CIA. During these decades, the region suffered a series of uprisings and revolutions, with a heightened period of unrest during the 1970s until the mid-90s. This armed conflict lasted 36 years, making the recent history of Guatemala one consumed with violence and oppression directed primarily toward the Mayan populations. Military forces played a central role in the structure of the state during this period, as Robinson explains, “[t]he military ended up doing for the dominant classes what they were unable to do for themselves. The military’s all-out counterinsurgency (what it termed ‘total war’) acted as a perverse midwife to the transnational elite project in Guatemala” (104), a fact which contributed to decades of brutal armed violence against groups deemed guerrilla insurgents, a reification used to justify the extermination of entire Mayan villages. This type of violence was used by the dominant elite to continue exploiting the poorer indigenous workforce, a resource that had been economically advantageous for the Guatemalan elites since colonial times.

Beginning in the 1980’s, neoliberal economic development promoted by transnational capital and international organizations with the complicity of military governments in Guatemala produced various national projects oriented towards global capitalism, in which “[s]tate terrorism became the instrument of capitalist globalization in Guatemala, conforming ‘national’ structures to emerging global structures” (Robinson...
107). The military terrorism thereby acquired an economic mission, in that the military was able to justify their extermination of the Mayan populations who were considered a hindrance to national economic growth in an increasingly globalized market. It was under this violent and oppressive social environment that the negotiations to end the civil war in Guatemala eventually began in 1995, with the search for justice by way of peace agreements and a truth commission. Nevertheless, after the negotiations were completed in 1996 and the war was declared over, there was no definitive progress made towards the writing of a new constitution. Additionally, although the declaration of the *Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas* in 1995 managed to establish a degree of equality, it was also evident that it would not be possible to accomplish many social changes:

To the extent that [the Guatemalan peace accords] helped put an end to the reign of brutal human rights violations […] and at least legitimized, if not realized, such demands as indigenous rights […], they also helped to legitimate the emergent neo-liberal order by precluding fundamental change in the socioeconomic system and delegitimating [sic] opponents of this system (for example, dispossessed campesinos invading land and those who support them) as ‘extremists who reject peace.’ (Robinson 114-15)

Although they were an important step to end the violence and to create legislation to protect the human rights of indigenous populations, the peace agreements also resulted in the reestablishment of an order controlled by a group of elites, while at the same time it delegitimized the efforts of the working class. Subsequent plans endorsed the existing
neoliberal framework, further institutionalizing the polarizing divisions between the elite and working classes. For these reasons among many, this distrust of official government systems by the Mayas continues today, ever-present although still basically tacit.

Specifically in the field of spiritual practices, the Mayas have also experienced heightened discrimination and oppression during the last few decades (and indeed in the last few centuries). During the civil war it was forbidden to speak Mayan languages, wear traditional forms of dress such as the *huipil* and *corte*, and to engage in Mayan spirituality.⁴ Even if it had not been explicitly forbidden, informal social pressure made it more difficult to engage in certain cultural practices, as in the case of most Mayan men who, working out of the home more than the women, ceased to wear their traditional garb due to taunting and discrimination (Otzoy 147). Contemporarily, some Kaqchikels express dejection regarding conversations with Catholic or Evangelical members of their communities, interpreting from these interactions that their neighbors have a negative view of their work in traditional Mayan spirituality and do not welcome them in their places of worship. While the discrimination is not a particularly institutionalized at this stage (as very few expressions of discrimination are), Kaqchikels express some hesitation when speaking of Mayan spirituality among Guatemalan groups who may or may not condemn the practices.

On a political level, while contemporary government officials make an effort not to ignore the spiritual practices of the Mayan population, the general sense in Guatemala is that this façade is disingenuous and tactical, and that this is the norm in politics. The

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⁴ See, for example, Becker Richards and Richards, as well as Otzoy.
prime example I witnessed and discuss in Chapter 2 is a public seed blessing at Iximche’ on 8 May 2010, which was attended by numerous government officials and was overseen by some particularly high-profile Mayan ajq’ija’. The politics of the day were thinly veiled, as the Minister of Agriculture spoke of the fertilizer vouchers afforded to each farmer, provided by the current administration. Photo opportunities were also not scarce, capturing the mutual participation of government officials and Mayan ajq’ija’ in the planting of the seeds that were blessed in a public ceremony. This last administration made at least an attempt to recognize Mayan spiritual practices in these ways as well as in other public fora. The former president of the country, Álvaro Colom, was able to build his support in the 2007 elections by rumors that he was an “ordained” Mayan ajq’ij (Weiner n. pag.) or at least in close allegiance with ajq’ija’, as well as adopting a public persona which allied him with Gaspar Ilom, the protagonist of Miguel Ángel Asturias’ seminal indigenist novel Hombres de Maíz (Henne n. pag.). Despite the appearances such as these, among the Kaqchikels there is a general sense that Mayan culture, including its spirituality, is not valued on a national level, as one ajq’ij stated plainly: “There is very little valorization of Mayan spirituality here. But even more so, we’re somewhat dissatisfied” (Yax Tiu n. pag.). Until recently, the lack of official laws and doctrine that protect the interests of Mayan spiritual practitioners, which was perhaps somewhat assuaged by the recent September 2011 law that protects ancestral sacred spaces, leaves the general population with a sense of being disregarded by their political representatives.

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5 “Es muy poco la valoración que tiene la espiritualidad maya aquí. Pero es más, estamos nosotros casi desatisfechos”
That combined with a growing conglomeration of religious groups in the country has led to a continuation of the marginalization of traditional Mayan spiritual practices.

Although it is not always simple to identify and to bind, group identity is often delimited and rearticulated in an attempt to valorize what has been threatened in the past. With this context we can understand that, as a group that has been historically oppressed, the Kaqchikel community, or any number of the Mayan communities, would seek a means to achieve representation and validation of their group. It is partially in response to this dynamic of oppression and (mis)representation that the pan-Maya movement emerged in Guatemala in the 90s. This cultural movement has primarily been driven by K’iche’s and Kaqchikels as well as foreign scholars, and it seeks to redefine traditional cultural symbols in such a way that it reshapes the image of what it means to be Mayan and reforms the political ecology of the country. Specifically:

Current Maya activism seeks a culture-based solution to Guatemala’s many problems. The approach is two-pronged: to work for the conservation and resurrection of elements of Maya culture while promoting governmental reform within the framework of the current (1985) Guatemalan constitution and international law. The production and control of history and prehistory are of central importance to the movement’s cultural promotion because of the widely held view, found in early Western scholarship and influential today among Maya and non-Maya alike, that ‘true’ Maya culture consists only of those features surviving from the precontact period. (Fischer and Brown 13)
Pan-Maya activism is a means by which the Mayan groups of Guatemala, particularly the Kaqchikels who are somewhat more urbanized than the other groups due to their proximity to the capitol, have become increasingly mobilized and aware of their ability to resist and redefine the Guatemalan state.

Despite their alliance with Pedro de Alvarado in order to defeat their K‘iche’ enemies, the Kaqchikels have tended throughout colonial history to resist Spanish influence, and in the recent political climate, they have shown renewed interest in autonomy and self-determination. This increased political awareness has informed the way in which the Kaqchikels define their group as they seek to self-determine. Moreover, as cited above, the pan-Maya movement directly addresses the production of cultural symbols, one model by which groups have historically been identified and defined. This remodeling of the past is a crucial point of the movement because it fundamentally changes the way the Mayas are imagined. Associating the Mayas with the past is nothing new, but colonial systems of thought used this paradigm to justify the ladinization or exploitation of the indigenous population, explaining that their customs were an obstacle to progress. Instead, reshaping history in a way that it can serve to reconstruct a valuable and even glorious past, as essentialist as it may be, enables the Mayas to make use of history to validate their culture and “construct a sense of pan-Mayan community” (Sturm 117). They are refiguring and reclaiming that past so that it is not backwards but instead becomes a resignification of pre-national history. Not simply resisting dominant structures, the Kaqchikels have traditionally utilized them for their own purposes, as Judith Maxwell explains:
Since the invasion of the Spanish in the sixteenth century, Kaqchikel centers have been either co-opted as seats of non-Indian rule or relocated so that they might serve as suppliers of goods and services to non-Indian political and economic centers. The Kaqchikels, then, to a greater extent than many other Maya groups of highland Guatemala, have been under heavy and constant pressure to adopt non-Indian ways, particularly in language and in dress. Throughout their history, the Kaqchikels have sidestepped direct attempts at assimilation and, whenever possible, have turned colonial policies around to serve their own ends. (195)

The pan-Maya movement, in some regards, has become the popularization of this tradition of resistance. It seeks to change the way Mayan culture is imagined currently in Guatemala, transforming the contemporary Mayas from bearers of an ancient and irrelevant set of practices into active and authoritative spokespeople.

1.5.5 Recent Resurgence: The Pan-Maya Movement

The pan-Maya movement is comprised of two tiers: the political and the cultural. In the cultural sector, researchers have tended to elaborate the ways in which language and dress have come to be utilized as a means to reclaim the vital aspects of a pan-Mayan culture. Edward Fischer explains the central goal of this movement:

Rejecting the idea of cultural assimilation implicit in the development strategy of the Guatemalan state, these scholars are constructing a model in which a revalued Maya culture provides the foundation for long-term,
sustainable development. Their efforts, which I collectively term the pan-
Maya movement, seek no less than a major redefinition of Maya identity
through subsuming traditional community-based allegiances to a unified
pan-Mayan culture. (51-2)

He goes on to explain that this goal is accomplished “by mobilizing certain common
elements of indigenous culture” (Fischer 52). These efforts focus on particular forms of
cultural expression, in such a way that their redefinition via this movement creates a
salient image to which the Mayas can adhere. It is important that these images are tied to
the heritage of the Mayas, as “Maya scholars stress that they must first regain control
over their past (i.e. the production of history) before they can start to build their future”
(Fischer 64). This is an attempt to reshape the production of history so that it can be
reclaimed by the Mayan populations. In the *Anales de los kaqchikeles*, history begins
with the first fathers and grandfathers, which, as Kay Warren explains, means that “the
history then becomes genealogical” (“Reading History as Resistance” 92). We can
interpret these claims as continuous acts of self-determination not just on a collective
level but on an individual level as well. Many Mayan men and women consider
themselves authoritative sources of information about Maya culture by the mere fact of
being Mayan, and this is particularly true in the case of the Mayan ajq’ija’. The assertion
of this essentialized identity becomes a means by which the Mayas have attempted to
self-determine. This is evident in the cases in which Mayan intellectuals have asserted
that pre-Hispanic texts, such as the *Anales de los kaqchikeles*, should be read as a source
of alternative Mayan history. Through the determination of that history, they seek to gain legitimacy, recognition, and representation.

With these criteria in mind – the redefinition of elements of Mayan culture capable of reclaiming a Mayan history – one of the claims I make in this work is that we should also understand the revitalization of traditional Mayan spirituality as an important facet of this pan-Maya cultural activism. While it has not been widely discussed by the Mayan scholars of the movement, if we observe what is occurring on the ground, so to speak, it is clear that spirituality has become a fertile field for the re-appropriation of the symbols of Mayan history. This is primarily accomplished through references which recuperate and make use of the Popol Wuj, commonly known historical or mythical figures, and Mesoamerican cosmovision. The revitalization of traditional Mayan spirituality retains the same basic goals as other cultural revitalizations occurring in Guatemala – to transmit an ancient Maya heritage – but merely utilizes a different matrix of signifiers.

The larger dynamics of culture and social structure within Guatemala provide a context to understand what this resignification looks like. Raxche’ Demetrio Rodríguez Guaján makes a revealing statement in how he understands the structure of the Guatemalan state. He explains that there cannot be a pluralistic democratic nation-state because the Guatemalan state is not democratic, but rather it is colonial. Here he is referencing what is essentially internal colonialism, maintained by a feudal-like social structure in which the Mayas and the ladinos comprise uneven sectors, with the latter generally economically and socially dominating the former. As he elaborates:
In reality, the Maya are completely meshed with the gears of production of Guatemalan society: they supply the largest quantity of manual labor to produce export crops such as coffee and sugar; they produce the largest portion of food for internal consumption, such as basic grains and vegetables; and in addition, through their heritage in the arts and culture, they largely support the tourist industry, which is the second largest earner of foreign currency. Likewise, the glorious Maya past is utilized by the Ladino community to present a unique image of Guatemala to the world.

This argument is both social and political. We see a formalized internal colonialism in government institutions which are dominated by ladinos, but the Mayas also experience the colonial structure socially, as they find themselves marginalized not just economically but also informally, as discrimination runs high and social mobility is difficult to attain. But the question I wish to propose is, on what other levels do we see this internal colonialism occurring? In the field of tourism and the global economy, Mayan customs have long been utilized by the state and now by international forces seeking to benefit from these autochthonous knowledge systems. The spiritual practices that I have observed in my research, thoroughly discussed in the chapters of this dissertation, can be understood as part of the reaction against this colonialism. It is, at least on one level, an attempt to define what is *propio* to the Maya. In a situation which appropriates Mayan knowledge and forms of expression, the Kaqchikels, in my assessment, have retaliated using their most powerful weapon: their culture itself.
Interestingly, and certainly out of line with the trend in anthropology and academia, the technique Mayan leaders use to define what is theirs is through essentialization of Mayan culture, as I experienced in my own fieldwork and is also suggested by Edward Fisher (64). This most often involves invoking an ancient past which is glorious in its knowledge and crowning achievements and, in the subtext, is a system of knowledge which supersedes Western structures. Rodríguez Guaján suggests this as well; when defining culture, he exclusively cites the intellectual and technical progresses of the ancient Maya – the number zero, the astronomical calendar, positional numerology, the writing system, and the domestication of corn. Although the author undoubtedly admits that the daily practices of the people – their dress, language, and so forth – are unquestionably a central element to Mayan existence, he nevertheless squarely locates the question of culture within intellectual, pride-worthy achievements. He then states, in reference to the contemporary Mayas of Guatemala: “The form of our culture has changed, but not its essence” (76). He, like many Mayan leaders with whom I have spoken, does not fail to make the connection between the contemporary Mayas and the ancient Mayas. Therefore, although out of vogue in academia, it is entirely accurate to explain contemporary cultural (and in my case, spiritual) practices from within these essentialist claims.

This rhetorical strategy, which claims an inheritance of pre-Columbian Mayan systems by the contemporary Mayas, stems from an important source of pride for all of
the Mayas with whom I have come into contact, but it also serves a strategic function.\textsuperscript{6} The Mayas generally cannot enter into the political life of Guatemala, nor are they able to enter very easily into the economic market in a way that would provide them with upward social mobility. Many Mayas express that the original colonial hierarchy has not changed its structure but rather merely changed hands. While the Spanish ruled after the conquest, then passed the country on to Creole elites, the ladinos now serve the function of dominant colonizer (Rodríguez Guaján 78). Aside from the obvious resulting economic and political stratification, there is also a cultural implication inherent in this claim. Within this paradigm, Mayan culture and its representatives (namely, groups such as the Kaqchikels) are not afforded a space within the universally recognized Guatemalan national culture. That is not to say that they do not enter it through tourism, but that system strips them of their agency. Pan-Maya activists have also sought social measures, as evidenced in the relevant articles of the Guatemalan constitution (86-7) and in the \textit{Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas} in 1995, to attempt to remedy this imbalance in representation. Despite these efforts, the social scenario remains tenuous and unequal and does not offer many opportunities for social mobility. The contemporary Mayas’ claims to inheritance of an ancient tradition can be understood in this light; reference to a glorious past can provide a means to substantiate the value and authority of a group that is otherwise denied those things.

\textsuperscript{6} I will later, in Chapter 3, elaborate this idea using Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) term “strategic essentialization,” although it would be too general to understand all such strategies as functioning by and as essentialization. Some strategies are simply political or economic.
Some activists, most notably Cojti Cuxil, have even proposed a multi-national state as the only real solution to bring about Mayan self-determination. These claims as well as the one at the heart of the movement, the reclamation of Mayan culture, utilize a framework that can be likened to ethnic nationalism. While Kay Warren explains that ethnic nationalism is “often condemned for destructive essentialism, polarized politics, and state disintegration” (“Reading History as Resistance” 102), a valid argument and one I sympathize with in the academic field, we cannot deny describing the Mayan cultural movement as it exists. It is certainly a polemic claim, but nevertheless it is the claim that they make. The concept of cultural nationalism is also not a new one. While it is implicit in theorist Eric Hobsbawm’s work⁷ and finds its trajectory back to Herder and the formation of European nation-states, what is unique about Latin America in many cases, including Guatemala, is the way in which ethnolinguistically plural societies seek to find new ways to imagine the nation-state. Undoubtedly the population of nation-state has always been plural, but assertions for the recognition of that plurality are a relatively new phenomenon, most evident in Latin America in the case of the passage of a new Bolivian constitution in 2009. However, these political maneuvers among the Mayas have, for the most part, been largely unproductive in gaining the recognition of the state, and the Mayas remain on the margins of national culture.

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⁷ Eric Hobsbawm’s ideas regarding nationalism build on early work of Ernest Gellner, who attests that nationalism is a sentiment, an artifact of humankind’s tendency towards groups and solidarities. Hobsbawm develops a comprehensive understanding of the development of nationhood based on these ideas, while further emphasizing the genesis of the nation as a historical construct. These theories view nationalism as a sort of consciousness which is inherently hierarchical and exclusionary and, as further elaborated by Benedict Anderson, must be erroneously construed as homogenous.
The rhetorical strategy that suggests a cultural continuum between the ancient Mayas and the present day Mayas provides a remedy to this conundrum. If they cannot be afforded actual political power, thereby justifying their existence as an ethnic group within the Guatemalan nation-state, they can at least make a claim to legitimacy by referencing a glorious past. In this regard, essentialization is really a necessary and key component of this line of argumentation. The claim is that present-day Mayas should be valued because they are the direct inheritors – not merely descendants (and that is important) – of this ancient and impressive cultural knowledge system. It is necessary to be Mayan in order to remake that which is Mayan. My work shows how that knowledge system is transformed and reproduced by the Kaqchikel community within spiritual practices in present day.

1.6 Chapter Organization

This dissertation has the primary task of describing the aspects of traditional Kaqchikel spiritual practices that are currently utilized in Guatemala while attempting to understand both the contemporary and historical contexts which have produced them. I have attempted to carry out a ground-up approach, using as my primary focus the material that I collected during my fieldwork – ceremonies, interviews with ajq’ija’, and participant-observation – then working my way towards a broad and contextual understanding of those practices.

I have divided the content into three content chapters, each framed around salient expressions of Kaqchikel spirituality. Chapter 2 has the broadest scope and explains the
functioning of Kaqchikel ceremonies. In order to best ground the topic in an understanding of the ceremonial form, this chapter begins with an explanation of the office of the spiritual guide or ajq’ija’ and their role in the ceremonies. I then conduct what could be analogized as a “close reading” of actual ceremonial expression, making reference to Mayan cosmovision and anchoring our understanding of these expressions within the discourse of the practitioners themselves. Chapter 3 deals with an intriguing figure which has become increasingly popular in expressions of Kaqchikel spirituality. Known as Rilaj Mam, this figure represented in wooden effigy is considered an ancestor from a previous engendering of the universe, when men were made from wood. From a complex and uniquely Mayan perspective, his origin tales as well as the contemporary usage of this figure display a dialogue with past and present colonialism. Chapter 4 is somewhat distinct, in that it does not describe a discrete practice but rather a field of discourse surrounding the international discussion of the 2012 doomsday prophecies. What is interesting about this turn of events is the way in which the contemporary Kaqchikels have responded to foreign discourse surrounding this date, and furthermore how they have used it to their advantage.

Perhaps the most revealing orientation which aids in our understanding of the importance of these spiritual practices is an awareness of their performative qualities. Catherine Bell explains:

[…] ‘cultural performances’ such as rituals, festivals, and theater are expressions of the more abstract and hidden structures of the comprehensive cultural system. Others have tended to see such activities
less as expressions of an existing system and more as the very form in which culture as a system actually exists and is reproduced. (72-3)

Performance does not just comprise culture; it makes culture. Ritual in particular possesses the dual nature of being both literal and symbolic: a ritual act necessarily indicates a meaning beyond the mere action itself. As an encoded form of expression, this makes ritual an effective means to communicate a cultural episteme. As Edward Bruner informs us at the beginning of this chapter, society is constantly reshaped through performative narrative experience. For the Kaqchikel, expressions of spirituality have become a narrative expression of self-determination with which they seek to organize and substantiate their world.
Chapter 2
Inheritance and Tradition: Building Symbolism in Kaqchikel Ceremony

2.1 Introduction

The ajq’ij looks towards the ceremonial fire and makes his plea, “Enter into our hearts, may this work enter into our heads!”\(^8\) He takes burning candles from the central fire and bends to touch them to the remaining candles that comprise the ceremonial materials, so that the ignited flames burn more fervently. This petition is made to the ancestral forces understood to be invoked through these ritual ceremonies, and they indicate one of the central goals of these practices: transformation. In this chapter, I will elaborate the ways in which the contemporary Kaqchikels of Guatemala have constructed ritual ceremonial practices which seek to transmit and reproduce the pre-Columbian knowledge system. Although there is not definitive archival proof of an unbroken continuation of this ancient episteme to contemporary practices, we can certainly entertain the notion that there exists some residual adaptation inherited from the Mesoamerican cosmovision. I posit that this is a useful exercise in how it aids in our understanding of what the Kaqchikels hope to accomplish through ritual ceremonies.

Mesoamerican cosmovision, elaborated thoroughly in Chapter 1, is arguably a sound analytical tool to enable, due to the insistence of many Kaqchikel spiritual leaders that

\(^8\) “Niqa pa qak’u’x [...] ri samaj pa qawi’.”
their practices are in fact continuation of pre-Columbian traditions, and that the traditions and language they use has been passed directly from these ancestral sources or adapted from the *Popol Wuj*. Moreover, if we examine the ways in which tradition is utilized contemporarily, it is in fact quite irrelevant whether they are faithful reproductions or not. What is most significant in this scenario is how tradition is used symbolically or strategically in the contemporary social context. Although I do not wish to claim that the contemporary Kaqchikels practice unfettered ancient Mayan practices, elaborating their confluence orients us towards examples which illustrate the intentions of the ceremonial ritual. Given that information, our task is to unravel and understand the ways in which the Kaqchikels utilize what they interpret as pre-Columbian forms of spirituality, and to what end. This harkening to the past lends an understanding of contemporary spiritual practices as symbolic events which, through a reworking of traditional epistemology, bind group identity and serve as an idiom of contemporary Mayan social agency. In ceremonial practices, this is primarily accomplished through ritual and a claim to tradition, which I frame as (re)traditionalization. In this way, the Kaqchikels as a group are able to build their symbology and enter into dialogue with complex social strata through the performance of rituals which they view as handed-down traditions that are, at the same time, also ever-changing adaptive techniques. As I will argue at various points throughout this dissertation, Kaqchikel spirituality is quite revealing in what it communicates about the contemporary challenges and needs of the community.
To enable a thorough understanding of Kaqchikel ceremonial form, it is necessary to first understand Kaqchikel spiritual leadership. For my purposes I opt to use the native term for community spiritual leaders: ajq’ij, in the plural ajq’ija’. There is not a perfectly accurate translation of the word ajq’ij, but common translations into Spanish include chamán (shaman), guía espiritual (spiritual guide), and sacerdote maya (Mayan priest). Probably the most popular term among academics is the awkward-sounding “Daykeeper” in English, a semantically accurate yet obscure word that doesn’t clearly specify what it is that they do. In this section, I will explain how a person enters the occupation of the ajq’ij, and I will then attempt to situate this role in a comparative context of spiritual traditions. To these ends, I elaborate the various ways in which we can understand the practices of the Kaqchikel ajq’ija’ as “shamanic” in nature. “Shaman” is a dangerous term in research on Mayan spiritual practices and is often eschewed by foreign investigators in Guatemala as well as by some Mayas themselves. This is mainly due to a preoccupation regarding the connotation of the term as pertaining to “primitive” societies or to societies outside of Guatemala (namely, Mexico). There is also a denotative protest to its usage, as it is not quite a perfect fit to all of the duties of the various individual ajq’ij. I acknowledge the validity of these claims but still contend that, generally speaking, it is useful to situate Kaqchikel spiritual practices within the shamanic tradition. As a mode of definition, I understand a shaman to be “a communally

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9 The word ajq’ij has a very difficult pronunciation for an English or Spanish speaker, due to the uvular glottalized /q’/, which has the effect of sounding like a click. The vowels in this case are the same as their Spanish pronunciation, as is the /j/. For the sake of the reader’s comfort throughout these pages, it may suffice to reduce the word’s pronunciation to aj-KEE. The plural ajq’ija’ may be reduced to aj-kee-HA.
recognized professional who cultivates personal relations with helping spirits in order to achieve particular ends for the community: generally, healing, divination, and/or the control of fortune” (Dubois 6). My goal in adopting this position is to gain a comparative understanding of the practices of the Kaqchikel ajq’ija’ so that we may better understand how their occupation functions in Kaqchikel society. We must also recognize that, in reality, this orientation is to a great degree a process of translation. They are “ajq’ija’,” they are not “shamans.” As in any translation, there are connotations and resonances that are lost as words are moved from one language to the other. Therefore although I utilize conceptual frameworks of shamanism to approach a discussion of their role, I should be clear that I don't want to brand ajq’ija’ as shamans, but rather I find it a useful exercise to note the ways in which some of their practices seem to be shamanic in nature. Among Kaqchikel ajq’ija’, we find that their occupation is a trade which must be learned, but it is also a don, a gift.

The overall scope of this project is not as an ethnography of ajq’ija', but instead I seek to situate Kaqchikel spirituality in a socio-cultural context in order to understand how spiritual practices are used to create cultural identity and resist internal colonization. As such, this introduction to the occupation of the ajq’ij is oriented towards that ultimate goal. Shamans in various societies have traditionally been community leaders, serving as guides who both explain natural occurrences and provide community stability. As Kaqchikel ajq’ij Cristobal Cojtí explains, “the role [of the ajq’ij] is to serve. It’s to serve the community. […] It remains a part of the inheritance of a grand culture that emerged
Like many spiritual leaders, the ultimate goal of a religious or spiritual guiding force within a society is to moderate human behavior. Religions and even their cousin spiritualities are by their very nature didactic, as they seek to provide a moral compass to their believers, an arguably necessary activity whenever people form societies and enter into inevitable conflicts. While it is important to understand that Kaqchikel spirituality strives not to be dogmatic like Judeo-Christian religions, it nevertheless serves the purpose of providing a guiding orientation for a particular group of people. This is where shamanism is useful for our purposes, as shamans in communities serve to assist their fellow members with problems that they cannot resolve alone. Understanding their "shamanic" roles provides insight into the ways in which the ajq’ija’ play their part to guide, bind, and articulate group solidarity within these communities.

To approach a robust exploration of the nature of the ajq’ija’ occupation, we begin with the term itself. Aj is a prefix that means a person who works with, and q’ij means daylight, sun, or day. Therefore the morphology of the term implies that this is a person who works with these elements, and if we make a culturally-appropriate extrapolation we can understand “day” as a reference to the calendar system. Time was of central importance to the ancient Mayas, as spatial dimensions and time were viewed as inextricably linked. It is well-known that the pre-Columbian Mayas were astute

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10 “Ése es el papel [del ajq’ij] que es servir. Es servir a la comunidad [...] Todavía es parte de la herencia de una gran cultura que se salió de un sistema comunal”

11 Examining the other significations of q’ij, the term ajq’ij also means someone who works with the sun, the source of light on the planet. Like all Mesoamerican dualities, it is the counterpart to the ajitz’, which is a person who works with the “bad” or the dark side of the spiritually energetic realm, commonly translated as witches.
astronomers who developed an accurate 365-day solar calendar, a ceremonially important 260-day sacred calendar, and numerous others. They manifested their knowledge of astrology in their architecture, which is often aligned along important geological and astronomical axes. As elaborated in Chapter 1, the Mayas had a fatalistic view of the universe in which humans played an active and important role in the development of cosmological events. As such, understanding the passage of time was not a mere scientific and intellectual exercise, but rather it was vital to maintaining the necessary control of the energies of the universe (Sarat n. pag.). For the ancient Mayas, time was a cyclical phenomenon that was at once diurnal and mythical. The reality of time and the myth of time were connected such that myth was readily accessible in daily experience, given the proper knowledge and rituals. Moreover, each day of the sacred calendar bears a certain energetic tone, manifested in its nawal. Thus managing the calendar does not imply a mere time calculation, but rather it requires extensive knowledge of the energetic forces of the universe. The ajq’ija’ were, and are still, considered the experts in such knowledge and at managing the energies that reside in the sacred calendar.

Kaqchikel ajq’ija’ are in reality a heterogeneous group, and a person may be considered of the ajq’ij occupation when they would be perhaps more accurately described as a midwife or a bonesetter. Some of these practitioners may even be trained in Western medicinal techniques (Martin n. pag.). For the purposes of this chapter, I focus not on these aforementioned practitioners, but rather on ajq’ija’ who specialize in guidance and healing, both physically and spiritually. Probably the most neutral and

12 Although the more common spelling for this term is nahual, I choose to use nawal because it utilizes standard Mayan orthography (as opposed to Spanish).
readily accepted translation of ajq’ij is *guía espiritual*, spiritual guide. Indeed these men and women do in fact serve as guides to the members of their community. Because problems in one’s life may manifest in psychological or physical ways, the process of “healing” the patient may involve both their mental and physical capacities. The resolution to a problem is discovered through various means of divination, which may involve the ajq’ij laying their hands on the patient, consulting talismans, reading the calendar according to the patient’s date of birth, or rubbing various items on their body such as stones (often jade or obsidian, both local to Guatemala), eggs, or herbs. The majority of the ajq’ija’ with whom I spoke conduct these practices at their in-home altar.
and during ceremonies. A ceremony may be performed if the ajq’ij determines that, given the nature or severity of the problem of the patient, this substantial offering is necessary payment to the ancestors in exchange for their assistance.

Examining the term aj’qij linguistically in the category of aj- words, such as ajtz’ib’ (scribe, tz’ib’ = written word) and ajchikopanel (hunter, chikop = animal), each describe a specific occupation in which an individual must be trained. If we situate the ajq’ija’ within the traditions of the society in which they reside, it is evident that these occupations are understood as a kind of trade. Like many trades, entrance into the field requires an apprenticeship, a system which still functions to train ajq’ija’ in the

![Figure 2. The sacred bundle, now open. It contains tz’ite’ beans, shells, and stones of jade, obsidian, and other varieties. This ajq’ij explained that some of these stones had simply been found and were assumed to have pertained to the ancestral Maya.](image-url)
contemporary Kaqchikel societies. Every ajq’ij goes through a 260-day training period, which of no coincidence is the same length of the Mayan sacred calendar. During this time, they must carry out 20 ceremonies as well as learn to use the tools of the trade, such as the calendar or the sacred tz’ite’ beans. The tz’ite’ are bright red seeds from Erythrina coralloendron, the whistle tree or palo de pito (Stanzione 49). They are perhaps the most important element in the ajq’ija’s sacred bundle, a bag of these seeds and other important talismans used for divination (see Figures 1 and 2). These tools of the trade can be complex mechanisms to put into use, and as such they usually require specific training carried out under the tutelage of an experienced ajq’ij, often the one who was able to divine that the new ajq’ij was destined to take on this occupation.

To broaden the discussion of this trade, Kaqchikel traditional spiritual practices can also be understood as a type of folk tradition, in that it is a popular expression of a marginalized group. As such, it is useful to situate the transmission of this knowledge within an understanding how these traditions function. Dorothy Noyes explains:

Most of what makes folklore meaningful is not susceptible to straight copying: folklore has to be recreated, and that depends on a social context as well as on key performers. You cannot just ‘use’ most kinds of folklore; you have to invest time and effort and you have to learn from somebody who is willing to teach you, typically in a collective situation.

(“Traditional Culture” 3)

The tradition of the ajq’ij is transmitted in part through an apprenticeship system which trains subsequent ajq’ija’ in the proper traditions and technologies of the trade. A person
who purports to be an ajq’ij or to possess similar capabilities but lacks proper training, as is sometimes the case with a few overzealous foreigners in Guatemala, is considered at worst a thief and at best an imposter. The charge of the ajq’ij is something that is destined for particular individuals. One must undertake this charge only upon the recommendation of a recognized ajq’ij and after completing some sort of training, whether formalized or through years of experience, which bestows the practitioner with credibility. In an apt metaphor, the sacred bundle also symbolically represents the innate abilities or the gift that the ajq’ij carries, and one must be bestowed with it. The sacred bundle that they bear is both literal and figurative.

While it is requisite to learn proper usage of the necessary tools before employing them, these tools are not to be wielded by anyone but rather by a chosen few. Not everyone could be trained, because training is not all a person requires in order to become an ajq’ij. Therefore while practicing as an ajq’ij is certainly a trade, it is also a charge. Traditional Mayan spirituality uses cosmological predictions to guide individuals in their daily lives; one possesses a certain destiny that is determined by the particular energy of important days in their engenderment, most importantly their conception and their birth. The sacred calendar provides information about the energetic tone of these days, which then in turn describes the particular skills of that individual and therefore what occupations they would be best suited for. A person must be in accordance with their “Mayan cross,” comprised of four specific nawales, or spirit energies, in order to experience good health, economic prosperity, and happiness. There are twenty nawales, and they manifest on each day of the year in rotation. Each one has a representative
figure, often an animal, but is also associated with other general characteristics related to that figure. A person’s nawal also acts as a guardian, and they are examples of the extra-earthly manifestation of a person’s vital energy or essence. This concept of “essences” which manifest in the nawales is a continuation of the pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cosmovision, which understands that

[…] each member of a particular class of mortal being [is] derived from a certain deity, who remained within that being as an essence covered by the perishable, destructible, heavy matter of mortality. This explains why all individuals of the same sort—dogs, for example—have common characteristics. (López Austin n. pag.)

The immitigable connection between humans and the divine is manifest in the concept of the nawales, because these energetic essences characterize and permeate all things. This understanding allows us to see how our Western systems of organization have come to classify this episteme as a type of animism which views all things as living. Furthermore, these essences ultimately shape a person’s destiny due to the conceptualization that: “Time actually consisted of gods who, according to their particularities, affected the world in the form of destinies” (López Austin n. pag.). A person must fulfill a certain destiny because their essence, determined by their unchangeable date of birth, prescribes it.

In fact, a large portion of the responsibility of the ajq’ija’ in their community is to guide people according to their specific energetic needs. Because one’s occupation is to a degree pre-determined by this astrological concurrence, particularly among those whose
indicated occupation is an ajq’ij, it is often directly stated that a person does not choose to be an ajq’ij, but rather they are born as one. It is common to hear ajq’ija’ speak of their abilities as a *don*, a gift. Recounting a story from the *Popol Wuj*, Kaqchikel ajq’ij Cristobal Cojtí explained that, after the creation of mankind, one of the first ancestors was readying to pass on and so was preparing a means to leave their knowledge to their people:

> It’s an inheritance. It’s hereditary. […] [The ancestor said,] ‘I’ve taught you, I’ve given you everything. Here I leave my keys. What were the keys? Here I leave the sign of my existence. I leave the staff of my power, of my calling. Who is going to lead?’ And he delivered a cover, a sacred cover of fire. ‘Here I deliver this to you. Because it is the symbol of the calling, the symbol of power, of knowledge, of wisdom and the gift.’ ([a] n. pag.)

This is an important revelation in the construction of the tradition of the Kaqchikel ajq’ija’. Here Cojtí suggests that the occupation of the ajq’ija’ is directly inherited from their ancestors. However, an important nuance in this assertion is that the trade of the ajq’ij is not solely transmitted through an apprenticeship, but rather it must be handed down as a type of gift. In Spanish there is a distinction between gift as a present (*regalo*) as gift as an innate ability (*don*), so in this case he is referring to the latter instance. The ability to be a spiritual guide to the community has been bestowed upon the Kaqchikel

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through a line of inheritance, a charge that is taken up by a select few as their destiny dictates.

We are now equipped with the proper information to begin taking a broad, comparative view of Kaqchikel spiritual practitioners. Once again I recognize that there is a somewhat vehement objection to using the term “shaman” to describe the ajq’ija’, mostly on the part of foreign academics but in some cases among the Kaqchikel as well. Conversely, some of the ajq’ija’ with whom I collaborated readily referred to themselves in this manner with no prompting on my part. I posit that, for the sake of contextualization as well as understanding the mechanisms of the practices of the ajq’ija’, it is useful to examine the ways in which the ajq’ija’ do indeed seem to have commonalities with shamanic ways. This is also a valid exercise due to the sometimes willingness of the Kaqchikels to self-define in this way. Although “shaman” is a term originating from Siberia and Inner Asia, since its original categorization the term has been used to describe practices found throughout parts of Asia as well as the Americas (Winkelman 8269). The four primary characteristics of the vocation which I will discuss here are: the specific qualifications for the adoption of the role as ajq’ij, communion with the dead, the ability to divine, and the practice of an altered state of consciousness.

The first characteristic of shamanism is that it is a “(1) hereditary transmission of the shamanic profession and (2) spontaneous vocation (‘call’ or ‘election’)” (Eliade 8269). This is an accurate description of the adoption of the occupation of the Kaqchikel ajq’ij, which is considered both a trade and a calling. As an ajq’ij operates based on their own innate knowledge of universal energies and ancestral connections, they are experts
in divination, defined simply by The Oxford English Dictionary as “the practice of divining or seeking knowledge by supernatural means.” As such they are also considered uniquely capable of divining the destiny of the person involved. It is common for an ajq’ij to have come to the knowledge of their calling after consultation with another ajq’ij, usually in an attempt to resolve some sort of serious illness. The consultation reveals that the illness is the result of not following their intended path (again, their destiny), a malady that can only be cured by taking on the charge of the ajq’ij vocation. Although it is entirely possible for foreigners to also become ajq’ija’, the vocation is generally viewed as a form of inheritance from the ancient Mayas. As elaborated more thoroughly in Chapter 4, the Kaqchikels tend to be quick to welcome foreigners into their spiritual practices, at least on the margins, as long as they display the proper amount of respect and communicative competence. While a foreign ajq’ij can never be “Mayan,” they can accurately learn the practices of the ajq’ij trade. This is an interesting incorporation in the traditional spiritual practices of the Kaqchikel (and other Mayan groups), one which is likely an artifact of “animistic” spiritual beliefs which view all living beings as capable of manifesting sacred energies, as well as a willingness to accept that foreign interest in Mayan spiritual practices is, in the end game, a good thing for the Mayas because it can be seen to validate their legitimacy.

Shamanic capabilities are generally viewed as the result of the transmission and the continuation of ancestral belief systems. This is tied to the second characteristic of shamanism, which involves communion with the deceased. In Kaqchikel ceremonial tradition, this functions on several levels. First, we must recall the dual implication of the
term “ancestor,” which signifies literally relatives who are no longer living but is also conflated to imply heritage. In the first of these instances, it is common to invoke well-known Mayan figures that are mentioned in such books as the *Chilam B’alam*, the *Anales de los Kaqchikeles*, and the *Popol Wuj*. Common names that are mentioned, for example, are Tz’aqol, B’itol, Tepew, Q’ukumatz, Ixpiyakok, and Ixmukane’, all of whom are mentioned most notably in the *Popol Wuj*. While these are considered to be historical figures (even the mythological ones, once we understand myth to be a kind of history telling), they are also construed as the figurative grandfathers of the inherited spiritual system of the Kaqchikels. Furthermore, if we connect the concept of ancestral communion with the discussion in Chapter 1 of Mesoamerican cosmovision, we come to understand how a communion with the deceased may occur. The Mayas view the realms of the departed to be readily communicable through the earthly realm, and therefore it is not surprising that we would observe some communion with ancestral spirits in Kaqchikel spiritual practices. Rituals create the necessary energetic events to communicate with the existential realm of the deceased. What is most notable about these practices, however, is the symbolic function of “ancestors” as the bearers and transmitters of heritage. As Kaqchikel ajq’ij Tojil Artemio Hernández explains, “[t]he Bible for us is the *Popol Wuj*, which is the Holy Bible that our ancestors left for us. Based on the *Popol Wuj*, we guide ourselves in the ways to be in communion with God, with the ancestors, with the grandfathers that the *Popol Wuj* mentions” (n. pag.).

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14 “La Biblia para nosotros es el Pop Wuj, que es la Biblia sagrada que dejaron nuestros antepasados. Y a base del Pop Wuj nosotros nos guiamos como para estar en comunión con Dios, con los ancestros, y con los abuelos que el Pop Wuj menciona”
claim that they have received a charge from their ancestors to carry on their ways, which can also be a point of pride when discussed in counterpoint with the civil war, during which it was difficult to practice Mayan traditions of various sorts. Much like we see in shamanic traditions, sentiments such as these reveal that the ajq’ij is considered able to commune with the deceased via a gifted ability, passed down through a sanguinary line of inheritance.

The third characteristic of shamanism is the ability to divine through the use of special abilities, which shamans use to intercede with spirits on behalf of community members (Winkelman 8275). Generally speaking, a shaman has various instruments that they use to carry out these tasks and which vary according to culture. Kaqchikel ajq’ija’ are considered able to read the signs presented to them when they are working with a patient, such as the color of the smoke or of the ash released in the ceremony, the sound of animals who approach the area, the flow of energy or blood in a person, or any number of individual capabilities. In addition, they make use of tangible instruments, such as the tz’ite’ beans, eggs, stones, and herbs, each of which have certain energetic implications that are well-known by ajq’ija’ and which are considered preferable for certain uses or days. These methodologies are acquired through a combination of teaching and individual preference, and they are understood to be the tools of the trade of the ajq’ija’ as well as evidence of their unique gift. The ajq’ija’ are considered bearers of an inimitable capability which enables them to serve as the primary conduits of communication with deceased ancestors and the creador y formador (creator and shaper), the Ajaw, the one true deity in Mayan spirituality and the entity responsible for creating and shaping the
universe, as explained in the *Popol Wuj*. Kaqchikel ajq’ij María Ernestina Reyes explained that ajq’ija’ are able to communicate with these spiritual entities because “they speak if one knows how to speak to them” (n. pag.).

The implicit declaration is, of course, that the ajq’ija’ are the persons capable of speaking to them, which occurs both through training but also by possession of a gift which makes them uniquely capable of fulfilling this task. These capabilities reinforce one of the central characterizations of shamanism, which considers the shaman uniquely capable of serving as a nexus between humans and gods, a task made possible because they were chosen for it.

Perhaps the major guiding technology utilized by the Kaqchikel ajq’ija’ in order to advance this communication is the sacred calendar. Manifested in this calendar are different energies pertaining to the universe, previously explained as the *nawales*. The energetic tone of each day, and the day on which the person was born and engendered, influences the therapy that the patient receives. For example, a ceremony asking for abundance (in agriculture, business, etc.) is likely to occur on the day *Aj*, a word that means reeds and which implies the abundance with which new reeds grow. A ceremony asking for wisdom or guidance in an intellectual endeavor may be performed on the day *Noj*, a term meaning thoughts or wisdom. The aqj’ija’ are considered to be trained in the calendar system. At the same time, however, their gift enables them to feel these energies and to read the signs given to them when they utilize the calendar in their rituals, which

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15 “Ellos hablan si uno sabe hablar con ellos”

16 As a brief example of the type of signs that ajq’ija’ purport to be able to read, I relate the following. An ajq’ij insisted in performing a ceremony for me before he was willing to conduct an interview. When assembling the ceremonial materials, he found an errant broken black candle in the bag of dried rosemary, and he informed me that this meant that someone was trying to put obstacles in my way and thwart my success.
they do by invoking (through naming) each of its *nawales*. They are able to directly communicate with the spiritual forces of the universe, an innate power or capability only afforded to these special spiritual leaders. Vilma Poz, a K’iche’ ajq’ij, spoke of the importance of the calendar system:

There is a great force from our ancient ancestors. Regardless of the invasion, regardless of wars, our spirituality and our calendar have been maintained. This is beautiful because […] the invasion imposed religion. But within this religion, the Mayan peoples maintained themselves according to their own spiritual vision. And because of that, maintenance of our Mayan calendar was not lost. What does the calendar have to do with it? It is something very important. For us, it is the fundamental base to be able to guide ourselves, to fill time, to drive ourselves. […] Our ancestors conducted great studies to understand time. And what our grandfathers have done, we continue to maintain. (“El día y el destino” n. pag.)

What is interesting about this assertion is that it illustrates the knowledge of the ajq’ija’ in two realms. Poz uses the term *estudio* (study) to reinforce the intellectualism of the ancient Mayas who formulated calendrical knowledge, which has the effect of reinforcing

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17 “Ha habido una fuerza inmensa, grande de nuestros antiguos abuelos. Y de la cual no importando invasión, no importando guerras se ha mantenido lo que es nuestra espiritualidad y el manejo de nuestro calendario maya. Esto es tan hermoso porque […] cuando vimos una invasión, se impuso religión. Pero dentro de una religión el pueblo maya se mantuvo desde su visión cósmica, desde su visión espiritual propia. Y a raíz de esto, no se perdió el manejo de nuestro calendario maya. ¿Qué tiene que ver el calendario maya? Es algo muy importante. Para nosotros es la base fundamental para podernos guiar, y para poder llenar el tiempo. Podernos conducir. […] Nuestros abuelos hicieron grandes estudios para entender el tiempo. Y lo que han hecho nuestros abuelos, seguirlo manteniendo.”
the value of this knowledge system. On another level, there is a clearly implied connection between the contemporary Mayas and this ancient timekeeping system. As a practice which assumes a genealogical transmission from the ancient Mayas to the contemporary Kaqchikels, the abilities of the ajq’ija’ are considered somewhat inherent. This is also a result of the Mayas’ belief in the system of the nawales, which to a degree pre-determine the abilities of the individual, making certain people more disposed to the ajq’ij occupation. This calendar system, as a product and an artifact of the ancient Mayas’ interest in time, is considered by the contemporary populations to be an inherited tool. Probably the most important technology of the ajq’ij, the calendar manifests both this inherited tradition as well as providing an opportunity for the ajq’ija’ to display their ability to use it.

A primary feature of shamanism in general is achieving an altered state of conscious (ASC), sometimes referred to as ecstasy, particularly in the research of Mircea Eliade. While Kaqchikel ajq’ija’ do not engage in this activity in the most pronounced sense, I nevertheless find it apropos to address the use of mood-altering substances in Kaqchikel ritual practices. During Kaqchikel ceremonies, it is common to partake in smoking cigars and drinking alcohol throughout the ritual and following it. The use of these substances has both a biological and a symbolic effect, each of which facilitate one of the central goals of the ritual: communion with the deceased and ancestral figures. On a biological level, mood-altering substances have been scientifically proven to increase the release of hormones in the brain, mostly notably dopamine. This hormone is connected to a feeling of enjoyment, and studies suggest that altered levels of dopamine
in the brain may cause hallucinogenic effects (Okubo et al.). Although it would be inaccurate to claim that these substances function in the same manner as known psychotropic plants, as utilized in classic shamanic traditions, they do serve the same purpose, as Peter Furst describes, to “heighten or otherwise modify the metaphysical experience” (8292). Furst also reveals that “tobacco […] plays an important role in ritual intoxication, most often in conjunction with another psychoactive species […]. Less commonly tobacco is the consciousness-transforming plant of choice” (8292). On a purely biological level, the use of these substances may therefore facilitate the altered state of consciousness desired in the ritual. These practices would also be aligned with pre-Columbian Mesoamerican spiritual rituals, which “sought communication with the supernatural, especially through psychotropic means” (López Austin n. pag.).

On a symbolic level, the use of alcohol and tobacco is considered a means to commune with the ancestors because it is an activity that they themselves enjoyed, according to sacred texts such as the Popol Wuj as well as oral traditions (for example the origin tales of the folk saint Rilaj Mam, discussed in Chapter 3). In fact, alcohol is perhaps the most important substance present in a ceremony; where other materials may vary, I have never observed nor heard of a ceremony in which alcohol was absent. It is considered to be the most salient offering to the gods, who are nourished by the materials that are offered literally and symbolically during the ceremony.18 Lastly, the remaining function of the use of consciousness alteration is described by Winkelman:

18 While it is quite common in ceremonial practice to use a variety of moonshine made from corn, kuxa, it is also possible to use other types of alcohol, perhaps most frequently sugar-based aguardiente under the brand name Quetzalteca (see foreground in Figure 11). Not only can we understand this usage as an
Shamanistic activities use ASC, visual symbols, and group rituals to produce psychological, social, and cognitive integration, which serves to manage relationships among behavioral, emotional, and cognitive processes, and between physiological and mental levels of the organism.

(8279)

The use of an altered state of conscious also has the effect of producing a communal experience. Winkelman explains the way this functions in the brain by altering brain waves, but once again its importance to the community lies in its symbolism. This is where we find the most apparent parallel between textbook ASC in shamanism and the use of mood-altering substances among the Kaqchikels. One of the effects of group ritual is to undergo a transformative experience, such that the participant emerges from the ritual with a sense of having been transformed. The very tangible and affective effect of Kaqchikel ceremonies is produced, to a degree, by the use of these substances. This is due to their ability to create a pleasurable effect in the participants (as a result of altered hormone production), a process which results in an emotional response, causing the members to feel closer to one another after the ritual. Emically, this is considered evidence of the spiritual efficacy of the ritual.

While it is certainly does not present an exhaustive understanding of the role of the Kaqchikel ajq’ija’, an examination of shamanism does provide a useful orientation to understand how Kaqchikel spiritual beliefs function in both a comparative and a local context. Winkelman explains that in general: “Shamanism is the original psycho-socio-

adaptation of traditions into contemporary practices, especially as far as more costly alcohols are concerned, but it is also a function of economics, as Quetzalteca is both readily available and inexpensive.
physiological therapy in that it uses rituals and cultural processes to manipulate health from physical through symbolic levels” (8278). This is a good description of what Kaqchikel ajq’ija contribute to their communities. In the literal sense of perhaps the most widely accepted translation of the term ajq’ij, they are considered to be spiritual guides. Community members consult with them when they have problems that they feel they cannot resolve on their own (a primary function of ritual, as I will discuss in the following sections). Not limiting their treatment options to the purely metaphysical, ajq’ija do however enter into curative and medicinal realms through their understanding of the ways in which the physical and metaphysical self are interrelated.

The resurgence of spiritual practices in post-war daily life also means the resurgence of the public presence of ajq’ija in Kaqchikel communities. These communities are typically quite religiously heterogeneous, and as a result it is not surprising to find a discourse from ajq’ija that engages in a dialogue with the presence of these originally foreign interventions into Kaqchikel culture. The stories that ajq’ija relate of how they knew they were supposed to follow the path of becoming an ajq’ij almost always involve their suffering from a mysterious illness that Western medicine failed to cure. They only cured this physical ailment once they accepted the charge of the ajq’ij, usually following the guidance of another ajq’ij. In a similar manner, the Kaqchikel ajq’ija, while often eschewed by certain factions of the community at the prompting of religious organizations, nevertheless tend to possess a certain sense of rectitude. On the perhaps the most extreme end of the spectrum, one Kaqchikel ajq’ij actually referred to Santiago Atitlán, which has been one of the most important epicenters
of colonial indigenous Catholic practice and then recently of Evangelism, as “rotten” for having undergone the process of shunning their native spiritual practices. Ajq’ija’ are certainly not popular among all Kaqchikels, but they consider themselves (as do their followers) to possess a gift that allows them to access knowledge not available in non-native (i.e. Christian) spiritual practices. In this manner, we can understand the role of the ajq’ij, to a certain degree, as serving as a counter to Western influences in the country, as they revive, maintain, and adapt what are considered to be ancient, inherited, and complex epistemological systems. The same Kaqchikel ajq’ija’ also exhorted, “I am a spiritual guide of the people. I don’t spend a lot of time in institutions. No, because I am not a clown. I live it, and it is for my people.” 19 We can understand the traditions of the Kaqchikel ajq’ija’ as a means to replicate and reproduce a way of life that was thwarted both by the conquest, and now by contemporary efforts of internal colonialism, which perpetuates hierarchal social structures and has the effect of homogenizing local practices. These spiritual leaders use technologies of their trade to build the confidence of their community and to bolster the ancestral transmission of traditions that have been under the recent threat of extirpation during the period of violence, and indeed since the conquest.

2.3 Types of ceremonies

Kaqchikel ceremonies in the Guatemalan highlands may be of a personal nature, performed for a specific individual and those close to them, or they may have a

communal purpose. In the case of personal ceremonies, one may come to understand their need for a ceremony after consultation with an ajq’ij, who suggests that this ritual is a necessary payment to the ancestors in the patient’s course of treatment. The goal is typically to ask for permission or guidance from the ancestors for a new undertaking or problem about which the patient has consulted the ajq’ij. Individual ceremonies are also performed to induct a new ajq’ij, as well as during the process which trains them in the trade. If the ceremony is of a communal nature, it is most often a combination of celebration and blessing. This is true in the case of ceremonies to welcome the new year of the 260-day Mayan sacred calendar, Waxaq’ B’atz’, as well as ceremonies that occur at other specific times of the year, such as public seed blessings during the spring equinox. These can be quite large events, attracting members of an entire community and even other communities, as people travel to well-known sacred locations, such as Kaminal Juyu’, Iximché’, and Totonicapán, to participate. Communal ceremonies may also be smaller affairs, seeking good will for a particular organization or a new business venture. In the following pages I narrate and explain examples of several ceremonies, focusing primarily on blessing ceremonies as I seek to elaborate a robust understanding of the function of these activities. Our ultimate goal here is to examine the ways in which the Kaqchikels structure ceremonies as a type of cultural expression. Ritual is not an acute, closed activity, isolated from the other aspects of a person’s life. Instead, we will

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20 These problems are quite varied in nature and include, for example, physical ailment for oneself or a family member, relationship problems, marital strife, the beginning of a journey, a new business venture, money troubles, and so forth.
see that Kaqchikel ceremonies are in fact poignant expressions that serve to articulate and form cultural boundaries.

In this chapter in particular, my role as participant-observer is inextricably linked to the form of the ritual expression itself. While this is potentially the case in any scenario in which I was present, it may be particularly a concern in ceremonies in which I participated. In some cases, I was joining a ceremony performed for a member of the Kaqchikel community, but other times the ceremony was for me specifically. It was not uncommon that, after I met a new ajq’ij and told them about my dissertation project, they would explain that they would be glad to participate as long as they could first consult with the ancestors in a ceremony. In my assessment, this request served three purposes. First, assuming the ajq’ij believes their own paradigm, a good outcome from the ceremony implies a favorable response from the ancestors and puts the ajq’ij’s mind at ease. Second, the ajq’ij is able to examine the genuineness of my participation in the ceremony as a kind of litmus test of my intentions. In this regard, a display of communicative competence\textsuperscript{21} in how to conduct myself in the ceremony is necessary for me to continue displaying a serious and respectful demeanor. Lastly, it should not be overlooked that ceremonies are expensive, as one should pay at least 300Q (about $38 USD) for materials (usually procured by the ajq’ij themselves) as well as at least 200Q (about $25 USD) in payment to the ajq’ij for their services. This sum of 500Q is quite

\textsuperscript{21} I utilize this term in the ethnographic tradition of Dell Hymes: "Within the social matrix in which it acquires a system of grammar a child also acquires a system of its use, regarding persons, places, purposes, other modes of communication, etc.--all components of communicative events, together with attitudes and beliefs regarding them. There also develop patterns of the sequential use of language in conversation, address, standard routines, and the like. In such acquisition resides the child's sociolinguistic competence (or, more broadly, communicative competence), its ability to participate in its society as not only a speaking, but also a communicating member" (\textit{Foundations in Sociolinguistics} 75).
large in a country where the official minimum wage (which isn’t necessarily met) is around 60Q per day. Of course, it is known that the higher payment one offers to the ceremony in this manner, the more likely it is that one’s requests will be granted. The greater the payment, the greater the reward. The expectation of monetary compensation is true for Guatemalans as well, although in poorer towns an ajq’ij may choose to accept goods as a form of payment when money is scarce. In this regard, I was not unaware of my perceived position as an American with cash to spend, and I welcomed the way in which my foreignness was used to others’ advantage in this situation. There are many exchanges that take place in a fieldwork scenario, and I felt this was a fair one that was advantageous to all parties concerned.

2.3.1 Sacred Energies: Building a Ceremony

To properly orient the reader in order to understand the elements of Kaqchikel ceremonies, I will briefly describe the materials that are most commonly used. All ceremonies are centered around a fire, and that fire is demarcated with a circle. Some common ceremonial locations, such as Iximche’ and even famous lowland touristic locations like Quirigua and Tikal, have a designated ceremonial area permanently constructed with cement and/or natural stones. If the ceremonial area is a bit more impromptu and lacks a formalized structure, the ajq’ij will usually bring their mesa, a small, low iron table sometimes with short legs, on which they assemble the materials for the ceremony (see Figure 3). Drawing on the explanation of Mesoamerican cosmovision in Chapter 1, the use of ritual is a means to open the lines of communication with
ancestors. Regarding the energies considered to lie in other realms along the axis of the World Tree, Carrasco mentions specifically, “these supernatural forces, from below and above, could also enter the world through caves, fire, sunlight, animals, stones – any place where there was a spiral or opening connecting humans with the spaces or temporal

Figure 3. An ajq’ij stands before his ceremonial fire, and we can see the iron mesa that contains it. Around it he has placed natural ornamental greenery, most notably laurel leaves and rose petals.
cycles of the gods” (52). This is important information given the use of fire in Kaqchikel ceremonies. The fire is a means to communicate with these ancestral beings, opening the lines of communication, and the ajq’ij hears their answers in the form of crackling sparks and spirals, much as Carrasco mentions, in the flames. Among the pre-Columbian Mayas, communication with other spirits and energies was sometimes accomplished with ritual bloodletting, as blood was considered a potent carrier of essential life energies. In a contemporary scenario, bloodletting may occur in Kaqchikel rituals through the use of animal sacrifice, most often a chicken, which I discuss in Chapter 3. In a more general sense, rituals are conducted in sacred locations but can basically occur anywhere – preferably outdoors or close to it – that one can place an iron mesa.

The notion of toj or debt payment is a driving function of contemporary ceremonies, and it is present in the basic formulation of the materials offered to the fire. Materials presented in the ceremony serve as symbolic payment to ancestral forces, and several other researchers have documented this conceptualization among Mayan groups. Hill explains that a Mayan ajq’ij may be required to “purchase” the health of their patient through an offering (144), and Christenson elaborates regarding the contemporary K’iche’: “Offerings, including blood sacrifices from chickens or turkeys, are still seen as ‘substitutes’ for the offender so that deity will not take them through illness or death” (133). Other common offerings among the Kaqchikels consist of salient materials of appealing taste and aroma, such as liquor, sugar, and chocolate, and it is considered that these gifts are necessary to nourish the gods. As we shall see, it is also common to offer
small pieces of pine resin continuously throughout a ceremony. These small round pieces are called *monedas* (coins), which implies an exchange of money and therefore payment of a debt. Indeed, the offering itself is sometimes verbally called a *multa* (fee) or a *toj*. In this way we come to understand the primary function of the fire, the central organizing element of any Mayan ceremony. On one level it serves as a reenactment of the mythic fire which forged mankind, and on another level it is a means to cause energies to flow. Kaqchikel ceremonies are considered, at their most basic level, an exchange of energies, made possible through the proper ritual actions. As people carry out these ceremonies in

Figure 4. The Mayan cross demarcated with sugar. The ceremonial materials will be assembled on top of this shape.
order to petition the ancestors for help or guidance, a payment in the form of material offering (which as we remember is not solely material but also energetic, repaying the energetic debt owed to the ancestors for their creation of mankind) is required in order to gain the ancestors’ favor.

To prepare, the first step is to demarcate the circle that will begin the fire using flammable materials. This is most commonly accomplished with refined sugar, which the ajq’ij usually pours to make a shape of either the Mayan cross, signifying the four cardinal directions and spatial composition of the Earth, or the symbol of the nawal of the day (See Figure 4). Both of these choices are symbolically important not just in what they

![Image](image.png)

Figure 5. A ceremony in which we clearly see the convex yo-yo shaped tolitos around the base and the large spherical bolas. On top is the panela as well as chocolate, cinnamon, incense, sugar, honey, flower petals, and colored and cebo candles.
purport to signify intrinsically – the Mayan cross as the Earth (and the dots as the tubular trunks of trees which connect the realms of existence and allow energy to flow between them, a pre-Columbian conceptualization described by López Austin) or the *nawales* as the energetic tone of the day – but also in how they reproduce and transmit the episteme of the ancient Mayas. This is the first of many conscious attempts by the Kaqchikels to utilize knowledge they consider inherited from their ancestors. On top of this sugar outline is usually placed either Bundt cake-shaped pieces or round balls of *pom*. *Pom*, a Kaqchikel word, is a hardened mixture of pine resin and leaves and is extremely pervasive in ceremonies. It comes in many different shapes and sizes, each with a distinct meaning. For example, resin pieces called *tolitos* or *guacalitos* are shaped like a convex yo-yo (see Figure 5). Ajq’ij Maria Ernestina Reyes also runs a shop that sells ceremonial materials and explained that this shape represents the two halves of *ruk’u’x kaj ruk’u’x ulew*, heart of sky and heart of earth, a duality expressed in the *Popol Wuj*. Additionally, when a person wishes to make a particularly hefty offering, they may purchase special kinds of resin which are basically pure, with fewer natural additives such as leaves.

Once the tower of *pom* has been constructed, a large cubical block of *panela*, basically congealed sugar, is placed at the top where the ajq’ij will light the fire. This is also a basic material used in ceremonies, as its quick combustion enables the fire to ignite. In the absence of *panela*, a bundle of candles is sometimes substituted. Once these materials have been assembled, the ajq’ij begins to add other flammable materials, most often *ocote* (pine tree) shards and candles of various colors. I will not attempt to explain the significance of the many colors of candles, because I found that each ajq’ij has their
own interpretation of what they mean and should be used for. To generalize, however, the ajq’ij chooses which colors to use based on the request and/or problem of the person for whom the ceremony will be performed. Nevertheless, the seven main colors of candles are almost always used, and these do share at least one level of significance among all ajq’ija’ due to their intricacies within the Mayan cosmovision. Four of the colors represent the four cardinal directions: red (East), white (North), black (West), and yellow (South). In the middle, the colors blue and green again represent the “heart of sky, heart of earth” phrasing that is very commonly repeated in Kaqchikel ritual. This configuration is understood to represent the cosmos in the manner of the axis mundi or World Tree, elaborated in Chapter 1:

Horizontally, there were four great quadrants, each assigned a specific color […] In each of the four quadrants of the world was located one of the cosmic columns, characterized by the color corresponding to its position. The fifth and principal column occupied the center and served as the axis mundi. The columns were considered gods and took arboreal form. (López Austin n. pag.)

Lastly, always included are the off-white candles made of cebo, lard. The use of cebo candles is generally considered to have ancestral origins that stem from native spiritual practices, to the degree that they are often forbidden in churches in Guatemala due to their “pagan” nature. They are best used to invoke and make an offering to the deceased who, of course, although invisible “to us are not dead” (Ajquijay n.pag.).
The aforementioned elements, but perhaps more acutely the remaining ones I will mention, make it evident that Kaqchikel ceremony is considered a manner in which to provide alimentation for the ancestors. Most types of pom are assembled in long corn husks that are then bound together, a form which mimics the way one prepares a tamal, corn dough that is steamed inside corn husks and is an extremely important staple of the Mayan diet. María Ernestina Reyes explained that assistance and guidance from the ancestors comes in exchange for our giving them a “tamalito.” A metaphoric expression, this indicates the widely held understanding that ceremonial burning is the way in which

Figure 6. This ceremony provides a view of the panela in the center as well as chocolate, spherical bolas of pom, and slivers of ocote wood. The greenery is dried rosemary. Note the four candle colors oriented in the four cardinal directions.
humans offer the deceased a meal. Ajq’ij Berta Batzin explained that “the spirits don’t eat like we do. They eat via the air. The aroma of the flowers […] by these means, they

![Image](image.png)

Figure 7. The finished version of the ceremony shown in Figure 6. The ajq’ij has added “modern” candle colors as well as cebo candles, and four cigars.

eat” (n. pag.). As such, it is common to include elements which are intrinsically aromatic or become so when ignited, such as tobacco, incense, cinnamon, myrrh, and rosemary. Flowers and other greenery, such as laurel leaves and pine needles, are also often assembled around the outside of the fire, and they serve both as decoration as well as this same aromatic purpose. Moreover, the deceased prefer to consume sugary

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22 “los espíritus no comen como nosotros. Ellos sí ya comen a través del aire, pues. El aroma de las flores […] a través de eso, comen ellos.”
substances, and so we see a prevalence of this type of materials: in addition to the aforementioned sugar, honey and chocolate are often present as ceremonial materials. Chocolate is particularly significant due to its importance among the Classic and Post-Classic Mayan peoples, when it was consumed as a drink and cacao pods were used as a currency (Stanzione 178-9). Lastly, liquids are used to demarcate the four cardinal directions by pouring a small quantity in each direction around the fire. They are also consumed by the participants, so that they may share a toast with their ancestors. Typically the preferred substance is either alcohol or soda, another sugary substance. Pre-contact Mesoamerican cosmovision believed that: “When [gods] travel in the world of

Figure 8. A stone altar found at Iximche’. A candle bundle is substituted for panela in the center; green and blue candles signify the heart of sky, heart of earth duality. At lower left is a conch shell, sounded at the start and end of ceremonies to call spirits.
humans, they are vulnerable to the passing of time and must be nourished” (López Austin n. pag.), a concept which displays a striking similarity to the contemporary Kaqchikel practices, wherein the elements offered provide the necessary nourishment for the spirits.

Most ajq’ija’ emphasize that the materials used in ceremonies are entirely natural elements, and this is true for the most part. However, there are a few additional items that are used only on occasion and which also indicate an insertion of a putatively ancient tradition into contemporary culture. A form of moonshine called *chicha*, produced from corn, sugar, spices and other “totally natural materials” (Hernández n. pag.) is used when it can be procured, but otherwise commercially produced hard liquor is substituted. At times, red soda is used as another means to offer a sweet element as well as to represent vitality (Ajquijay n. pag.). We also see the usage of sweets such as hard candy and *pan dulce*, sweet bread, which is often placed on the ceremonial materials. Lastly, some ceremonies call for loud noises made either with bottle rockets or by exploding chili peppers in tin cans.\(^{23}\) Particularly special occasions may call for a marimba band, a style of music considered by the Mayas to be of native origins. These aural elements serve both to create an element of festivity, as many Guatemalan festivals make use of bottle rockets to make a more joyous atmosphere, and as a means to call the attention of the ancestors.

We can make several conclusions upon examination of common ceremonial materials. First, as we will see in our analysis of ritual in section 2.3.3, a central goal of a

\(^{23}\) Some who I communicated with told me that chili peppers in tin cans are only used when one is practicing dark side magic, which would enact a curse, for example. Others told me that the use of chilies in cans was not a “Mayan” practice. I did not find these opinions to be consistent.
ceremonial activity is to create a sense of transformation. Through the manipulation of combustible materials as well as mood-altering substances, these rituals are able to produce this perceived effect. Whether they in fact “work” to resolve the solution at hand is not what I seek to prove in this study, but rather I take an objective stance on the function of Kaqchikel spiritual practices within a greater cultural and social context. The more important consideration is that the people who utilize these rituals believe that they work, and they use them in for specific purposes, as I will elaborate in the following sections. Second, the use of natural elements serves to reinforce the common claim among the Kaqchikels of a proximity to nature, an ethical orientation that is likely a continuation of animistic beliefs as well as statement of a differential identity in relation to other religions. Moreover, usage of these natural materials is often a direct or implicit reference to the spiritual practices of the ancient Mayas, who are assumed to have used elements from their natural surroundings in rituals. This leads us to our third observation, which is that these ceremonial practices are very clearly an attempt to revive, maintain, and/or mimic practices that are putatively inherited from the ancient Mayas. The ancient Mayas imitated the natural characteristics of the earthly world in the materials they used in their rituals, and Schele and Freidel suggest that the contemporary Mayas’ decoration of their altars and ceremonial circles with “flowers, leaves, pine boughs, and other living links to surrounding nature” (72) is an example of the correlation between ancient Mayan practices and contemporary ones. Many of the elements used, such as chicha, pom, or the cebo candles, are considered to have pre-Columbian origins. Even contemporary substances like refined sugar, honey, and soda are examples of cultural adaptation that
reworks the past in a contemporary moment. As such, we can understand these ceremonies to be very much a way in which tradition is retraditionalized, taken up by a marginalized population to serve their purposes, as will be elaborated in Section 2.4. Examples of fully constructed ceremonies are found in Figures 5-8.

2.3.2 The Blessing: Performance

Kaqchikel ceremonies typically begin with an invocation. In this section I will quote directly from a ceremony that was realized for me as I began my research project in Guatemala. I was put in contact with ajq’ij Berta Batzin in Santiago Sacatepéquez, with the assistance of my friend and Kaqchikel language instructor Aq’ab’al Gonzalo Ticún. Once I arrived at her house, she suggested that we conduct a series of three ceremonies “for my study,” seeking both a blessing and the approval of ancestral forces. It is apropos to note that in this instance, as in several others, the ajq’ij expressed interest in formulating the ceremonial experience around my research on ceremony itself. Although the genuineness (in the sense of uncontamination) of these ceremonies could be questioned, thus is the nature of a field situation and is at least somewhat inevitable in any ceremony which I would relate in these pages. Nevertheless, I find these blessing ceremonies which I received at the beginning of my field experience an apt example to illustrate some of the key features of Kaqchikel ritual invocations. It is simply practical for me to use these as examples because I had the ajq’ij’s permission to record them, and so I was able to obtain an exact transcription (as exact as even a native speaker can be with fast-paced ceremonial language). Moreover, I chose the subjects I discuss here
precisely because they were present in other, less contrived ceremonies that I observed. In addition to the first ceremony which Berta performed for me, I will also interchangeably discuss two blessing ceremonies that took place at a language school and social organization, the Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín (PLFM).

Berta began these ceremonies with a series of ancestral invocations, mentioning historic figures such as Tz’aqol, B’itol, Q’ukumätz, and Ixmucane. As previously described, these are ancestral figures which the Kaqchikels have passed down with the understanding that they originate in ancestral Mayan texts. By naming them at the beginning of the ceremony, the aq’iq is summoning their presence and thus their guidance. Once again this is a primary function demonstrating a sort of “shamanic” capability: the ability to communicate with the deceased. It is worthwhile to note that communicating with these figures is not arbitrary, but rather it is a function of a cultural construction which understands these ancestors to be the figures best capable of passing along a Mayan knowledge system. Ancestral consultation is primarily about seeking wisdom, but we must recognize that the Kaqchikels, in these practices, seek a particular type of wisdom: that of the episteme constructed by the ancient Mayas. Whether or not these ceremonies are in fact faithful reproductions of ancient Mayan ritual practices and historically accurate figures is somewhat peripheral. Instead, we must recognize that the Kaqchikel quite explicitly claim them to be, and as such, our primary task is to understand in what manner they do this and why.

These offerings are, in the most general sense, carried out in a manner that seeks to reproduce specific structures of the Mayan episteme. We can take for example the
method by which the *monedas of pom, or cuilco*, are offered throughout the ceremony. It is common for participants to cast them onto the fire in groups of 13 or 20, both important numbers in the sacred Mayan calendar, as well as in the vigesimal (base 20) Mayan number system. Furthermore, the *cuilco* are packaged in corn stalks shaped into long tubular packets, and each packet contains precisely 365 of them, the number of days in the solar year. These materials are fabricated in Guatemala, usually in Momostenango (Reyes n. pag.), specifically for the purposes of ceremonial usage, so this organization is highly intentional. Additionally, the 260-day sacred calendar serves as the central organizing structure of all ceremonies. It is comprised of 20 *nawales* (“months”) with 13 coefficients (“days”); the *nawales* always progress in the same order and repeat, while the coefficients increase from 1 to 13 and also repeat. As a result, the calendar is circular, and it is therefore possible to begin at one *nawal* and, counting through each, to arrive back at the starting place. The calendar count for any ceremony typically begins on the *nawal* of the day that the ceremony is realized, and it then passes through each subsequent day in the appropriate order. When the ajq’ij invokes these *nawales* one by one, which is to say that they summon its particular energy, that is then the time to make a specific petition or offering based on one’s desires, and it is also as an opportunity for the ajq’ij to read any signs presented in the fire. For example, sesame seeds are almost always offered on the day Tz’ik’in (bird) while making the noise one makes in Guatemala to call chickens. This gets the attention of the *nawal* spirit while also offering the seeds which simultaneously represent (bird) food and the abundance that springs from seeds. Berta similarly instructed me to offer a large amount of candles on the day No’j (wisdom), since I was
carrying out an academic study. Likewise, in this particular ceremony, half of the fire extinguished during the invocation of the day Imox (alligator). Taking into account her knowledge of the characteristics of the *nawal* Imox, Berta informed me that this meant there was someone, likely an older woman, trying to block my path to success. She gave me a bundle of *ocote* wood to add to the fire. When it resumed with vigor after this addition, she offered this as evidence that she had indeed fixed my problem.

The invocations in ceremonies such as this one typically emphasize Mayan characteristics of both the social and natural worlds. Berta accomplished this by mentioning sacred cities of the Mayan civilization: Tikal, Waqxaqtun, Piedras Negras, Copán, Chichén Itzá, Lacandón, Palenque, and so forth. Spatial orientation is indeed an important organizing characteristic of Kaqchikel ceremonies, often displayed through various expressions of the cardinal directions. We have already seen examples of this, as the physical arrangement of ceremonial materials must be aligned with the directional axis, indicated by the colors in each of those directions as well as the center (Figure 5 is the most visually appealing example). However, space is also delimited verbally in ceremonies through references to vital forces residing in particular directions, as was the case with a blessing ceremony at the PLFM. In this case, the ajq’ij makes a cross using hand movements (not dissimilar to genuflecting but symbolically distinct). He indicated in synchronization of words and motions: *ruk’uʼx kaj* (heart of sky - up), *ruk’uʼx ulew* (heart of earth - down), *ruk’uʼx q’aq’* (heart of light - East), *ruk’uʼx kaq’iq* (heart of wind - West), and *ruk’uʼx kaslem* (heart of life - middle). This appears to be a variation of a common invocation of the four ancestral spirits considered to reside in each of the
cardinal directions, the four original ancestors according to the *Popol Wuj*: B'alam K'ıtze', B'alam Aq'ab', Majukutaj, and I'ki' B'alam. As previously stated, we can understand some of these references as intentional reproduction of language found in historical Mayan texts, and moreover we observe the animistic beliefs of harmony with the natural world. Furthermore, Hill and Fischer explain that, “Traditional Kaqchikel prayers normally begin by addressing the dualistic deity *ruk’u’x kaj, ruk’u’x ulew* (most often rendering in translation as “the heart of sky, the heart of earth” and denoting a spiritual force described as dwelling in the center of the earth and the center of the sky)” (321). Christenson explains that the heart, in ancient Mayan epistemology, refers to a person’s essence, so we can therefore understand this sort of invocation as a summoning of the essence of these natural forces. The ajq’ija’ consider these ritual phrasings to be a continuation of ancient Mayan language usage as well as symbolically charged metacommunication of a spiritual system. Ceremonies provide one of the most salient opportunities for the Kaqchikel to publicly or semi-publicly enact and perform this cultural structure.

Ancestral communication is one of the achievements sought in Kaqchikel ceremonies, and we observe the confluence of this goal in many ceremonies that are intended as a sort of blessing. The Spanish and Mayan language school in Antigua, Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín (PLFM), conducts 13 ceremonies per year. Not only a language school, this institution also engages in projects which aim to bolster Mayan languages, such as the publication of dictionaries and grammar books of the most widely spoken languages. The language school director informed me that they conduct these ceremonies for three purposes: to bring about abundance, for *toj* to repay what they
had been given, and to fortify their work. Given this paradigm, we can understand how offerings were framed in the PLFM ceremonies, in which the ajq’ij repeatedly declared that we were offering *jun sipanik*, a gift. After some participants cast their ceremonial materials onto the fire somewhat hurriedly or haphazardly in the first of these ceremonies, the ajq’ij reprimanded us and explained that we were offering a meal for the ancestors, and that we should take care to do so gently and with respect. These types of assertions in the ceremonies I elaborate here are actually quite useful in how they function as metacommentary vis-à-vis outsider presence in Kaqchikel ceremonies, revealing explicitly what might otherwise be tacitly understood by participants. In this case, it facilitates the understanding that offerings should be made to the ancestral forces in a respectful manner, and as a result it is expected that they will help us as humans. The second PLFM ceremony elaborated this even more explicitly, as the ajq’ij requested of the spirits “Remove any bad thoughts”24 and that there be songs and laughter in our lives.25 He requested their presence and expressed gratitude: “so that everything will be made clear, thank you.”26 As this second ceremony involved the participation of PLFM staff members and teachers but also any foreign students who chose to attend, the ajq’ij explained some aspects of his conduct more explicitly and in Spanish instead of Kaqchikel. He clarified the meaning of our offerings on the day *Tijax* (obsidian), for which one often offers black candles, the color of obsidian: because this is the *nawal* of

24 “Tawelesaj itzel na’oj”
25 “k’o b’ixan, k’o tze’en”
26 “Para que todo sea claro, matyox”
medicine, offerings on this day are intended to bring about a cleansing of any corporal
problems we may have and to resolve any negative situations which may surround us.

We can understand the summoning of these ancestral forces, which are both
historical figures as well as essential energies represented in each of the nawales, as a
means by which the Kaqchikels seek guidance for the unknown in life. Requests may be
very general and reference the non-concrete – such as bad thoughts or happiness – and
they may also give thanks for concrete items, as in the second PLFM ceremony during
which the ajq’ij gave thanks for the money generated by the language school. The
ceremony itself, through its use of fire as well as its ritual language and action which, like
many rituals, serves as a sort of “key” to unlock the communication with these energies,
therefore opens the lines of communication between the earthly world and the spirit
world. The ajq’ij who performed the PLFM ceremonies invokes all of the spirits he
mentioned with the simple repeated declaration, “Come,” after which he informed us,
“The grandparents have come, and they are pleased.” The evidence of this fact need not
be the ajq’ij’s word alone, as he explained that the fire indicates the presence of the
ancestors. As was explained to me by other ajq’ija’ in other ceremonies, when the fire
swirls or when sparks jump, it is a sign of an answer to our queries and that the ancestors’
response was positive. Because “the ajq’ij is an expert,” he is able to divine these signs
for us and communicate our needs and wishes to the ancestral forces capable of helping
us. These are the ways in which the ajq’ij serves as a conduit of communication with

27 “Kixan pe”
28 “Los abuelos han venido y están complacidos”
29 “El ajq’ij es un experto”

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ancestral entities, in the literal and figurative sense. It is considered that they literally communicate with these forces, but we also understand that their practices are embedded within a particular cultural sign-system which serves to transmit not just discrete messages passed on by the deceased, but also the knowledge of the pre-contact Mayas.

Nevertheless, it would be incomplete to omit the encounters I had with Christianity when interacting with practitioners of Mayan spirituality. I should note that after our first two ceremonies, I asked Berta about a name she had spoken while conducting them that I hadn’t been able to understand, but sounded like “krixti.” As it turns out, this was a part of two different words blended together, which I had been unable to distinguish in her rapid ceremonial language. Before I realized my error, I asked her if this was a reference to Jesus Christ, and she said that no, it was not, but that she could invoke him if I wished for him to be present. In the context of the invocation of ancestral Mayan figures, we can begin to make sense of this claim as well as the presence of Catholic figures and saints on many Mayan altars. On one level, this is a function of familiarity. Many of these ajq’ija’ as well as their followers grew up in the Catholic tradition, as a symptom of the conquest and a civil war which did not allow them to practice traditional spirituality safely. When asked to make a statement on their religious beliefs, some ajq’ija’ will insist that they are no longer Catholic. What personal reasons led them to this decision will certainly vary, but we can at least understand why they would reject the Catholic Church when the Church, in many cases, tends to wholly reject them due to their spiritual practices. Other ajq’ija’, however, will explain that they still attend mass every now and again, which they clarify by explaining the similarities
between the two belief systems. They accomplish this usually either through a claim that the *Ajaw*, God, is one in the same, and/or an explanation that they go to mass but not for the same reasons as Catholics. Instead, they recognize that many Catholic churches were in fact built on top of Mayan ceremonial centers (true to my knowledge at least in the cases of Tecpán, Santiago Atitlán, and Chichicastenango, but surely in many other places). The ajq’ij will assert that they are merely attending church as a means to commune with the important energy innately contained in this earthly location, not because of a belief that Catholicism is the only method of worship. As I have argued elsewhere in this chapter, I understand these claims to be, at least in part, a function of the animistic beliefs of the Mayan culture. This provides the Kaqchikels with the ability to accept other religious beliefs without feeling that they are a threat to their own. This animism is reflected in the ceremonial invocation via the summoning of elements of nature: “Blessed Lord among the clouds and our Mother Earth, Grandfather Sun, Grandmother Moon, grand clouds, grand stars, receive our offering!”30 On another level, the acceptance of Christian figures can be understood as an adaptive technique. Robert Carlsen (*The War for the Heart and Soul of a Highland Maya Town*) has referred to the acceptance of Christianity among the Tz’utujil as a means of survival in the face of threatening forces (2), and it is entirely likely that the Kaqchikel acceptance of Christianity not only allows them to build a larger base of believers, helping more people and gaining more acceptance (and making a better living), but it also keeps them on safe ground in a potentially tenuous social scenario. In any case, this is an interesting dynamic.

30 “[…] Loqoláj Ajaw rat k’o pa suzt’, rqate’ ruwachulew, qamama’ q’ij, qat’it ik’, nima’q taq suzt’, nima’q taq ch’umila’, tik’ulu’ tata ri toj ri multa.”
in ceremonies in which, undeniably, we do see many examples of a fortification of explicitly Mayan elements.

The openness to Catholicism indicates a subtle but very important point in understanding the function of contemporary Kaqchikel spirituality. In the absence of an ability to pinpoint a specific set of spiritual or religious practices which designates pertinence to the Mayan ethnic group, instead we see the development of other means to delimit this membership. It is not necessarily the singular practice of Mayan spirituality to the exclusion of all other religions which affirms one’s possession of a Mayan identity; rather, it is the recognition of the inheritance of these ancestral – yet portable between religious systems – characteristics. As the pan-Maya cultural movement has indicated, these are primarily manifest in language and dress. In Kaqchikel ceremonies, we not only witness both of these performances of identity, as Kaqchikel ceremonial language is used, as well as offering an occasion for one to wear their traje and specifically a red faja (belt), but we also see a conscious attempt to build a sense of Mayan inheritance by referencing places, Mayan ethnolinguistic groups, and historical figures, all of which are identity markers that are not necessarily dependent on religious expression. This is not to undermine the importance of Kaqchikel spiritual practices in the developing dynamic of cultural expression in contemporary Guatemala. To the contrary, traditional Mayan spirituality instead provides a space to build these communities despite difference, something not offered through other performative means. Kaqchikel ceremonies can be and often are a performative delimitation of group membership through participation, but
they also provide the space for the delimitation of a Mayan commonality even if religious differences are present.

In this regard, we can understand the way in which the genre of ritual is able to serve this function, where seemingly conflicting viewpoints can coexist. As Catherine Bell explains, drawing on Ronald Grimes,

[...] ritual performances do not involve systems of opposing symbols. Rather, ritual performances appropriate symbols in so many different ways that, if they were all set out as a neat system, the result would be full of contradictions; performance allows such contradictions to be avoided. Hence, performance theorists have tended to depict culture not as a fully articulated formal system or set of symbolic codes, but as a changing, processual, dramatic, and indeterminate entity. (74)

Because ritual exists outside the realm of everyday experience and often outside experiences of the concrete, as practitioners come to expect metaphysical occurrences and transformation, it creates a sort of in-between space where social expectations can be suspended, allowing for contradictions to take place. This is described in detail by Victor Turner and his concept of *communitas*, in which a community of experience is created via ritual and serves to suspend the fragmentation and dissidence of routine daily life in a liminal time and space. When seeking to understand ritual, then, we must remember that the types of contradictions we see in Kaqchikel ceremonies are to be expected and, perhaps more accurately, are inevitable and inextricably linked to the function of ritual
Ritual is useful to a community precisely because it allows individuals a safe space to look past identifying differences and enter into the *communitas*.

### 2.3.3 The Public Blessing: Reflexivity and Transformation

The hills surrounding the ceremonial circle undulate not with green grass or earthen gray dirt but with rows of people. They stand peering down into the crowd that curves around the primary concrete *mesas* behind the ruins at Iximché, Guatemala, the old Kaqchikel capital. Tall trees overlook the masses, providing not much shade but rather a sense of majesty and permanency. The people themselves stand in much the same way as these trees, rooted to their homeland, as they pray and celebrate this day of the spring equinox, partaking in a seed blessing ceremony. Ten or so Kaqchikel ajq’ija’ lead the rituals, directing participants to add elements such as candles, sesame seeds, and swigs of alcohol to the ceremonial fire around which everyone is gathered. Large baskets of seeds and kernels are presented to the ajq’ija’ and blessed. It is the end of the dry season, and the heat and sunshine at this high elevation test the dedication of the followers. As the end of the ceremony draws near, the close proximity with which everyone stands, the beating sun, and the quantities of liquor and tobacco that have been consumed create a sense of familial union among such a large group. “*Q’ukumáatz descends from the sky to fertilize the seeds! To fertilize the earth so that there can be creation!*”\(^{31}\) declares one ajq’ij, as he continues, “It is the light of a new dawn, the

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\(^{31}\) “¡*Q’ukumáatz desciende del cielo para fecundar las semillas! ¡Fecundar la tierra para que haya creación!*”
abundance of life.” Participants keep their heads lightly bowed in solemn agreement, as children run about between the legs of family and neighbors. These families of farmers are hoping for a plentiful rainy season and fertile fields for the growth of their crops, as they bless, pray, and hope. “Thank you sky, thank you earth, thank you Lord, thank you grandfather and grandmother,” an ajq’ij speaks before blowing a long, low note on a conch shell, signaling the closing of the ceremony. All kneel and kiss the ground, then rise and turn to hug and greet one another in a final act of communal solidarity.

Figure 9. A public seed blessing performed on the equinox on 21 March 2010. The ajq’ija’ are identifiable in the crowd by their red head scarves.

32 “Es la luz de un nuevo amanecer, la abundancia en la vida.”
33 “Matyox ri kaj, matyox ri ulew, matyox Ajaw, matyox tata, matyox nana.”
A relative of more intimate blessing ceremonies is what we could call a public blessing, an example of which is narrated here. In this section I will discuss two public seed blessings I observed at Iximche’, the first on the spring equinox and the second at the beginning of May in 2010. The first, described above, was a medium-sized affair that appeared to be mostly under the direction of the spiritual guide organization of Tecpán, Kaji’ Imox B’eleje’ Kat (see Figure 9). The second involved government officials and was a great deal more “spectacular” than the seed blessing I had observed previously. In both cases, the idea was to engage in a ritual that would provide reassurance for a successful harvest, as the rainy season descended upon the countryside and the time to sew new seeds approached. In each instance, the people presented large baskets of various kinds of seeds and kernels, most notably beans as well as the four colors of corn: red, yellow, white, and black.34 A large crowd surrounded the ceremonial area, and several ajq’ija’ directed the rituals as they recited ceremonial language, made declarations to the crowd, gave instruction to participants, and tended to the fire. During both ceremonies, the fire smoke was used to imbue the blessing, as participants circled the fire carrying large baskets filled with seeds and kernels and then waved them over the burning flames while an ajq’ij made declarations. The May 2010 ceremony involved the participation of government officials who stood at the head of the ceremonial area and contributed to the rituals, at times occupying a clear seat of honor, as they were asked to engage in certain activities such as holding a sacred bundle. Due to this ambience, the

34 We should also note that these colors coincide with the colors of the four cardinal directions, and they are also thought to represent the various races of the world.
ceremony had an undeniably political undertone, manifest most obviously in the events and speeches following the fire burning.

After this ceremony, the mass of people walked out of Iximche’ proper to a field just outside the front gates, where an ajq’ij buried some of the seeds that had been blessed. The main focal point of this event was the primary ajq’ij, a fairly well-known elderly man, and the Minister of Agriculture. As they planted the seeds, there was a flurry of excitement as official press photographers snapped shots of the event and filmed. This was an interesting occurrence, and I never witnessed this type of deliberate staging with any other ceremony. While the men and women ajq’ija’ in charge of this event were certainly highly trained and knowledgeable in regards to the standard conduct of Kaqchikel ceremonies, there still remained a sense of pomp and deliberateness in these rituals. Some of the government guests of honor were dressed in Western-style clothing, while others donned expensive, cleanly pressed Mayan traje. This stylized presentation of the participants as well as the intentional photo opportunities made it clear that this event was very much intended to be a spectacle.

Following the ceremony, seed planting, and series of panel speeches to the large crowd (perhaps 200-300 people) gathered around the Iximche’ Visitor’s Center, I managed to speak to the leading ajq’ij. We had spoken on the phone the day prior to the event, at which point I told him about my project and requested time to speak with him. As we conversed, he slowly doffed his ceremonial garb – of course his head covering which all ajq’ij wear only during ceremonies, but also his thick jacket with woven detailing, his traditionally woven pants, and his many jade necklaces. Indeed he had told
me on the phone that I would recognize him by his beard and because he looked
“Mayan… as the Mayan do.” He bore the name “Tata” which one uses with elders, a title
which his long, white beard endeavored to uphold. In the end, as we wrapped up our brief
conversation, this ajq’ij that had done such a spectacular job putting on his appearance of
a wise elder simply ended up in khakis, a yellow dress shirt, and a straw cowboy hat. I
wish to clarify my point here. In relating these actions, I do not intend to generalize on
the genuineness of all ajq’ija’ or even this ajq’ij. Rather, these actions were notable
precisely because they were out of the norm. While each ajq’ij certainly has a fashion
style that they prefer on a daily basis, and generally speaking men wear Western-style
clothing more than women, what was striking about this interaction was how it seemed to
indicate that this dress had been a manner of costume. What I wish to gain from relating
these events is an understanding of the degree to which they were spectacularized, and
then we will try to get at why this might have been the case.

On the one hand, we can approach this event via the political motivations that
likely underscored the events of the day, as there was clearly much political positioning
underway. We can begin to understand one level of the purpose of this spectacle by
noting some of the topics discussed during the panel of speeches following the ceremony
and the planting. The ladino Minister of Agriculture took the opportunity to remind the
crowd, comprised entirely – seemingly – of members of the Kaqchikel and other Mayan
farm-based communities, of the gubernatorial policies which directly benefitted them. He
referenced President Álvaro Colom’s promise that this was the año agrícola, the year of
agriculture, or that is to say, the year when the government would pay attention to the
policies necessary to foment agricultural development. During his speech, he reminded everyone to take advantage of the fertilizer voucher program offered by the government. Lastly, he emphasized that there were many challenges which lay ahead, while also referencing specific legislation currently in the works and awaiting passage into law. If we take into account the discursive fodder of the event, it was interesting in how it seemed to mix the symbolic with the utilitarian. It was as if they were saying, Mayan spirituality is all well and good, and we as government officials want to make sure you know that we respect your traditional practices, but just in case you want real results, don’t forget about your fertilizer vouchers.35 And perhaps more importantly, don’t forget what the UNE party has done for you when the national elections roll around next year in 2011.

While the intentions of the government officials were most likely what the intentions of politicians tend to be, the Mayan community present (which was not entirely comprised of the Kaqchikels, as the government had sponsored buses to bring people to Iximche’ from other areas) seemed to have two perspectives. On one side, they used this opportunity to voice their concerns. There were some overt statements indicating a desire for change in the political efficacy of policies towards the agricultural communities, as one particularly animated speaker declared that it was time for the elected officials to stop “chupando la sangre” – sucking the blood – of the farmers. There was an attitude of displeasure with the past policies, as another speaker declared that the government never changes, just presidents do. While the statements made by the Minister of

35 It is fitting to mention as a side note that the many Kaqchikel actually tend to eschew the use of chemical fertilizers, believing them to be harmful. See Carey (2001) for a full analysis.
Agriculture seemed to be a way to hedge these very issues and build community relations, the response from the Mayan community could be characterized as hopeful but skeptical. Therefore while they probably appreciated the public forum which appeared to give credit to their culture and their opinions, on the other side of things, we should remember that they were also relying on the efficacy of the rituals they had just performed. The ritual experience is important within the paradigm of traditional beliefs, and it also provides a means for them to attempt to bring about a successful harvest. This leads to the possibility of a favorable economic condition in the immediate future, an opportunity which they lack from their own government.

By these means we can approach an emic reading of the situation. That is to say, what do the believers in the rituals hope to accomplish with them? This public seed blessing is striking precisely because intentions were thinly veiled, and as such it enables a fairly clear understanding of how these rituals were intended to function. Particularly in the case of the second ceremony which was a deliberate dialogue with social and political actors, we witness an example of the way in which the performance of ritual is not just reflective of culture, but also reflexive. That is to say, the actors of ritual are not passive practitioners of an inert set of ancient practices, but rather they play an active role in the generation of cultural and social symbols. The ritual doesn’t just reflect the way culture is at present, but rather it actively transforms that culture, as “symbolic activities like ritual enable people to appropriate, modify, or reshape cultural values and ideals” (Bell 73). As such, ritual becomes prime territory for responding to quickly changing social and political scenarios, in order to negotiate conflicts while maintaining confidence in the
possibility of collaboration. This goal serves both parties. The Kaqchikels hope that the communal participation in ritual will bring the government closer to the needs of the people, and they also express appreciation that the government acknowledges their spiritual practices. On the other hand, we can’t be entirely sure of the sincerity of government officials in their intent to reform their political stance towards the Kaqchikels, which perhaps most often takes the form of agricultural policies since the majority of Kaqchikels depend on agriculture in some way. Nevertheless, it is certainly a useful political move for them in that it at least gives the appearance of attention to the needs of the Mayan population of Guatemala, as well as allowing them to promote and reinforce the social programs that their party has in place. Because of these expectations from both parties, the ceremony does, whether intentionally or by accident, actually serve to accomplish the sense of community, the *communitas* of Turner, that the Kaqchikels hope to create, as both parties leave the ritual experience feeling that perhaps something has been accomplished. While the ceremony was certainly a spectacle at some level, even for the Kaqchikels as evidenced by the ajq’ij who readily removed his traditional garb, it is to some degree precisely that characterization which allows it to create a sense of change. Ritual relies on a sense ceremoniality, such as costume, to convey its efficacy because it is an experiential event, and even a self-conscious ceremony reflects these intentions.

This sense of accomplishment, change, or transformation is one of the primary goals of Kaqchikel rituals in general. We can also observe the transformations that are intended to take place through ritual actions in other ceremonies, such as the smaller
blessing ceremonies discussed in Section 2.3.2. The invocation of the first ceremony Berta performed for me provides insight into our understanding of what these rituals seek to accomplish. As this was the first ceremony of three, it was necessary to ask for the “authorization” of the ancestors, which once given effectively grants their assistance, assuming the offerings are favorable. During Berta’s invocation, she elaborated “Give strength, energy, and wisdom to your granddaughter, illuminate her mind […] may our words not remain unheard, Grandfather, receive our offering, receive our payment […] for tomorrow, for the past, and our future days.”

Ceremonies serve as a venue for a person or group to offer materials that possess a specific meaning – such as the various colors of candles – and this is then seen as a form of payment in exchange for the assistance and guidance of intangible ancestral forces. Also of note is the use of the dual terms “awiy” and “amam,” signifying grandchild of a woman and grandchild of a man, respectively. In this way, the ajq’ij discursively establishes the relationship between the petitioner and the ancestors, serving as a symbolic connection of guidance (its symbolism is evident particularly in my case, as I was still considered a grandchild even though I am not genetically related to the Mayan ancestors). The ceremonies are intended to be a way to request and receive aid, so that a problem or situation may find resolution.

These ancestral connections are intended to aid in effecting a tangible outcome for the petitioner. Remembering the opening of this section which narrates the first seed blessing ceremony at Iximche’, the ajq’ija’ shouted exactly what the ritual hoped to

36 “tayatana k’a tata, ri fuerza, energia, sabiduria, pa ruwi’ ri awiy, pa ruwi’ ri amam, ta jaqa’ ri rutzantzq’or [...] ma xwatana kiri xtikanaj kan ri tzij tata, ta k’ulu’ k’a ri toj, ta k’ulu’ ta ri multa [...] richin ri chwa’aq, richin ri kab ’ij, tata.”
accomplish: abundance in the harvest. In the second ceremony, the ajq’ija’ initiated a call and response with the audience, as they shouted and were answered: “There will be rain!” “Yes!” “There will be harvest!” “Yes!” 37 The practitioners of the ceremony make these assertions and pleas in order to bring about the good things they seek. As one of the ajq’ija’ performing the second seed blessing ceremony told me that they do this ceremony to bless the seeds so that there is a real, concrete result at the end: food for the Mayan people and their families. These aspirations are best summed up by the eloquent explanation given in the PLFM blessing ceremonies, transcribed loosely and translated:

On the day Ey [road, tooth], we asked that the good path to follow in life opens for us. We are asking for good, clean paths, and that the way opens so that we can walk with clarity and know where to put our feet. We don’t know what lies in the hereafter. On each side of the path there is darkness, so we ask for a light to illuminate our way.

The assumption is that these rituals bring about a better harvest, more abundance, and better life. Rituals respond to the human condition of preoccupation with the future, “faith in the victory of hope over fear” (Malinowski qtd. in Bell 48), as they seek to bring about all of the positive things they desire but have little control over.

Within the genre of ritual in general, James Fernández explains that, through its use of 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: “By persuasion and
performance [ritual metaphors] operate upon the member allowing him eventually to exit from the ritual incorporated, empowered, activated, euphoric” (23). While we cannot directly control the actions of the government, the rain, the sun, insects, or the content of the soil, we can control our petition for a ritual blessing from the ancestors to help us in these matters. That way, we may have a fruitful year and be able to provide for our families. All ritual is primarily about transformation. We turn to ritual when we need to accomplish things that we feel are out of our control (grave illness, money problems, crop growth, rainfall, and so forth). This makes ritual a powerful form of expression in the way in which it provides a means to continue having faith that our desires will be granted, our problems will be rectified, and our lives will be abundant, especially in the face of great adversity.

2.4 Cultural Memory and (Re)Traditionalization

The practices of the ajq’ija’ are considered by the Kaqchikels to be a continuation of traditions – both corporal, linguistic, and epistemological – inherited from the ancient Mayas. This is evident not just in the ritual structure of ceremonial practices, but also in the conceptualization that ajq’ija’ have of their own trade. As ajq’ij Tojil Artemio Hernández explains, he is an ajq’ij in the tradition of his grandmother, who also worked in herbs: “And so she left me that inheritance, so that I could substitute for her after she died. And so generation to generation, this inheritance that our forbearers left us has
What seems to be happening here is the appearance of what Jan Assman has called “cultural memory,” a combination of memory culture and reference to the past, and which is further elaborated upon by Rodríguez and Fortier: “Memory culture is the process by which a society ensures cultural continuity by preserving, with the help of cultural mnemonics, its collective knowledge from one generation to the next, rendering it possible for later generations to reconstruct their cultural identity” (1). This variety of identity construction always requires reference to a past that is generally encoded within specific cultural traditions that possess symbolic meaning or importance within the contemporary culture itself. In this way, cultural memory is primarily about the construction of meaning, through which a cultural group can define, articulate, or delimit a particular identity. In this light, religious practices are particularly fertile grounds for the performance of these coded means of expressions which serve to form identity, if we keep in mind that “[a]s we seek to give meaning to everything we do, religion validates our existence […] by connecting us with ancestors, with spirits, with a god or gods” (Assman 3). Rituals are an encoded form of these beliefs, of this communication with the ancestors or gods, and they are realms of existence to which the practitioner does not have access in daily life. Through their claim to a continuation of these traditions, the Kaqchikels find a manner by which to build solidarity and to respond to the daily quandaries of an ethnically, religiously, and culturally plural society.

To really get at what cultural memory suggests, we first have to approach the topic of tradition. Classic definitions of tradition would pit it against modernity and

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operate under the assumption that tradition lies in the past as an inert set of practices, unchangeable and inoperative in the present. However, folklorists have revised this model and given us the understanding that, contemporarily, “tradition cannot be defined in terms of boundedness, givenness, or essence. Rather, tradition refers to an interpretive process that embodies both continuity and discontinuity” (Handler and Linnekin 273). Indeed, traditions are often not truly lost to the past, but instead serve many purposes in reinvented, present manifestations. This is the case in a class-centered nationalism, where we see the “invention of tradition,” as coined by Hobsbawm and Ranger, a scenario in which popular traditions are appropriated by a hegemonic state for nationalist projects. This is an important framework for understanding the claims of folklorists, who are careful to make the distinction between this process and the one which instead involves the rearticulation of tradition by the popular masses (i.e. the “folk”). In the latter case, Hymes recognizes that tradition is frequently repurposed in specific social scenarios and, in fact, should not be thought of as a timeline but rather as social phenomena (“Folklore’s Nature and the Sun’s Myth”). These scenarios do not follow a timeline that would flow from traditional to modern, as modern peoples still utilize tradition in new and contemporary ways. He calls the process by which peoples make selective choices of what traditions they will foment in their current context “traditionalization,” and he asserts that they will traditionalize their experience as a response to the particular dynamics of a social scenario. Similarly, O’Giollain coins the term “re-traditionalization,” which we can understand to be basically the same as Hymes’ traditionalization. O’Giollain’s “re” prefix is important in that it merely distinguishes the
Hobsbawmian state-generated invention of tradition from the process of traditionalization enacted by the popular masses. With this framework, we gain a dynamic understanding of the functioning of traditions in society. Traditions are molded, revised, and repurposed according to a contemporary social scenario, and this is precisely what makes them unable to be bound as well as capable of manifesting seemingly contradictory viewpoints, as they are in a constant state of flux.

Handler and Linnekin as well as Hymes are careful to assert that tradition is not a natural phenomenon, but rather it is a symbolic one:

We suggest that there is no essential, bounded tradition; tradition is a model of the past and is inseparable from the interpretation of tradition in the present. Undeniably, traditional action may refer to the past, but to ‘be about’ or refer to it is a symbolic rather than natural relationship, and as such it is characterized by discontinuity as well as by continuity. (Handler and Linnekin 276)

This assertion is based on an understanding that “symbolic life ways are always symbolically constructed, never naturally given” (Handler and Linnekin 281). This is useful information in our attempt to understand Kaqchikel ritual practice, as it enables us to understand fully what these ceremonies hope to accomplish. One the one hand, they indeed seek to bring about transformation, whether for an individual or in response to a particular social or political scenario. But on the other, they are fundamentally a means to build the symbology of the contemporary Kaqchikel as a group. Tradition is frequently traditionalization, and thereby is a means by which to articulate an “approximate
identity” (Handler and Linnekin 275) whose exact characteristics are perhaps not easily definable. In an indistinct and messy social context as we see in many Kaqchikel towns, where Kaqchikel and ladinos coexist as do Catholics, Evangelicals, and “Traditionalists,” this symbology arises in dialectic with seemingly opposing forces that, through ritual, are able to approximate a way to coexist.

2.5 Conclusions

As the Kaqchikels respond to the individual needs of their community, the genre of ritual provides a means by which they can effect a sense of change, both individual and collective. One of the ajq’ij from the public seed blessing ceremony explained: “Our faith is manifest today. It will guarantee the harvest.” Remarkably similar to the pre-Columbian Mayas’ belief in the necessity of human ritual undertaking to make the sun rise and rains fall, contemporary ritual expression creates a sense of agency over elements that people cannot otherwise control. Given the current Guatemalan context, this is a very desirable consequence. While the civil war officially has ended, violence still pervades the country in the form of lynchings, drug-related violence and murder, and impunity. Meanwhile, as a deeply Catholic country, Guatemala has also seen the largest Evangelical movement in Central America in the past decades. These two ideologies exist in tandem with a pan-Maya cultural movement, which seeks to reclaim Mayan symbols and foment inherited ways of life. I have attempted to explicate how, in this

39 “Nuestra fe se manifiesta hoy – va a garantizar la cosecha”
multivalent society, ritual practices are used as a negotiation technique with which the Kaqchikels can act in response to vacillations in social life such as these.

As the Kaqchikels seek a means to negotiate their contemporary social milieu, they make use of ritual practices to articulate local knowledge that is transmitted through the continued practice of Mayan spirituality. This involves the use of various elements that are viewed as “traditional” in the sense of tradition as a process of handing down something that originates in the past. This concept of a shared cultural past - a type of cultural memory that is enacted in modern-day performances of identity - is what provides the basis by which these practices can be (re)traditionalized. The efforts of the Mayan cultural movements, which activist Victor Montejo describes as “[t]he reconsideration of Maya identity, or the affirmation of Guatemalan indigenous people as Maya” with the goal of affirming, “[o]ur sense of belonging to a unique place containing the roots of our being, our culture, and civilization [...]” (9), exemplify the way in which these traditional structures are being (re)traditionalized in a contemporary context. Not merely an archaic or petrified form of the past, these practices of spirituality are a way in which the Kaqchikels work towards redefining how they interact with their broader social context. In this regard, the use of tradition is particularly poignant, as tradition has the ability to reshape cultural symbolism by reshaping the past. While we understand the connections between pre-Columbian cosmovision and Kaqchikel spiritual practices, we also recognize that it is, in fact, wholly impossible for them to be exact reproductions due to the changing nature of tradition and its continued repurposing. Handler and Linnekin describe the key issue here: “Tradition is not handed down from the past, as a thing or a
collection of things; it is symbolically reinvented in an ongoing present” (280). The Kaqchikel ritual tradition is not hermetically sealed in a museum. It consists of recreated and repurposed practices that are strategically used by members of the community to bolster their cultural group and respond to changing social scenarios, through reference to a shared ancestral history.
Chapter 3
A Mayan Trickster: Rilaj Mam\textsuperscript{40} and Resisting Spanishness

3.1 Introduction

The Lord of Looking Good. That’s his humorous – yet ironically apropos – nickname as christened by North American researcher Robert S. Carlsen (“Maximón” n. pag.). He has many other names, most frequently known as San Simón, El Monchito, Maximón, Mam, El Tata, and Rilaj Mam. 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 Mayas 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, which I have gathered during my fieldwork and supplemented with Vincent Stanzione’s (2000) work. 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’ or palo de pito – whistling tree – by the nawales, spirit energies who walked the earth as humans, to prevent their women from having affairs.

\textsuperscript{40} For the sake of clarity, the /j/ in Kaqchikel is pronounced like the /j/ in Spanish. The other consonants and vowels in this case are also pronounced like the Spanish equivalents, with the exception of the /r/. The /r/ varies depending on region but may either be an alveolar trill as in Spanish or retroflex as in English.
while they were absent from home, working as merchants. 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 Mayan ajq’ij who resisted the Spanish conquest. The Spanish pursued him, but he repeatedly evaded capture using his transformative powers. Finally, he was caught 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 Mayan 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.”

Traditionally, research on Rilaj Mam\(^{41}\) 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 community, a separate but related ethnolinguistic group to the Kaqchikels. Nevertheless, on the basis of interactions with Kaqchikel practitioners who work with

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\(^{41}\) I use the term Rilaj Mam instead of Maximón because Maximón is not widely used among the Kaqchikels. I chose instead to use this common name from the town of Tecpán, an important spiritual center of the Kaqchikels.
Rilaj Mam and his devotees, I propose a different understanding of this figure in regards to hybridity. In each instance I encountered with the Kaqchikels, Rilaj Mam was not 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 Mayan ancestors. Moreover, variations in his story almost always include his mysteriously escaping and deceiving his Spanish conquerors, and he is also said to appear at other critical historical times, such as during the late 20th-century armed conflict. My central claim in regard to hybridity is thus: to understand how the Kaqchikels are using Rilaj Mam, it is more useful to view his hybridity not as religiously syncretic, but rather as a response to a hybrid environment. That is to say, he does not blend various sign systems as in the case of religious syncretism; i.e. Kaqchikels largely do not revere Rilaj Mam as another manifestation of Catholic saints or saviors. Rilaj Mam is not present in Catholic Churches, and unlike other post-colonial scenarios in which native deities were disguised as Catholic saints, this is not the case with present-day Rilaj Mam. Rather, the Kaqchikels revere him for his uniquely Mayan characteristics, the specifics of which I elaborate in the following chapter. In this regard, I find it more useful to understand his hybridity as that presented by García Canclini (1995): hybridity as a large cultural phenomenon that is the result of a negotiation between tradition and modernity.

I want to be clear that I do not ignore the Catholic influences in Guatemala or the fact that Rilaj Mam shares a festival day (and a name in some cases) with Simon the Apostle. Rather, I am adopting this admittedly polarized view of hybridity because I find that any other would be a disservice to the Kaqchikels and an inaccurate portrayal of how
they view him. I am looking at Rilaj Mam’s usage among the community, and if we look at what is happening “on the ground” in that regard, he is, resoundingly, a means to call on Mayan ancestors and represent resistance to foreign invasion. This assertion is in line with one of my guiding argumentative threads throughout this dissertation, which positions Mayan spiritual revitalization as inextricably linked to, and as a means to mediate, contemporary contexts. Guatemalan society finds itself in a negotiation process due to neoliberal forces of economic and cultural reorganization, a recent civil war, rampant racism, lynching and vigilante justice in the face of impunity, and continued brutal violence against common people due to drug trafficking. These dynamics are threatening both to the cultural traditions of the Kaqchikels and indeed to their very livelihood. In the face of these difficult scenarios, each of which is at least partially the result of Guatemala’s postcoloniality, Rilaj Mam has come to represent opposition to the invasores, the colonial Spanish invaders and simultaneously all that is foreign in present day. If we examine Rilaj Mam’s characterization as a contact-era ajq’ij that evaded Spanish domination, we can understand him as a trickster figure, a trope which traditionally subverts an established order through trickery, deception, and/or evasion. In fact, as I will elaborate, his trickster characterization is also central to understanding the question of hybridity. Because tricksters can evade categorization and change form, this lends Rilaj Mam the ability to serve as a liminal figure that can both approach Catholicism and remove himself from it. This is what makes him an apt tool for the Kaqchikels to mediate their position within Guatemalan society: by means of a folk saint who represents resistance to Spanishness.
3.2 Rilaj Mam, a Kaqchikel Effigy

Previous research on Rilaj Mam primarily focuses on his characterization among the Tz’utujils, where he is considered to have originated. The Tz’utujils are a related ethnolinguistic group of the K’iche’ an branch of Mayan languages whose geographic territory abuts the Kaqchikels. Among this community he is referred to instead as Mam or as Maximón and is typically considered a prime example of religious syncretism, a blending of two religious symbolic systems. Historic documents dating to the time of Spanish contact record the presence of a bundle of rocks that was wrapped in cloth, which the Maya revered and called their ancestor (literally “Mam”), 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 deity 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 we disregard the possibility that 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’utujils. 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 coalescence: he claims that it emerges from the contact-period Mayas’

42 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’ute’ tree.
confusion about the difference between deities (their own concept) and saints (a foreign concept) (335). 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’utujils, Mam is deliberately and blatantly 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 anywhere 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. While this may be an accurate description of how Mam came to exist, where we see a difference between the Tz’utujil-based analyses and my own among the Kaqchikels is in a close examination of their contemporary practices, a distinction which I specifically elaborate in Section 3.6. Although (Rilaj) Mam is considered to be of Tz’utujil origin, the Kaqchikels have adapted this figure to their own purposes.

Kaqchikel ceremonies involve the use of many different materials and symbols, mostly including natural elements such as resin, honey, chocolate, and so forth, that burn easily and operate within a semiotics which points to their ancestral origin. Blatantly iconographic symbols are rare, however, limited to at best a Virgin Mary votive or two in

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43 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.
very few cases where there is a designated place to position such items in the immediate area. I never witnessed these being used in the ceremonies I observed or participated in, but I have seen them left behind from apparent earlier ceremonial events. The exception to this rule is Rilaj Mam. His effigy appears during ceremonies, particularly ceremonies for the graduation of a new aj’qij, which involve bestowing upon them the materials which they will use to carry out their practice. Because most Kaqchikel ajq’ija’ have a Rilaj Mam effigy in their home for use with their clients who pay them a house visit, his appearance in these graduation ceremonies indicates that he is undoubtedly a prolific and popular figure.

Like all of the ancestral authoritative figures that are invoked in ceremonies, the Kaqchikel ajq’ija’ who utilize him operate based on a two-pronged authority. On the one hand, these historical-mythical figures such as Rilaj Mam are considered to be authorities themselves. They are the bearers of wisdom, both practical and metaphysical, a knowledge which is accessed via the portal provided through the sacred fire in ceremonies. We can understand this assertion as not only an artifact of a culture which still values the elderly as possessors of the wisdom of life, but also as an interest in ancestral – and specifically Mayan – ties. By invoking these figures and asking for their guidance, the Kaqchikels recognize and moreover intentionally utilize their heritage as descendents of the ancient Mayas. 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 Mayan 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. More importantly, in
addition to frequently conducting holistic medicinal cures involving herbs and other
natural substances like eggs or a repetitive ritual such as walking in circles, the advice
that one is given by an ajq’ij typically operates within a culturally didactic framework.
The actions of the patient must display a certain rectitude if they wish to bring about an
overall well-being and to continue in that state. The framework for establishing these
guidelines for comportment are built within the Kaqchikel town culture(s), but they are
also viewed as having originated from an ancestral Mayan source, passed down as a form
of knowledge from generation to generation by those who have been chosen as its
bearers. In this way, the cultural traditions that are considered to be indicative of the
Mayan way of life are perpetuated through the practices of the ajqi’ja’, who are
considered the authorities on the subject due to their ancestral bonds. In this regard, in
much the same way that a ceremony functions to transmit cultural memory, as elaborated
in Chapter 2, so do consultations with Rilaj Mam as an ancestral Mayan figure.

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 Mayan 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
Figure 10. Rilaj Mam figures, complete with their *varas* or staffs that represent both their authority and their occupation as *ajq’ija’*.

*Rilaj Mam* traditionally was himself an *ajq’ij*, and every proper Kaqchikel effigy of him also includes the staff that symbolizes his authority. Figure 10 displays several Rilaj Mam effigies that are available for purchase at Nim P’ot, a warehouse with textiles and tourist gifts but which also houses a Rilaj Mam altar that is visited by Mayas and non-tourists.

As the effigies in Figure 10 indicate, the form of Rilaj Mam can vary, displaying different skin tones and varying degrees of refinement in features as well as diverse dress. Some of this is due, in part, to geographic and ethnolinguistic variation. For example, the Tz’utujil figure is often dressed in traditional male dress of the town of Santiago Atitlán,
Figure 11. A Tz’utujil-style Maximón carved by a Kaqchikel artist. This particular statue is used in ceremonies for tourists.

where his effigy is housed in a confraternity. Undoubtedly the most researched manifestation of this folk saint, the Tz’utujil Maximón is armless, his body being entirely comprised of differently colored scarves. He also dons the traditional dress of Atiteco
males, most prominently a pair of woven pants in a bird motif and a shawl. Figure 11 and Figure 12 portray the traditional Tz’utujil version of Rilaj Mam or Maximón.

By contrast, in the Kaqchikel speaking region, Rilaj Mam is more often seen with arms, wearing 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 occupation as an ajq’ij. He is sometimes dressed in a Western-style black suit, and he always wears a hat. It may be Stetson cowboy style – popular among males in Guatemala – like his Tz’utujil counterpart shown in Figure 12, or it may

Figure 12. The actual Maximón of Santiago Atitlán at his confraternity, smoking a cigar at lower left. The members of the confraternity can be seen looking on, as Kaqchikel ajq’ij Tojil Artemio Hernández kneels before him.
be traditional Mayan grass reed style, as seen in Figure 10. His black suit is often attributed to the influence of the well-known Rilaj Mam effigy in San Andrés Itzapa, where he has another confraternity and is more commonly called San Simón.

While his ceremonial appearances are certainly notable, Rilaj Mam most frequently appears on the in-home altars of ajq’ija’. An examination of the figures found on these altars reveals that the San Andrés Itzapa variety of Rilaj Mam appears to be the most popular style repeated among the Kaqchikels. 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, he is also the ancestor to whom 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 have power over a scenario when the devotee feels otherwise powerless.

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 3.4 of this chapter. 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, there is no canon that 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 images mentioned. 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 next to or wearing uniquely Mayan items – such as the four-colored Mayan cross to the far left in Figure 13, as well as Mayan style pottery, masks and musical instruments as in Figure 14. Additionally, the type of cloth draped around his shoulders in Figures 13 and 15 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 Mayas (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 Mayan figure, displayed among other Mayan items, as he perpetuates the knowledge of Mayan ancestors. Nevertheless, his appearance alongside explicitly Catholic imagery as in Figure 15 is the result of a particular religious ecology of Santiago Sacatepéquez in which the Catholic and Evangelical groups are in opposition to the practice of traditional Mayan spirituality. The steward of that particular altar, Lidia,

Figure 14. José Pérez’s home displays two large Rilaj Mam effigies. The larger of the two was inherited from his grandfather. He also possesses several smaller figures, visible on the table.
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 Berta 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.

Figure 15. The altar of Lidia Marina Ixcajoc displays Rilaj Mam wearing both a black Western-style suit and a hand woven fabric typically used for a Kaqchikel uq’- corte or skirt. At his side sits the Virgin Mary and a black Christ figure on a cross.
3.3 Celebrating Rilaj Mam

Perhaps the pinnacle of my interaction with Rilaj Mam and his society of believers occurred during his festival day. Rilaj Mam’s festival day proper is October 28th, which of no coincidence is also the Roman Catholic saint day for San Simón. This celebration, 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. There were events celebrating this festival day in towns all over the highlands, such as Tecpán and Santiago Sacatepéquez, but I attended this particular celebration because I knew the two host ajq’ija’. We came jammed in a small car with our neighbors, journeying the twenty

Figure 16. Four Rilaj Mam effigies are displayed to make their petitions for the coming year. 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.

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minutes across the hilly and narrow roads of Guatemalan countryside to arrive at Tojil and José’s house in Santa Catarina Barahona in the late afternoon. The ceremony had already begun, and the wide, corral-style tin doors were propped open, exposing the ceremonial circle and its participants inside. A few neighbors, curious but not willing to participate, lingered on the fringes, peering in and casually standing next to the two policemen who were there to ensure things didn’t get too unruly. 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, signaling the expectation that a great number of people would be in attendance. Inside the tent, one end held a platform and lively marimba band, while the other staged four separate Rilaj Mam figures, surrounded by woven fabric, flowers, candles, cigarettes, bottles of alcohol, and monetary offerings (see Figure 16 and Figure 18). 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. This altar was particularly elaborate with its inclusion of multiple Rilaj Mam effigies, dramatic and copious flowers, and a bed of rose petals at the feet of the figures. This altar was also where the ajq’ija’ made their offerings that evening.

On this day celebrating Rilaj Mam, 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, shown in Figure 17, adding candles and alcohol to the flame as they wished. While most ceremonies have a fairly formal structure, requiring the full attention of its participants for an hour and a

Figure 17. Four ajq’ija’ are pictured here, donning their mandatory headscarves and kneeling around the fire along with a handful of devotees as they participate in the ceremony. A camcorder records the event.
half to two and a half hours, this particular ceremony was executed more freely. Most ceremonies include a count of the sacred calendar, discretely mentioning each *nawal* consecutively. This serves as a frame of reference for the participants to know when they should participate by adding their materials (candles, incense, and so forth) to the flame on the day of their *nawal*. The ceremony for the festival did not include a calendar count, however, and instead consisted of other rituals structured by multiple ajq’ija’, mostly adding alcohol and other materials to the fire while blessing them and saying thanks. The lack of a calendar count may be related to the nature of the event, in which it was expected that participants would freely enter and leave the ceremony as they also socialized and made their way to the altar inside the tent to present their offerings. As a result, the ceremony functioned much more as a modular activity in a grander festival. With marimba music as the backdrop, the ceremony seemed to be the means by which the ajq’ija’ could execute a blessing in the spirit of the day, while other activities were simultaneously taking place. Thus the ceremony served as a type of proxy, as the ajq’ija’ appealed to Rilaj Mam and other ancestors in the name of all attendees.

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 other ceremonial materials, 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 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 Mayan ancestors. Therefore, in looking to understand the meaning in these actions, we must examine 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 cutting. 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 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 Mayas 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 (and pictured in the

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44 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.
foreground in Figure 11). The ancestral Rilaj Mam in particular consumed *chicha*, and the use of other alcoholic substitutes is an imitation of this preference (Hernández (a)). Thus in much the same way that other ceremonial rituals are intended to be a mimesis of ancient Mayan 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 Mayan groups; I was once asked by a Christian missionary whether it was true that “they” sacrifice babies. Besides the lack of knowledge of some 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, as I have proposed to do with all of these spiritual practices. It is important to 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 Mayas 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 episteme 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

Figure 18. An ajq’ij kneels before the Rilaj Mam altar, as he adds more aromatic materials to supplement the other offerings, which now include a chicken heart.
metaphysical sense, but also in a historically referential sense that shows a conscious intent by the Kaqchikels 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 Mayan epistemology while also promoting a spiritual transformation for the participants.

Finally, after the standard couple of hours of fire burning, the ceremony wound to a close, and the participants filed in twilight into the illuminated tent to await their communal meal. Under the tent that housed the Rilaj Mam altar and the marimba band, a few ajq’ija’ gave speeches, explaining the importance of the gathering. Tojil elaborated that, through the day’s events, they were practicing “Mayan cosmovision.” He made it explicitly clear that, contrary to what some say, this was not a bad thing. Instead, they were merely rescatando, rescuing or recuperating, the ancient forms of knowledge. Another ajq’ij then came forward looking to sell print copies of the Mayan calendar for the coming year, claiming that it would explain why there was so much rain and so many natural disasters. This calendar, he asserted, also contained messages, one of which was from the Gran Abuelo himself - the Mighty Grandfather - that is to say, Rilaj Mam. These statements are important to note in part because of the explicit way in which they are
presented. Many community festivals do not involve a direct statement explaining why those practices are valuable (or even acceptable), because the participants already have access to the knowledge. Insiders to a tradition do not need to be told what it means, since they know that information through their cultural upbringing. The fact that the ajq’ija’ had to explain what these practices were meant to accomplish and, moreover, that they were important practices contrary to the belief of many, demonstrates the religiously plural and globalized\(^{45}\) society in which the Kaqchikels find themselves. As a result, they act in a manner that responds to this scenario, thereby necessitating an explanation and defense of the practice. Also of note are the claims made regarding the calendar, which are also the result of a very specific local scenario: in 2010 there was much damage to the highland countryside, particularly to the poor who have less stable housing structures, when Tropical Storm Agatha came through Guatemala at the end of May. The ajq’ija’ know that the people appeal to spirituality in such difficult times, and the calendar and figures such as Rilaj Mam become the tools used to explain and provide consolation for suffering and despair.

Following the speeches, there were two events which reinforced the communal nature of the event: the sharing of a meal and the baile del abuelo. Everyone waited under the tent, sitting in folding chairs facing each other around a dance floor with the marimba band at one end and Rilaj Mam at the other. Little by little, a plate of a traditional Guatemalan dish, pepián chicken with corn tortillas, was brought out for each

\(^{45}\) Globalized, in part, because the presence of foreigners such as myself in this event should be noted, as well as the influence of the interest of foreigners on a broader scale (which is addressed in Chapter 4). Moreover, it should also be noted that Tojil in particular is an ajq’ij who works in a touristic area, as he is in charge of the Rilaj Mam altar at Nim Po’t in Antigua. He has also had extensive contact with North American researchers, making him well aware of the interest of foreigners in Mayan spirituality.
attendee. Following the meal, as was customary, each person also received a glass of atol, a hot gruel-like drink made from corn or rice. Not lacking in participation was, of course, Rilaj Mam himself, who also received a plate of food placed in front of him at his altar (seen in Figure 20). In this manner, in much the same way that the ceremony accomplished the sharing of a communal meal with the ancestors, here the attendees literally shared in a meal with Rilaj Mam. After everyone had finished their meal, there was a formal baile del abuelo – dance of the grandfather. Again, in this scenario, the term grandfather refers to Rilaj Mam himself, who is often called the Gran Abuelo, as was spoken in the discourse of the speeches at this event. This is merely a Spanish translation of Rilaj Mam, but it also seems to carry another layer of meaning. He is one of the most revered and commonly known figures in Mayan history (or at the very least, storytelling history), and reflecting this status is his ability to represent Mayan ancestors via metonymy. He is not just a grandfather, he is a particularly great one who can be referred to by not only his name but also by the general term.

The baile del abuelo is an event that must occur at every gathering for Rilaj Mam’s festival day. He is lifted from his chair and placed on the back of an ajq’ij, who dances with him, moving either back and forth within a circle or in a circular path, after which he is then passed to other ajq’ija’ who continue in the same manner. His effigies, as notable in the images included, are always sitting. This is important, because this depiction as a seated authority is connected to his role as a judge, in accordance with his nawal. He is always associated with the nawal tz’i’ on the Mayan sacred calendar, which represents justice. The animal representative is a dog, and just as a dog is able to sniff out
the correct path with an instinctual knowledge, so a person with the *nawal tz’i’* will be able to divine the righteous path. Because he cannot get out of his seat to dance himself, the ajq’ija’ carry him on their backs so that he has the opportunity to dance this one time of the year. The ajq’ija’ literally take on the burden of Rilaj Mam as they do so proverbially when they use him in their practice. When asked about the meaning of this dance, ajq’ij Lidia Marina Ixcajoc posits the source of this tradition can be accredited to the *Popol Wuj*. She explains that in these stories, the twin heroes Jun Ajpu’ and Ixb’alam Kej descended into Xibalba’, the underworld, and repeatedly defeated the Gods through tricks and deception. They were able to do so by dancing, in a proverbial sense: by sidestepping all of the traps that had been laid for them. We can then understand the *baile*...
del abuelo as a part of the Mayan cosmovision to which Tojil referred in his speech, an action with a hidden referent. It is not simply a lively activity to add diversion to a celebrated festival, but rather it is necessarily a meaning-filled act which deliberately attempts to recreate a Mayan story. These are the type of unstated facts we expect to see in a festival; they are the means by which a cultural episteme is transmitted. What is intriguing is their juxtaposition with more deliberate attempts to explain the meaning of the events behind the festival. These actions are revealing if we understand them as part of the dynamic of a hidden transcript, elaborated in Section 3.5.

After completing the baile del abuelo, the dance floor was opened to all in attendance. In the customary Guatemalan fashion, couples danced enthusiastically to the upbeat music of the marimba band while periodically resting and chatting in the chairs flanking the dance floor. The festival became a lively party as all participants danced and drank late into the night, intermittently approaching the altar to leave an offering or make, at times, an emotional petition as they knelt next to Rilaj Mam. Sharing the dance floor with Rilaj Mam as well as their fellow Kaqchikels created a sense of community, one enhanced by the environment of loud music, close quarters, physical contact through dancing, and drinking. Additionally, the combination of these factors led to the creation of an experience that, besides being communal, was also exceedingly emotional. Thus we understand another function of ritual festival in the Guatemalan context: its power lies in its ability to function within the affective realm of the devotee. An experience of affect makes the ritual more potent, as having a highly emotional experience can be interpreted as a spiritual change in the individual.
To take a few lines orient this study within a larger framework, I find myself adopting an orientation of postmodern hermeneutics, elaborated most thoroughly by Gavin Flood. In contrast to the phenomenologists (most famously Mircea Eliade), who view religion (or spirituality) as a *sui generis* phenomenon that is immune to the course of history and specific context, the orientation I adopt offers a way to understand religious practices using a dialogical model. That is to say, religious practices are in constant dialogue with their cultural context. Flood assesses the value of this approach as “[t]he recognition by the study of religions that the self is embodied and embedded within personal narratives that articulate with the wider narratives of culture” (219). This
dialogue therefore means that religious displays are indicative of a broader cultural context, allowing an understanding of culture through the study of such practices. In regards to an affective display of devotion, the display of emotion is at once a personal and collective experience that is embedding within a specific cultural framework. As John Corrigan explains,

The expression of emotion […] reminds a religious community of its investments in certain ideas, behaviors, and ways of life. Moreover, the enthusiastic collective display of feeling by celebrants of a holy day, for example, not only reminds persons of the sacred events that occur on that day but also recalls the vital importance of a religious calendar itself, of the boundaries that define place, organize time, and enclose individuals within the community. Individuals remember what matters through performance of emotional rituals, while at the same time those rituals reinforce shared beliefs and practices by way of the affect that they cultivate. (n. pag.)

By affirming their belief in Rilaj Mam, the Kaqchikels are also affirming two other things. First, they make a statement of communal unity. If we understand ritual to be a dramatization of a social phenomenon, or a dramatized response to a social phenomenon, then “through dramatization […] the group can individualize some phenomenon and thereby turn it into an instrument capable of individualizing the collectivity as a whole, giving it identity and individuality” (DaMatta 20). In other words, through a public display of an image and a sentiment which everyone shares, the community itself is
reaffirmed in its shared beliefs, while at the same time interpolating and incorporating the individual. An affective display during a religious festival is simultaneously an act of devotion, and affirming devotion in a collective environment in which everyone shares in the same devotional belief serves to build community. Second, as they affirm their belief in Rilaj Mam, his embedded meaning as a central figure in a Mayan legend means that these acts of communal devotion also avow a specifically Mayan orientation. In this way, affective acts of public devotion serve to build not merely a community, but a specifically Mayan one. Just as Tojil explicitly stated that the events of this celebration were a salvaging of the ancient Mayan past, affective acts of devotion communicate the same, although encoded, message.

Another important aspect to note from Corrigan’s account of emotion in religious practice is that affective displays of spiritual beliefs define boundaries. Expanding on this idea, we can understand that performative events such as festival and public acts of devotion also serve as a shibboleth\(^{46}\) that serves as a boundary mechanism which indicates pertinence to a group. As Noyes elaborates, “[s]hibboleths become emblems of identity, the most conservative elements of the culture, and may be frozen while other elements are changing rapidly” (“Group” 26). The use of cultural markers of participation creates a way to bind a group identity. In this case, the cultural markers were mostly tied to Rilaj Mam as a uniquely Mayan figure. This is the case not merely through his familiar physical appearance, use of Mayan cloth, or other recognizably Mayan possessions, but

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\(^{46}\) This is a term elaborated by Noyes in 2003 in a revised version of a 1995 article. The term shibboleth, in a Biblical sense, was originally used as a verbal identity marker as a means to establish pertinence or exclusion to a group through pronunciation. Noyes’ 1995 article was the first instance in which this term was applied to a non-verbal practice. In either of these cases, shibboleths are a way in which boundaries – in the sense of identity or group formation – are both identified and maintained.
also through both explicit and tacit statements of his Mayan heritage. However, Noyes clarifies that while these markers are used to define boundaries, they in fact attempt to bind what cannot really be bound. Cultural pertinence is a fluid category, and the same individual may adopt different identities in different situations. This understanding is particularly revealing in the case of the contemporary Kaqchikel. Although Guatemala is divided into two primary social groups, Mayas and ladinos, these seemingly ethnic categories are in reality somewhat misnomers. In general it is necessary to be ethnically Maya in order to be considered Maya, but at the same time the other markers of ethnic identity are changeable: dress, language, place of residence or lifestyle. A Mayan person may become “ladinized” by leaving behind their Mayan 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 through performative ritual expression which employs a trickster figure.

3.4 Rilaj Mam the Trickster

If we examine the multiple versions of his origin tales, they point to Rilaj Mam’s central characterization as a trickster figure. 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 sometimes 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 Mayan 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. Among these tasks, they tricked the Lords into thinking they had lit the forbidden cigars and torch by placing fireflies and a red macaw feather on the ends, fed bones to jaguars so that they were not consumed, escaped deadly bats by hiding in their blowguns, and so forth. Even their birth was made possible through trickery. Their mother, the goddess Ixquic, became impregnated with twins when the skull of a previous twin god, perched in a tree, spit into her hand. 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.

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47 Although Jun Ajpu’ loses his head in this trial when he peeks out to see if the dawn has come, he does not die. This ability to escape death is an important trickster characterization.

48 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. In an explicit reference to the *Popol Wuj*, the *baile del abuelo* described in Section 3.4, with its back and forth dance pattern, is specifically intended to mimic the sidestepping that the twins accomplished when deceiving the gods of Xibalba’. Moreover, the legendary depictions of Rilaj Mam 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 complements 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, the last ruler of Iximché’, where he resisted the (eventually successful) Spanish conquest of the city before being killed (Rodas Hernández n. pag.). 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 another 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 Mayan 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.

Many non-Mayas or those who are Catholic or Evangelical will assert that Rilaj Mam is a negative figure and that he represents Judas Iscariot who sold Jesus to the Romans. When our ladino Catholic neighbors discovered that I was writing an article on Rilaj Mam for a local magazine, they expressed concern because they believed that he was “bad.” Many ajq’ija’ with whom I spoke referenced this same social dynamic, recognizing that he is often represented as Judas. Nevertheless, the vast majority of ajq’ija’ with whom I consulted insisted that his connection to Judas and to evil in Christianity was erroneous, emphasizing instead his Mayan origin. As Tojil elaborated when I spoke with him, “in terms of [Rilaj Mam’s] image represented in the pre-Columbian and pre-colonial [time in relation to] the modern and current [period], Maximón represents an important character in the life of the shamans, since it is known that he lived in the past, was a great lord, a grandfather, that he was an ancestor” (Hernández (b)). This is, in fact, the scenario to which Tojil referred in his speech during Rilaj Mam’s festival day. While Evangelicals and some Catholics criticize the worship of Rilaj Mam, believing he is evil, the Mayas try to promote that the worship of him is a salvaging of an ancient practice. The assumption made here is, of course, that worshipping in the same manner as the Mayan ancestors is a valuable practice, operating outside the Catholic paradigm of ecclesiastic versus pagan. To the Kaqchikels, he evidences a rejection of this entire paradigm, as they insist that, “he is not bad, he is an
authority. He represents resistance to Spanish influence, and moreover he is a spiritual
guide.”

Unlike the Tz’utujil region in which Rilaj Mam appears alongside a Christ figure, he represents something subtly different for the Kaqchikels. Rilaj Mam can be understood as an allegorical figure, symbolizing for the contemporary Kaqchikels a continuity of the pre-Columbian Mayan 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 “Great Ancestor,” the latter of which was a term used by many other ajq’ija’ with whom I spoke. Appropriately, reverence for this figure has historically provided a means to generate Mayan resistance to the Spanish conquest. Referring to the colonial encounter, when, after Rilaj Mam’s death the Mayas 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.

49 The term “spiritual guide” or guía espiritual is a common way to refer to ajq’ija’. Additionally, this source is uncited because the speaker did not give permission to use their name.
Instead, he is continually reborn and transformed, following “a law of human nature: that we come back to life” (Cojtí b n. pag.), while at the same time providing a sense of hope that perhaps the Mayas can still evade Spanishness and all that is foreign, saving what is continually under the threat of being exterminated. 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 local 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 belletteristic technology, the innate, subversive critique is that these hierarchies can be overturned not by physical force but rather by cunning trickery. 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 Kaqchikels find themselves threatened by referring to another: the conquest.

The nature of the Mayan 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 interaction with the Kaqchikels 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. In general, proponents of the pan-Maya movement understand Guatemala as occupying a situation of what is effectively internal colonialism. 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 movement is the legitimization of Mayan 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 Kaqchikels. We often see a reshaping of history and folklore into a contemporary usage for the purpose of expressing Mayan culture as it is lived and determined by the Mayas. 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 Mayan history is reshaped often attempts to emphasize what is distinctly Mayan, while at the same time it implies the 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 dominant ladino population, while there is, by most estimates, an even larger contingent of Mayan peoples at around 42 to 87 percent of the total population (Warren “Language and the Politics of Self-Expression” 151). Although the Mayas likely dominate the country in numbers, they have not been the group that holds power in any official or unofficial capacity. While I do not wish to be overzealously generalizing in how I interpret the Kaqchikels’ response to their contemporary scenario, it is evident that the Kaqchikels, as a somewhat more urbanized group due to their proximity to the capital, do view themselves as mediating 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 Mayan 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 “Reading History as Resistance” 102). Rilaj Mam as a trickster is an apt example of the ways in which we witness a “resynthesis” of cultural forms when the previous forms do not accurately serve the goals of people. Rilaj Mam becomes not

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50 Census data is problematic in Guatemala due to the difficulty of gaining correct demographic data as well as the social and political implications of that data. In other words, the politically dominant group would not want to admit that the Maya are a majority because it would validate their demands for representation. There have therefore been a number of different census studies carried out, with varying results.
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 Mayan 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 Kaqchikels, as he represents not just a non-Spanish figure but more importantly a figure that actually tricked and, in that regard, 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 hierarchal structure in a profoundly corrupt and violent country, a playful inversion of authority in the absence of a real ability for the Mayas 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 saintly guidance. We must recognize that reverence for this image is a part of ritual practice, and all ritual is primarily about transformation. As James 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 accomplish 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.

3.5 The Encoding of Rilaj Mam

Through both quotidian devotional rituals and popular festival, practitioners display their intent to revere, please, and celebrate Rilaj Mam. Festivals in particular have the ability to be centripetal forces, pulling participating members into the center, as they join in with the activities which solidify a group with a common belief or purpose. While Rilaj Mam is utilized as a figure that specifically represents a Mayan ancestor, that assertion of ethnic identity often occurs in conjunction with a threat to its validity or its stability. In this light we may understand his central role in a popular festival. Both by means of Rilaj Mam and of his celebration, the Kaqchikels use ceremony and ritual to negotiate a complex social situation. In their lack of actual political representation, they do not engage in outright protest against their position as a marginalized sector of society,
but rather they choose indirect methods to convey what they are not able to say outright. This is at least partly the result of the social structure of Guatemala as a post-colonial nation which still maintains old structures of dominance and subordination. These structures are not wholly ethnic, but rather they are based on the practices exercised in the life of the individual. A Maya with sufficient economic opportunity may ascend the social ladder, although never reaching the topmost level of the oligarchy which controls Guatemalan politics (Fischer and Brown 11-12), assuming that they leave behind their “Mayan way of life”: their dress, their language, their town, and so forth. Indeed the recently deceased proponent of pan-Mayanism Sam Colop explains, quoting a popular line of argumentation in Guatemala: "It is well understood that an Indian dressed in jeans and wearing boots is no longer an Indian. And even less so if he speaks other modern languages besides Spanish” (111). This scenario sheds light on a figure like Rilaj Mam who is bolstered entirely through performative means, either in devotion or public celebration. In order to be Mayan, it is considered that an individual must be so ethnically, but moreover that individual must perform a Mayan way of life. In this regard, the outright celebration of what is considered an ancestral Mayan figure is undeniably a means to portray a Mayan perspective, which cannot be enacted through traditional political means.

The use of these indirect means of representation can be understood as an example of a hidden transcript, as described by James Scott. In a culture with two factions, a dominant power and subordinate group, the dominant power controls the public stage. The subordinate group must find representation through the only means
available to them, since they lack the power to enter the public forum directly; in other words, “[…] the process of domination generates a hegemonic public conduct and a backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power” (Scott xii). Since the subordinate cannot enter directly into public discourse, they create a hidden transcript, which is often expressed in the form of gesture, speech, or practice. Although the canonical idea of a hidden transcript is not exactly what is happening here, I still argue that it is a valuable orientation to help us understand what the Kaqchikels accomplish through a figure like Rilaj Mam. The hidden transcript often refers to stories or negative opinions that are expressed when a person is behind closed doors in the company of their peers, or to intentional acts to subvert the efficiency of the dominant group. Here we are not necessarily experiencing an outright criticism behind closed doors of the dominant structure. Rather, we are seeing a response to that structure which can only be expressed through encoded means – that is to say, through emphasizing what is Mayan in a specific effigy – because there are relatively few public outlets that otherwise affirm Mayan identity.

In the emotional tumult of the festival ambience, social boundaries can be broken down to permit the formation of a shared community that is constructed around an image

[51] Here again it is apt to point out Rilaj Mam’s physical appearance. As a shape-shifter posing as a ladino descended from Spaniards, his Western appearance signals his presence as a mediator in situations in which the Kaqchikels are wary of being outwardly Mayan. His very physical appearance is a mode of encoding. [52] Additionally, the hidden transcript often requires a particular audience, and it is sometimes only communicated when an outsider asks specifically. We can posit that perhaps this was the case in my interactions as a foreign researcher. In regards to Rilaj Mam’s festival day, interestingly, there was quite a bit of outside observation of this event. Not only were there many onlookers from the town, but Tojil and José had made it clear to me several times that I should bring all of my recording equipment. There were at least two other outside groups of people present who were filming the event.
of a strategically essentialized\textsuperscript{53} Mayan identity, one which is necessarily contrary to the dominant ladino forum. Furthermore, because ritual is intended to transcend and exist outside of time (Turner 96), it provides an experience of a liminal space to mediate the objective structure of society and an emotional, idealized spiritual goal. That is to say, everyday existence is not necessarily spiritually transformative; on the other hand, by participating in ritual, devotees implicitly hope to have a transcendent experience that they cannot have in their quotidian existence. The ritual space provides a place for these two realms of existence to coalesce, without being one nor the other. Rilaj Mam, as a trickster figure, is the perfect vehicle for this scenario, as tricksters have the ability to slide between boundaries and evade categorization. He provides a fleeting moment in which the Kaqchikels can exist outside of the rules of their oppressive society, as they celebrate together and approach an affective, albeit perhaps transient, unity. In the festival experience, participants partake in shared ritual offerings and the ceremonial experience, culminating in dancing and a lively drunken party that lasts until dawn. Finally, exhausted, they straggle home after having shared money, meals, and blood with neighbors and strangers. They are able to shed other identifying differences, such as their sometimes Catholic practices or geographic isolation, and come together to join in the performative experience.

While there is certainly an element of the hidden transcript occurring in events such as these, that is to say the encoding of a message to say what cannot be said outright,
to fully understand this phenomena we may also understand these actions as examples of counter-narratives. As Homi Bhabha elaborates, a nation emerges in the process of narrative performance as the people mediate the various discourses of nation: “[t]he people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference where the claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address” (297). The public transcript, which is created in the public sphere by the dominant group as they control the public stage, interpolates the subordinate group. The subordinate group may then elect to respond to the dominant discourse, and they may do so in a manner that affirms or that counters that message. We understand a discourse that is not concordant with the dominant view as a counter-narrative, a discursive feature which has the ability to present an alternative view of the nation while also challenging its boundaries: “Counter-narratives of that nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries – both actual and conceptual – disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities” (Bhabha 300). As the public sphere and the counter-narrative enter into negotiation and conflict, it is these varying discourses of the nation that must be mediated by “the people,” who rearrange and understand these messages in a way that is logical and culturally meaningful for them.

These statements by Bhabha ultimately look to elucidate ideas that point to group identity, and that is a concept that is highly relevant when we seek to understand the spiritual practices of the Kaqchikels. We will attempt to break down these schemas so
that we can discuss them specifically in regard to Rilaj Mam. First, Bhabha assumes that
the nation is formed as an imagined community, in the andersonian sense, a concept
which is important to understanding the way in which the public and the hidden transcript
feed back into one another. An imagined community is, by its very nature, homogenous,
and its formation is controlled by the group that dominates the public stage. Although the
imagined community may include elements of a subordinate culture, which are central to
the creation of the national imaginary, these elements are appropriated and adapted from
the subordinate culture to which they pertain by the dominant powers. Moreover, the
national imaginary is by necessity an essentialization of the culture of the nation, as it is
reduced to its most salient parts which can create the most affective response possible
from its members. Nevertheless, the subordinate themselves cannot enter into the public
forum that creates the national imaginary. In this way, counter-narratives are an attempt
to interpolate that homogenous, dominant discourse of the national imaginary. At the core
of this dynamic is a struggle for representation and identity. In the face of an inability to
exercise their autonomy to self-represent and to form their own group identity, a
subordinate group adapts using the means that are available to them: a counter-narrative
that exists as not as direct speech, but rather as a hidden transcript manifested in encoded
means of expression.

Rilaj Mam exemplifies this search for self-representation in a number of ways.
The primary example perhaps resides in his tales of origin and what is indirectly
communicated in these stories. In each version, Rilaj Mam deceives and eludes the

54 This is a concept expressed by many theorists of nationhood, including but not limited to Gellner (1983),
Castoriadis (1998), and Hogan (2009).
Spaniards through trickery. Once again it is apt to mention that more than one ajq’ija’ from Tecpán explained that Rilaj Mam was Kaji’ Imox and/or B’eleje’ Kat, the rulers of Iximche’ at the time of the Spanish conquest, and that there is where he resisted Spanish invasion, was caught, escaped, and was eventually killed. In this way, his trickster configuration is central to his function as the central character in an encoded counter-narrative. His tales of successful evasion of the Spaniards are an indirect subversion of the colonial power system which is still in effect in a post-colonial political environment. This system operates based on an internally colonial ladino oligarchy, which is, of course, descended from Spanish rule. Similarly, even though Rilaj Mam is eventually captured and killed, he does not die but is said to have made many historical appearances and is still rumored to make appearances to the contemporary Kaqchikels. Thus through his stories, as well as through his veneration, he represents both past and present resistance to the foreign – in that it is not native to Guatemala – Spanish order. The way in which Rilaj Mam is constructed in his veneration also serves as an encoded narrative which seeks to affirm that which is Mayan as it disavows that which is non-Mayan. Rilaj Mam is portrayed not as a hybrid figure which has been inserted into a Catholic set of practices, but rather he is always emphasized as a specifically Mayan figure, in that he was a Mayan ancestor – the great ancestor in fact – as well as an ajq’ij.

Given these scenarios, perhaps the best way to describe these practices is not simply as a hidden transcript nor a counter-narrative, but rather as an encoded means of

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55 I would posit that he perhaps appears in the most tumultuous and difficult of socio-political times, precisely because he is a useful mediation tool. The best example that suggests this correlation is that he also made appearances during the civil war. While I haven’t researched these connections thoroughly, it is something I would like to explore in the future.
expression with qualities that exhibit both of these discursive phenomena. The *baile del abuelo* is a good example of this, in that it seems a simple dance but in reality makes a reference not just to Rilaj Mam as an ancestral figure, but also to the *Popol Wuj*, probably the most well-known Mayan work in existence. He is therefore connected to the contemporary Mayas in two ways: through a shared ancestry or tradition, and through the way that his contemporary figure has come to represent what the Kaqchikel are attempting to articulate about their own group. The pan-Maya cultural movement has become widely popular, not necessarily under that name, but instead as a general awareness that is manifested, at times, in the Kaqchikel’s assertion of their desire to be considered a validated and autonomous faction of the Guatemalan nation. In this way Rilaj Mam is a primary example of one of the central goals of the pan-Mayan movement: “Maya cultural activism is centrally concerned with assigning new meanings to traditional symbols in an attempt to construct a unified, internally defined pan-Maya identity” (Fischer and Brown 11). He is not a deceased saint whose effigy is revered in an arcane confraternity, but rather he is a living advocate for Mayan authority.

3.6 Hybridity: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity

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 note that any supposed historical origins, whether they are pre-Columbian or
forged in the contact period, have been superseded by the tales that are transmitted among the Kaqchikel community itself. In these stories which I collected during my fieldwork, Rilaj Mam is portrayed as a human figure that pre-dated the Spanish conquest. Most commonly he is said to have actually lived at the time of the Spanish conquest and fought to defend his people from the foreign invaders. 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 contemporary 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 Mayas because they somehow become transculturated in their evolution. Rather, the continued adoption of these forms of belief and their accepted significance as Mayan, regardless of the whether or not they are actually “purely” Mayan in some way, 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 this figure’s life underscores his contemporary significance in society; he has acquired a social and political message. He represents not just a simple “saint”\textsuperscript{56} to whom one makes petitions, but rather he is imbued with multiple layers of meaning that reference resistance to colonialism.

\textsuperscript{56} 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. Mayan ancestral figures who are completely eschewed by the Catholic Church are also referred to as tyox. However, it is noteworthy that it is, in fact, a linguistic borrowing that comes from
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 Mayas adapt in ways that continue to articulate what the Kaqchikels consider a uniquely Mayan 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 Kaqchikels imagine themselves, and how they produce and reproduce that imaginary. Thus we arrive back at the idea of counter-narratives and can once again come to understand Rilaj Mam as an attempt to narrate that which is Mayan in a country that does not have a public space for the Mayas 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 Mayan populations and which simultaneously appropriates their way of life to serve the Guatemalan nation in their tourism campaign, the Kaqchikels have sought new ways to self-represent. Supporting this supposition is the fact that Rilaj Mam has gained in popularity in recent years (Maxwell (a) n. pag.), after the civil war ended and the Kaqchikels began to experience post-war societal structures. We see evidence of this structure in the lack of legislation protecting indigenous interests such as land rights. Although Guatemala

colonial-period encounters and the way the Maya heard the Spanish term Dios (God), resulting in the loan adaptation tyox (Maxwell (b) n. pag.). Again I posit that while his origins hint at religious blending, his contemporary usage does not.
recently, in September 2011, signed into law a constitutional amendment protecting Mayan sacred spaces, land rights as they pertain to agricultural interests still remain a point of contention. As an example, the strikingly unsatisfactory dynamics of the Guatemalan government in relation to Mayan representation were evident in a recent Presidential Forum regarding indigenous rights, conducted as a part of the 2011 Presidential Election. Each of the nine Presidential candidates responded to questions regarding their platform on issues related to indigenous interests, and while all candidates gave politically favorable responses, the only indigenous representative was the famous K’iche’ Nobel laureate Rigoberta Menchú, who in 2007, and as it ended up in 2011, won only 3% of the total national vote. Couple that with former President Álvaro Colom’s recent statement that a lack of economic resources leads all Presidential candidates to promise what they cannot deliver (Orozco n. pag.), and it is extremely unlikely that the Mayas will soon find direct political representation nor effect any sort of change under their current gubernatorial system, especially after the introduction of a conservative regime in 2011.

In regards to Rilaj Mam’s origins and his contemporary usage in this social environment, it is necessary to address the concept of hybridity. While previous research primarily among the Tz’utijil community understands Rilaj Mam as a syncretic image, I argue that among the Kaqchikels he is not an example of religious syncretism. They do not believe they are practicing a type of Catholicism as they revere Rilaj Mam, nor do they adapt Rilaj Mam to fit into their pre-existing Catholicism. It is imperative to remember that presently, Rilaj Mam is always conceptualized by the Kaqchikels as
predating and resisting Spanish conquest. The Catholic context of Guatemala should not be ignored, so I will clarify how we can understand Rilaj Mam in his contemporary milieu. To begin, we are dealing with the way that the Kaqchikels imagine their community at present. While it is clear that many Mayan stories can be understood as common ecotypes 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 Kaqchikels’ 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 Kaqchikels use these stories with a specific intent.

The cofradías or confraternities are typically the main focus in research dealing with Mam among the Tz’utujils. Historically, confraternities house effigies of specific saints which may be visited by devotees, as they make offerings or petitions based on that for which a particular saint is known. On that saint’s day according to the Roman Catholic calendar, these effigies are then taken into the street and carried on public display during a procession, which usually involves firecrackers, costume, and musical accompaniment. In Santiago Atitlán, where his most famous Tz’utujil effigy is housed in a confraternity, Mam is treated much like other Catholic saints, revered in these brotherhood systems which date back to the Middle Ages of Roman Catholicism. Most notably, he is also seen as the bearer of the five dangerous days of the Mayan solar calendar, the Wayeb’, which in Santiago Atitlán coincide with the five weekdays of Holy

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57 Although somewhat underused, I find this term (first used by folklorist Carl Wilhelm von Sydow in 1934) to be the most precise to refer to a common storytelling trope that is present across cultures.
Week. Much like other effigies of confraternities, he is carried out for a procession during this time, on Wednesday of Holy Week and then again on Good Friday. Nevertheless, in the Kaqchikel community, there is no public procession of his effigy during this week. This again is one of the primary differences between the Tz’utujil Mam and the Kaqchikel Rilaj Mam, although they both share similar characteristics as well as San Simón’s saint day. While there is at least one well-known Rilaj Mam confraternity in the Kaqchikel community, located in San Andrés Itzapa, the vast majority of effigies are found on the in-home altars of the Kaqchikel ajq’ij and do not operate within a formal confraternity structure.

Furthermore, the Tz’utujil version of this figure differs subtly from the Kaqchikel version not just in appearance and custom, but more importantly in what he represents. In the Tz’utujil region, the existing research posits that he represents two kinds of hybridity, not merely in an analytical way that is removed from the intentions of the people, but rather he holds meaning for them that is based on his hybrid nature. First, he represents the religious hybridity of Santiago Atitlán, which has been an important center for Catholic growth since the colonization and is now a prime area for Evangelical churches (Carlsen The War for the Heart and Soul of a Highland Maya Town 17-18). This confluence is particularly notable when, on Good Friday of Holy Week, his effigy is carried in a procession behind MaNawal de JesuKristo, a Christ-like deity described as “a Catholic man-god gone Maya” (Stanzione 62). The coupling of these dual figures has

58 In reality this figure is quite complex. The stories about him are the result of an adaptation the stories of Jesus Christ once told by Franciscans and now appropriated and reworked by the Tz’utujil. He is a remnant of the attempt to disguise their traditional religion under the guise of Catholicism. See Stanzione (2003) for a thorough explanation.
two different interpretations. One theory posits that in this representation, Mam serves as Judas Iscariot (Knowlton n. pag.), although this seems to be the less popular interpretation among Atitecos. The other theory views MaNawal de JesuKristo as Mam’s trickster twin (Stanzione 124), replicating a common Mesoamerican trope that we can identify even in the twin heroes of the Popol Wuj. As such, it is no coincidence that Mam and MaNawal de JesuKristo both share the Holy Cross confraternity in Santiago, Atitlán.

This paired presence of Mam and a Christ figure is a ritual that serves two purposes: one that represents the Christian view of the symbolic death of Jesus Christ, and the other which is the result of the ecological timing of Easter, which always occurs around the end of the dry season. In this way, Mam’s death brings about the rainy season (Stanzione 60), and coupling his death with that of Christ serves the dual function of enacting both Mayan and Christian belief systems. Mam can be understood as mediating these two worlds, taking on whichever identity better serves his immediate purpose. Furthermore, Morales proposes that Mam also signifies ethnic hybridity by representing mestizaje, a polemic assertion yet one that he insists holds meaning for the Atitecos. He references Mam’s often medium to light skin tone and Western style of dress, insisting that while Mam historically begins as a Mayan character, he ends up as a ladino. He concludes that he therefore represents the mestizaje of Guatemala and the conflict that lies therein in regards to identity and affiliation (Morales 332). These interpretations lead

59 The term for inhabitants of Santiago, Atitlán.
us to understand the Tz’utujil Mam as representative of a hybrid culture, both religiously and socially.

While there is evidence that shows that the Tz’utujil have “utilized their own culture to help mediate exploitation” (Carlsen *The War for the Heart and Soul of a Highland Maya Town*, 8), as they adopt hybrid forms of religion in order to survive under a fervent Catholic seizure of their religion and their culture (and in the face of Evangelical influence in present-day), there is no such hybridized mediation among the Kaqchikels. To the contrary, although I often questioned my Kaqchikel collaborators regarding whether Rilaj Mam and Christ or other Catholic figures might engage in the same rituals, as he does in Santiago Atitlán, I was always given a negative answer. I asked if more people came to visit them with requests during Holy Week, and with an exception of an ajq’ij who worked in the touristy area of Antigua where Holy Week processions are internationally famous, they insisted that they were not busier during that season. The closest example I found of comparable religious systems was when Rilaj Mam was present on an altar along with other Catholic saints. A cross might also be present on a Rilaj Mam altar, but this was usually explained as a Mayan cross, not a Christian one.

I therefore make the claim that the practices observed among the Kaqchikels, such as the presence of a Catholic saint on the same altar as Rilaj Mam, are more accurately parallel religious practices instead of hybridized ones. A Catholic may visit an ajq’ij and

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The Mayan cross represents the Earth with its four cardinal directions and its center – its *k’u’x* or heart. Each direction has a corresponding color, and this configuration is used to spatially orient the altars in Mayan ceremonies. One is pictured to the left in Figure 13. This is not the same as the Christian cross, which represents the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ in order to save humanity.
make a petition to a Catholic saint, but unlike in Santiago Atitlán, the meaning of these saints’ stories is never combined with that of Rilaj Mam. Although I do not wish to deny the Catholic context of Guatemala, I nevertheless found that, unlike among the Tz’utujils, the Kaqchikel Rilaj Mam is largely not inserted into Catholic sign-systems, and he does not engage in the same public ritual activities as Christ-like figures. Whether or not there was colonial-period religious blending with the Kaqchikel remains unproven, and I attest that it is not central to the question at hand. Instead, what is of interest here is how the significance of a figure like Rilaj Mam is constructed in present day. In this regard, among the Kaqchikels he is considered an utterly Mayan figure, and as such he serves as a symbol of Mayan culture and identity, both ancestral and contemporary. He is a tool used by the ajq’ija’ to respond to the needs of their community.

Although some Kaqchikels who practice Mayan spirituality are also Catholic, their discrete practices generally do not overlap, and the majority of Kaqchikels deny that the two have anything to do with each other in practice. 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 Mayan “deity”; for example, they do not pretend to revere a Catholic saint while tacitly understanding that they are really praying to Rilaj Mam. Instead, Rilaj Mam is a stand-alone entity who is strongly rejected by the Catholic Church as brujería, witchcraft. The traditional model of religious syncretism in Latin America has been that the indigenous pray to Catholic saints that disguise native deities, but it is not what we are seeing in the case of the Kaqchikels. Furthermore, those who are Evangelical operate in an even more truncated scenario, as the Evangelical churches do
not tolerate partaking in Mayan spirituality in the slightest. This sharp division means that for the Kaqchikels, the Mayan elements of their spiritual practice have an entirely different function, and indeed an entirely different set of signifiers from Catholic or Evangelical elements. 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 a Catholic saint 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: this is evidenced in his solitary stance as a primarily Mayan figure, never being coupled with Christ. While the Catholics sometimes couple him with Judas, this is a characterization largely rejected by the Kaqchikels.

This association between Rilaj Mam and Judas is actually quite interesting as well as revealing of why we also find the name San Simón in reference to him. There are two theories that attempt to explain the evolution of this name, which is mostly utilized in the Kaqchikel town San Andrés Itzapa (see Figure 13). On the one hand, it is merely an issue of nomenclature. San Simón sounds like Maximón, as many Kaqchikels 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. The second explanation requires a bit more contextualization of theological concepts. Rilaj Mam’s festival day is October 28th, which is the same festival day as Saint Simon as well as Saint Jude (“Saints by Date” n. pag.). Some spiritual practitioners suggest that the
Catholic colonial missionaries deliberately associated the pre-contact Rilaj Mam with Judas to make him an unattractive figure to the Mayas. It is not uncommon to find Judas confused with Simon theologically, as Judas’ father’s name was Simon, and Judas is often seen with Simon the Apostle when the apostles are paired together. The fact that

Figure 21. The San Simón effigy at San Andrés Itzapa, complete with Spiderman blanket (probably an offering from a devotee; all of Rilaj Mam’s clothes are gifts) and flashing welcome sign. He wears a black suit, a recurring style on other Rilaj Mam effigies.
they share a saint’s day is indicative of this conflation. Indeed, the San Andrés Itzapa San Simón, the only well-known effigy that distinctly bears that name above the other possibilities, is considered among Catholics as one of the most negative, witchcraft-attracting versions of Rilaj Mam. What we should bear in mind with these associations is that no one believes that the San Simón of San Andrés Itzapa shares the same origins as Catholic Simon the Apostle nor Saint Jude nor Judas, and strict Catholics and certainly Evangelicals would never visit his altar there. Although he shares a festival day with San Simón and even evidences some overlap in name in at least the community of San Andrés, not one story I was told explaining his significance ever placed him with the actual Catholic saints. Simply put, Rilaj Mam’s spiritual symbolism is not combined with the symbolism of any other religion. No matter his name, his identity as Rilaj Mam remains one and the same. For these reasons, I claim that it is more accurate to understand Mayan spirituality and Catholicism among the Kaqchikels as parallel religions, not syncretic or hybrid ones. The etymology of his name and his frequent appearance next to Catholic saints on altars indicates this religious coexistence. Rilaj Mam is malleable enough to stand next to important figures of other religious doctrines, and indeed these religious systems have found coexistence since the conquest.

As coexisting belief systems, it is not uncommon to find Kaqchikels who do not consider it contradictory to engage in traditional Mayan rituals as well as attend Catholic mass. Some Kaqchikels, in fact, explain that they believe they are praying to the same God, the creador y formador called Ajaw, and that churches are often built on top of Mayan 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 varied social environments. Once again, Rilaj Mam as a trickster figure is the perfect vehicle to carry out this mediation. It is clear that these categories of Catholic and Mayan 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 Kaqchikels. Rilaj Mam is nuanced, multifaceted, and complex, and he exemplifies the fluid categories that the Kaqchikels themselves must mediate. As they struggle with their place in Guatemalan society, they make use of a folk ecotype like Rilaj Mam which allows them to slide between their parallel religious beliefs and, most importantly perhaps, continue exerting what it means to be Mayan to them. Unlike the Tz’utujil Mam, the Kaqchikel Rilaj Mam was not a colonial adaptive technique to survive the Spanish conquest, resulting in his insertion into a Catholic framework. Instead it seems that among the Kaqchikels, he has largely remained a separate entity from the Catholic canon, both in symbolism and in practice, existing as a tool in traditional spiritual practices that, although they are inevitably informed by their Catholic surroundings, are considered by the Kaqchikels as pertaining to the Mayas. Rilaj Mam can mediate the difficult and sometimes contradictory categories that the Kaqchikels must also navigate, and to them he does so as a Mayan man whose origins are resoundingly pre-Columbian. His ability to coexist betwixt and between religious and ethnic categories as a dual figure is, in fact, a function of Mayan
cosmovision which allows for non-contradictory duality, a concept which is produced
time and time again in Mayan mythology (such as the *Popol Wuj*’s multiple twin figures)

If we really understand how Rilaj Mam functions in Kaqchikel society, the issue
of his name 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. Here is a case where the Rilaj Mam
of the Kaqchikels and the Mam of the Tz’utujils do seem to share a commonality. While
we may understand the Tz’utujil Mam as ladino and therefore representing both ethnic
and religious hybridity, as does Morales, another school of thought explains this
differently. We can also understand him to be a character that simultaneously represents
both their traditional Mayan and their Catholic interests, switching roles when
appropriate. He therefore both is and isn’t ladino (Stanzione 43). Thus is the trickster.

What remains different between the communities of the Tz’utujils and the Kaqchikels,
however, are the particular cultural dynamics that have caused them to summon the use
of this character. Santiago Atitlán’s case is a good example of religious syncretism for the
purpose of survival, combining the two religious sign systems to disguise the Mayan
Mam under the pressure of religious colonization by the Franciscans. On the other hand,
only recently have the Kaqchikels used Rilaj Mam as a mode of resistance to colonialism,
not disguising but rather emphasizing his Mayan characteristics as they adapt his origin
tale of deceiving the Spanish to their contemporary goal of making a claim to authority
and validity in a multicultural nation.
It is noteworthy that, 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, my central claim in regards to his hybridity is that what is 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 the Guatemalan Constitution which states in Article 62,

National artistic expression, popular art, folklore, and the autochthonous handicrafts and industries should be objects under the special protection of the State, with the goal of preserving their authenticity. The State will facilitate the opening of national and international markets for the free commercialization of the work of artists and artisans, promoting their production and appropriate development. (my translation)
The Mayas are generally viewed as 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 by the state. 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 Kaqchikels 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 seek to find ways to negotiate that position.

3.7 Conclusion

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 doomsday phenomena. While Guatemala has historically been one of the most Catholic countries in Latin America, it has recently experienced a massive wave of Evangelism which has attracted nearly half the population in believers. Meanwhile, traditional Mayan spirituality has been growing in popularity, but it has been appropriated by the state for tourism and by international venues such as Hollywood,
which seek to profit from the 2012 prophecies. These recent changes in societal
organization and religious ecology point to a context that provokes the Kaqchikels to
assert their identity and their legitimacy as a marginalized population. The trickster Rilaj
Mam at once mediates societal differences while also providing a way for practitioners to
interact with those differences in an encoded dialogue. 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 ways of life continually threatened. Therefore the practice of
spirituality becomes a much larger issue than just religion: it can be understood as a
reaction to a cultural context, an attempt by the Kaqchikels to mediate their existential
quandary. Because assertions of identity can occur in conjunction with a threat to its
validity or its stability, the continual risk of violence as well as recent changes in the
religious ecology of Guatemala set the context that provokes the Kaqchikels to make a
claim to authority. 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 a hidden transcript, manifested in stories, ritual, and popular festival
celebrating a trickster Mayan effigy.
Chapter 4

“Pirates of Our Spirituality”: The 2012 Phenomenon and the Value of Heritage

4.1 Introduction

Casual conversation among residents of the United States would reveal that most are familiar with the ominous date of December 21, 2012. Circulating for years among the New Age community, references to the perceived implications of the year 2012 have recently filtered into popular culture with the large-budget special effects Hollywood film 2012 (2009) and even the official Britney Spears music video for her 2011 Billboard top hit “Till the World Ends” (urging listeners to, unsurprisingly, dance until the world ends, which in the video occurs on December 21, 2012). Both of these examples, a few among many, imply that the end of 2012 will bring about an apocalyptic phenomenon, most notably through a series of cataclysmic natural disasters. This date signals the completion of 13 B’aqtun, a calendrical cycle in the count of the sacred Mayan calendar, a temporal phenomenon which has been interpreted by some to signify the end of the world as we know it. By these means in particular, Mayan spirituality is effectively mediated by the tourism market, as the 2012 prophecies function as a facet of cultural tourism which aims to draw foreigners to Guatemala. The Kaqchikels are well aware of these sorts of appropriation of their culture in the form of mass-media globalization, due both to their frequent interactions with tourists as well as their growing participation in social media.
The idea behind the 2012 phenomenon is that a long cyclical count within the sacred Mayan calendar will complete on December 21, 2012. A cycle of 440 years is called a B’aqtun, and 2012 will mark the end of 13 B’aqtuns, a count which began on August 11th, 3114 B.C.E. As the Mayan sacred count goes from 1 to 13, reaching the top number 13 prompts a return to the beginning count of the calendar. A common conception is that this equates to the calendar resetting to “zero,” which seems an ominous prospect. In reality, because the calendar is cyclical the count may reset, but by its very nature it will continue counting again through another B’aqtun and beyond.

Foreigners seem to have a wide array of opinions on the topic, as evidenced at least by the approximately 4,800 books on the 2012 prophecies available for purchase on Amazon.com. It is also interesting to note that, while foreigners have proffered their own opinions on the topic, the Mayas themselves also do not agree on what this particular date implies. The practice of Mayan spirituality is not a science; it is a craft. It is a learned technique communicated through what are essentially apprenticeships, and the results of its practice are certainly not measurable through scientific means. That is to say, the practice of Mayan spirituality necessarily implies experiences outside the realm of scientific measurement or esthetic values. A person who is destined to become an ajq’ij is considered to be the bearer of a gift, and this gift means that they simply come to know the necessary information to guide their community spiritually. They are considered an authority within the community, and they gain their knowledge through their unique gift which allows them to communicate with other, ancient sources of authority; namely, the Mayan ancestors as mentioned in well-known texts such as the Chilam B’alam and the
Popol Wuj. Thus it is expected that we would see an array of interpretations and opinions, as each ajq’ij arrives at their own interpretation of signs and information according to their cultural and ritual episteme.

Upon examining the discourse produced by the tourism industry and that produced by the Kaqchikels, we encounter two competing constructions of cultural value. While the tourism industry seeks to appropriate the symbols of Mayan culture to generate revenue, the pan-Maya cultural movement also looks to rearticulate and reclaim those same symbols. On the one hand, the tourism industry appropriates social signs (in this case, the spiritual traditions of the Kaqchikels) and assigns a commodified exchange value to them. This is made possible via a Western conceptualization of cultural practices that brands them as intangible cultural heritage. Although formal institutions like UNESCO have not given the status of intangible cultural heritage to Mayan spiritual practices, Western interest tends to classify them in much the way that they understand intangible cultural heritage: as something to be preserved. According to UNESCO’s World Heritage Centre website, items considered world heritage are designated as “outstanding universal value to humanity” so that they can “be protected for future generations to appreciate and enjoy” (n. pag.). On the other hand, the Kaqchikels give value to these practices as inherited knowledge on which they are the authorities. For the Kaqchikels, they are valuable because they are both accurate in their information (i.e. the ancient Mayan knowledge system is true), and because they are accurate as a marker of a Mayan identity that is transmitted from the ancient Mayas to the contemporary Kaqchikels. In this regard, they are not claiming heritage as a transmission of inert
practices of the past, but rather they are asserting their contemporarily relevant, authoritative knowledge of these practices. The Kaqchikels thus stake a claim to knowledge that they have inherited, a process in which culture is reified as heritage. By means of this claim to authoritative knowledge, tourism thus becomes a stage by which the Kaqchikels can valorize their culture. They seize the opportunity to possess the public stage afforded to them as objects of tourism in order to fight the foreign influence of tourism itself. While the valorization of ancestral knowledge is a heritage understood by the Kaqchikels long before the invention of Western conceptions of value such as the ones communicated through UNESCO, the contemporary environment of foreign influence has provided them with a tableau which they can appropriate for their own cause. As they re-appropriate the symbolism of Mayan history and substantiate the accuracy of its prophecies, the Kaqchikels attempt to valorize a culture that, after enduring centuries of acculturation, has suffered in the last decades a veritable cultural genocide.

4.2 Spiritual Tourism in Guatemala

The crisis of the nation-state due to the economic forces of globalization has generated a renewed interest in examining cultural identities throughout the American continents. As many nation-states move toward a multiethnic or multinational state, we are able to reconsider how culture is performed, maintained, and created. In Guatemala, the pan-Maya movement attempts to redefine the Mayan imaginary by occupying a discourse specific to Mayan symbolism. Reclaiming and restoring Mayan symbolism is,
in fact, the central goal of this movement. While language and dress have been the primary cultural practices discussed, one of the aims of this dissertation is to propose that we can and should look to other practices, such as response to tourism, to gain an understanding of the ways in which marginalized Mayan peoples in Guatemala negotiate their contemporary cultural milieu. The attitudes and comportment of the Kaqchikels regarding increased spiritual tourism in Guatemala can be understood as such a negotiation, and their response ultimately functions by reclaiming the ancestral Mayan episteme and symbolism.

Tourism is one of the driving forces of globalization, as it promotes and facilitates the process of transnational exchange and integration. The instrument of this transnational exchange is corporations, who seek to build a business and therefore become the instruments by which capital is transformed and exchanged in a global market. Tourism is fundamentally an economic activity, as citizens of the First World participate in tourism as their monetary limitations permit; this is the nature of the industry, which allows capital to flow between countries. What has occurred in Latin America, however, is that while tourism works this way in theory, it does not always in practice. Due to First World parent companies invested in Third World countries, the system actually creates a closed loop such that much of the capital flowing in tourism never leaves the First World (Mowforth and Munt 15), in so doing denying the Third World countries the full economic benefits of the industry. Moreover, because “[t]ourism defines culture and is defined by culture” (Reid 105), it necessitates the commodification of cultures other than that of the First World tourist so that these destinations may enter
the free market for exchange along with other kinds of capital. This structure, however, has led to an uneven development in which there is little to no economic trickle-down to the poorest populations who are most often the producers of the cultural forms which are appropriated by the tourist market. As the free market allows the flow of capital and people between nations, globalization and its associated tourism is considered a homogenizing force that although “[…] promoted as a positive means of economic development for […] many countries and communities,” in fact “tourism has not been a positive experience for all parties engaged in the development process” (Reid 1). While orthodox economists may explain that free market flow would be an economically equalizing process for all citizens, Donald Reid goes on to explain that in reality “tourism is characterized by uneven development. […] Local communities often form the front line in terms of service provision, but are last in line when it comes to benefitting from development” (4). These local communities usually are not able to make the decisions regarding the introduction of tourism to their area, and once the tourism is present, they are often considered both a spectacle and obstacle. Their culture is put on display as the tourist attraction, while simultaneously the people themselves are viewed as an obstacle to the progress in the form of increased development that tourism hopes to bring about.

How the Kaqchikels as a group dialogue with the cultural dynamic in Guatemala as the date 2012 approaches is the central question of this chapter. While the responses are multi-pronged, I would like to focus on the way in which the Kaqchikels have responded to the relatively recent development of spiritual tourism. This term, “spiritual tourism,” is the one that seems the most appropriate in my assessment, although it is not
widely used. Researchers of note are Olsen and Timothy, who have referred to “religious travel” and insist that, while religion has been a motivating factor for tourism for centuries, it has not been an area of much study (1). Moreover, they explain that religion as a tourism resource was overlooked by governments and tourism agencies until recently, when these institutions began to notice the potential for religious sites to play an important role in the growth of their national tourism: “[…] public interest has arisen mainly owing to the economic potential of religious tourists. As a result, venerated places are now being seen as tourism resources that can be commodified for travelers interested in cultural and historic sites” (1). It is also noteworthy that these tendencies have increased in the past fifty years. The trend has shown that progressively more people are traveling to sacred locations “seeking authentic experiences” (5), despite a perhaps cursory assumption that people would distance themselves from religious ideas as society advances technologically. In Guatemala as well as other countries, the rise of the New Age movement post-1950s has also supported individuals’ interest in alternative spiritualities not present in their home countries (Timothy and Conover 139). Because this movement “represents a personal spiritual quest that typically eschews traditional monotheistic religions” (141), spiritual practices such as animism, a common devotional practice in Native American spiritual practices, are often of central interest to followers of the New Age. Mayan ajq’ija’ generally view this broad, foreign interest in Mayan spirituality as superficial and lacking in true understanding of the subtleties of the belief system, as Cirilo Pérez, the Daykeeper who advised former Guatemalan president Álvaro Colom, decried: "When foreigners, or even some Guatemalans, see us, they think 'Look
at the Maya, how nice, how pretty', but they don't understand us” ("Mayan 2012 apocalypse theory” n. pag.). The scheme of religious tourism thus functions in a similar manner to tourism in a broad sense, as citizens of the First World seek to enrich their lives by momentarily participating in the “traditional” practices of the Third World, which are putatively unfettered by modernization.

In order to understand the field of spiritual tourism in Guatemala specifically, let us also situate it vis-à-vis Guatemalan tourism in general. As the tourism industry was able to increase in the post-war environment of the 1990s, a time period which Jennifer Burtner calls “a critical period of post-conflict reconstruction” (xi), the emphasis was on creating an “authentic” experience for tourists, which assumed a certain level of interaction with and/or observation of the Mayas in their perceived traditional way of life (Little 7, 40-41). The Mayas have been the central focus of the national tourism campaign in the past two decades, utilized by the national tourism agency INGUAT as a source of “national folklore” of interest to the international community. This is partially the effect of an agreement made in 1992 between the governments of Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, Belize, and El Salvador to collaborate in a tourism project that promotes the Mayan cultural contingents of each respective country. This project is known as the *Mundo Maya* or Mayan World.

We should note here that the Kaqchikels’ and other groups’ heritage as Mayas ironically bears different levels of value in different situations. It is useful for tourism and therefore fomented for these purposes, but it is disavowed when it comes to issues of land ownership, which, if their Mayan heritage were readily accepted, would imply a *prima*
facie right to the land as its original, pre-conquest inhabitants. The reason for this differentiation is most prominently related to economics. Simply put, it is economically advantageous to the Guatemalan state to bolster its Mayan cultural resources to build a tourism industry, while recognizing that same Mayan history in regards to land rights would mean a substantial loss of control over monetary flow of the country’s agriculture. Indeed, land redistribution was one of the reasons the Arbenz government of 1954 was deemed a potential socialist threat and subsequently ousted. Conversely, the perception that the Mayas “belong” to the land that comprises Guatemala is actually an important facet of tourist attraction to the area. INGUAT has utilized the worldwide perception of Mayan culture as something timeless, eternal, and native to distract potential tourists from the negative reputation that the country has recently received in the media. An example of this is the phrase “Guatemala: so beautiful, so safe” which has recently appeared in the Guatemalan tourism campaign (“VisitGuatemala” n. pag.). This intriguing juxtaposition of adjectives refers not just to a statement on the past violence of the war, but also to this negative press regarding both urban and rural violence, particularly drug cartel induced violence once the Mexican Zeta drug cartel crossed into Guatemala, after a concentrated effort against them in Mexico (Escalona n. pag.). One of the central concerns of the Guatemalan tourism industry appears to be fighting this negative image perpetuated in international news. In order to accomplish this, INGUAT has attempted to draw focus to other “attractive” features of the Guatemalan nation, emphasizing instead the beauty of the country and its “Living Maya Culture” (“VisitGuatemala” n. pag.). It is indeed apt to mention that the official slogan for the
national tourism agency is “Guatemala: the Heart of the Mayan World,” portraying Mayan culture as a kind of innate quality of national culture. This tourism strategy functions in a similar manner in many countries around the world: although the Mayas are not the group that holds political power in the country, they become the face of its tourism campaign.

At this juncture we should also define the term “spiritual” if we wish to explore the topic of spiritual tourism. As recent scholars have protested (Delgado Shorter n. pag.), this term can be problematic due to its very broad usage and therefore lack of precision. United States Americans tend to use the term “spiritual” when “religious” doesn’t quite seem to fit, due to its disassociation from formalized institutions. Generally,

[…] spirituality often refers to the felt sense of the transcendent grounded in the deepest part of one's being; still, it is increasingly understood that such spiritual awareness arises in response to concrete social, political, economic, sexual, or ecological dimensions of existence and in turn informs a person's capacity to respond to these realities. (Burton-Christie n. pag.)

The term “spirituality” has recently become a popular mode of expression to dictate one’s dialectic opposition to “religion” – i.e. it is common to say that one is spiritual but not religious. This phenomenon is undoubtedly inseparable from the social climate which has produced a renewed interest in these types of individualistic spiritual expression. Emerging most prominently after 1950, Burton-Christie posits that in the United States this is the result of a complex dynamic of individualism and an increased political
awareness which prompted an interest in morally-minded civic duties such as nonviolent resistance. Combine this ambience with the socially conscious era of the 1960s which saw an intense awareness of Native American spirituality (such as the works of pseudo-spiritualist Carlos Castaneda), and the last few decades of US life have gradually ramped up an interest in ancient indigenous spiritual practices. Moreover, the very nature of the “spiritualist” movement in the United States almost mandates the incorporation of indigenous practices, given that “[a] predilection to speak of having spirituality rather than having religion indicated a change in worldview and a transition from exclusive religious traditions to inclusive, overlapping expressions of commitment to world and community” (MacDonald 8718-9). Contemporary “spirituality” implies the confluence of various religions and worldviews, as people not necessarily connected to the origin of those views create a conglomeration of different ideas which they use to confront questions of their daily existence. This is partially why we have seen a recent interest in the ideas expressed in traditional Mayan spirituality; although the ideas themselves are ancestral, foreigners rearticulate and use them in new ways as they mold them into their inevitably globalized worldview.

Therefore “spiritual tourism” would be a tourism industry that operates based around foreign interest in the spiritual practices intrinsic to a particular country, and this spirituality is deliberately shaped, packaged, and sold to tourists with the explicit intention of meeting the tourist’s desires. While it is difficult to ascertain what quantity of tourists visit the country solely seeking to benefit from Mayan spiritual knowledge, it is evident that Mayan spiritual practices do contribute a certain appeal to tourists who visit
Guatemala. We see evidence of this appeal upon examination of images hinting at Mayan spirituality that appear in tourism literature. For example, the October 2010 issue of a the highly popular bilingual tourism magazine *Qué Pasa en Antigua* featured what was clearly intended to be the image of a Mayan ajq’ij. This cover, Figure 22, displays a

Figure 22. The cover of the October 2010 issue of Qué Pasa displays a Mayan Daykeeper. This image is reproduced with the permission of Grupo Que Pasa and photographer Eric Stone.
Mayan person donning a woven scarf and smoking a cigar, the traditional attire of a Mayan Daykeeper and a common ceremonial practice. This bilingual magazine is widely circulated every month in the city of Antigua Guatemala, arguably the major tourism hub for the entire highland region. However, although Antigua is overrun with tourism agencies, there are relatively few offering tours directly related to Mayan spirituality. Antigua Tours by Elizabeth Bell, one of the most expensive and well-established agencies, offers small guided tours to a nearby Rilaj Mam altar. On a few occasions, I also observed busloads of tourists at the ruins of Post-Classic Kaqchikel capital Iximche’ outside of Tecpán when I was there to participate in a ceremony. It is not unreasonable that direct participation in Mayan spirituality remains largely closed to tourists, as the Mayas are not quick to reveal this intimate part of their culture to untrustworthy strangers. Tourists’ involvement in Mayan spirituality instead generally takes on a different form in Guatemala, functioning via a construction of the Mayas’ spiritual authority. While tourists may never see what actually occurs in Mayan spiritual practices, they nevertheless seek out what they believe it to be, and they may even integrate their findings into their spiritualist worldviews. Although they are concerned with authenticity, the frequently closed nature of Mayan spirituality lends itself to allowing the perpetuation of outside perceptions instead of actual Mayan knowledge. At once elusive and alluring, spiritual tourists to Guatemala often feel that they are in pursuit of this mysterious yet possibly veracious spirituality.

61 This Elizabeth Bell is middle-aged American woman of no relation to me. She is the daughter of a former diplomat who has been living in Guatemala since she was a teenager. It is an uncanny coincidence to be sure and was often a point of confusion when I spoke with people in Antigua.
There are four ways in which this perception manifests as explicit spiritual tourism in Guatemala. First, the international view of the Mayas as spiritual people holds a certain appeal to those looking to travel to Latin America and likely attracts an unknown number of visitors. Many tourists who visit Guatemala look to participate in Spanish immersion classes, where they are able to receive the same number of classroom contact hours for approximately the same price as a public university semester course in the United States, plane ticket included. The Spanish schools are a quite popular industry in Antigua, where there are at least eight major Spanish language schools, along with a quite large but undetermined number of smaller and often short-lived schools. Most of these language institutions provide excursions and other tourism activities for their students, who are of all ages. The language school which supported my Fulbright, the Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín (PLFM), also teaches Mayan languages classes and, in addition to the standard cultural and sporting tourist excursions, will occasionally provide an opportunity for the students to participate in a Mayan ceremony (see Figure 23). Second, the foreign perception of the Mayas as possessors of an acute spirituality manifests in tourism in the form of goods for sale in the mercados típicos, typical markets. There one can buy depictions of the sacred Mayan calendar as well as nawal figures etched into agate (imitation jade), carved as a figurine, depicted on belts, or portrayed in a myriad of other creations. Mayan cosmovision is also interwoven into material cultural expression such that even a purchase of a huipil, the hand-woven shirts worn by women, will contain imagery endemic to the Mayan cosmovision.\(^{62}\) Third,

foreign tourists and ex-pats, a portion of which are of the New Age disposition, integrate a perceived Mayan spirituality into activities through which they seek spiritual transcendence. These activities are not always intrinsic to Mayan spirituality but rather integrate Mayan knowledge into other spiritual activities, in accordance with the

Figure 23. Students and staff of the Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín prepare a Mayan ceremony.
processes of the global New Age movement. Yoga retreats and yoga farms are quite common on Lake Atitlán, particularly in San Marcos La Laguna, where tourists can spend a few days partaking in the “healing energies” (“Villa Sumaya” n. pag.) of the region. Additionally, there is also a New Age center just outside of Chimaltenango which “offers visitors to Guatemala the chance to learn about the country’s Mayan ancestry, meditate in a haven of peace, recover one’s balance and reconnect to the sanctity of a natural way of life in the beauty and magic of this land” (“Parialaj” n. pag.). These are prime examples of the way the “spiritual” in spiritual tourism functions in Guatemala, as foreigners integrate Mayan spirituality into a globalized orientation which looks to transcend daily existence. Finally, there are some discrete opportunities to participate in Mayan spirituality aimed toward tourists. In these cases, the ways in which the Mayan Daykeepers themselves have chosen to use tourism to their advantage are noteworthy. This scenario is discussed at length in Section 4.4.

As Olsen and Timothy explain, “[The] search for truth, enlightenment, or an authentic experience with the divine or holy leads people to travel to sacrosanct sites that have been ritually separated from the profane space of everyday life” (3). Undeniably, as the date of 2012 approaches, Mayan spirituality has become the subject of increased interest to First World tourists. Many who come to Guatemala express intrigue in contemporary spiritual practices, and some actively seek to participate in activities which claim to tap into a spiritual realm that is uniquely Mayan. In this way, Guatemala has generated a great deal of interest to spiritual tourists, as they seek a sacred and transcendent experience, or at least a glimpse of what they assume to be an “authentic” or
“natural” way of life. The spiritual tourist desires contact with the authentic and with the primitive, operating under the assumption that it is in touch with ultimate truths. The Mayas are considered to possess a unique capability of being able to access an ancestral knowledge base, due to their sanguinary connection to its original bearers (i.e. the ancient Mayas.) Many foreign travelers consider the Maya to be bearers of this knowledge that may provide access to truisms only attainable by appealing to these forces.

4.3 The Value of 2012: Tourism and Intangible Cultural Heritage

While the field of opinions on tourism is certainly multifaceted, it is not inaccurate to state that the Kaqchikels generally take offense to the tourism industry’s appropriation of their spirituality. In the following analysis, I will primarily focus on the Kaqchikels’ response to discourse surrounding 2012, although this discussion is also relevant to touristic interest in other spiritual activities, as one could argue that 2012 has generated outside interest in Mayan spirituality in general. The topic of 2012 and tourism was addressed directly in a symposium organized by myself and Guatemalan journalist Kara Andrade, with the support of the Fulbright network. Entitled “El día y el destino: desde los derechos hasta el 2012” (“Day and Destiny: From Rights to 2012”) and held on 17 July 2010 in Antigua Guatemala, the symposium consisted of a panel of six religious and spiritual leaders. The members of the panel were three ajq’ija’ (one Kaqchikel, one K’iche’, one Ladino), a Kaqchikel Catholic priest, a Kaqchikel director of a Catholic community organization, and a ladino Evangelical pastor. This event was conceived as a public forum which would open the stage for spiritual leaders to discuss the role of

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spirituality and religion in Guatemala. Questions were submitted online before the event as well as taken from the audience in attendance. In regards to 2012, there were three important tendencies in the responses from spiritual leaders at the symposium, trends that were reflected in other interactions and interviews during my fieldwork. First, the foreign interpretations of 2012 are incorrect; second, the appropriation of Mayan spirituality for tourism is unwanted; and third, climate change and natural disasters are evidence of the approaching 2012 prophecy. I will elaborate each of these tendencies, also utilizing information from other interviews and sources, as I explain what they indicate about how the Kaqchikels of Guatemala are responding to international interest in this aspect of their spirituality.

4.3.1 “The Catastrophe of 2012 Is a Lie”: Cultural Property and Subaltern Knowledge

The general consensus of the symposium was that the interpretations of what will happen in 2012 are misinformed. Ajq’ij Carlos Alvarado stated simply, “The catastrophe of 2012 is a lie.”63 He later explained that the hype about 2012 is primarily based on ignorance; if one studies the Mayan sacred calendar in any detail at all, it is evident that not only is it circular, but counts such as the B’aqtun continue ad infinitum. The 440-year-long B’aqtun is not the largest count in the calendar, and therefore an end of a cycle of 13 of them, although the ultimate number of spiritual completion in the vigesimal Mayan number system, should not hold any particular significance. This implies that its importance is somewhat arbitrary and has more to do with the fact that we are living in a

63 “La catástrofe de 2012 es una mentira.”
time period during which 13 B’aqtun will complete, more than whether it actually bears ancestral or contemporary significance. As Kaqchikel ajq’ij Baldomero Cuma Chávez reinforced, “It’s the end of a calendar cycle, not the end of the world.” Further discussion revealed that, as in statements by other ajq’ija’ with whom I have spoken in Guatemala, the central prognostication of 2012 is not necessarily apocalyptic end times, but rather that December 21st, 2012 will signal some sort of change. Ajq’ija’ will often cite that 440 years prior to 2012 is the year 1572, which coincides not-exactly-but-well-enough with the date of the arrival of the Spanish in Guatemala in 1519. The implication is, of course, that while the past 440 years have seen the domination of the Mayas by the Spanish and contemporarily by their descendents, the ladinos, after 2012 there will be some sort of spiritual or energetic change that enables the Mayas to break free from continued discrimination and violence. It is, as one Kaqchikel ajq’ij stated in a separate interview, “the hope for transformation.” Thus the 2012 phenomenon begins to reveal its characterization as a field used to reference other matters indirectly. In this case, the contemporary claims to the meaning of 2012 are inseparable from colonialism and its continued impact in Guatemala. As they inhabit a post-colonial nation which still maintains its hierarchal social structure and denies the Mayan peoples representation, in their articulation of spiritual practices the Kaqchikels find subtle ways to respond to this continued domination.

Central to the proclamation that others simply have it wrong is a claim to ownership of the 2012 prophecies as cultural property, emphasizing the Mayas’ role as

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64 “Es el fin de un ciclo calendárico, no el fin del mundo.”
65 “La esperanza de la transformación.”
the authorities on the subject. Just as Cuma Chávez also stated that the Mayas aren’t
given many opportunities to speak about the real meaning of these spiritual
prognostications (“El día y el destino” n. pag.), the idea is that they are the experts as the
bearers of this inherited knowledge, passed down from their ancestors, which the
contemporary Mayas can choose to impart. Moreover, it is generally accepted that this
knowledge is transmitted to the present-day Mayas via an implied direct line of
communication and/or sanguinary inheritance. In this regard, the ideas of Walter Mignolo
concerning modern and colonial epistemology are useful for understanding how
knowledge is constructed and transmitted in this scenario. Mignolo is speaking from a
postcolonial perspective as he attempts to articulate and rethink the ways in which
knowledge has been produced as the process of decolonization unfolds in Latin America.
He attests that traditionally, colonized nations have been considered to be producers of
culture but not producers of knowledge (93). As he accurately indicates, the rise of
postmodernity and postcolonialism post-1945 has allowed the space for subaltern voices
to transmit their knowledge systems or epistemes when they were previously
marginalized. He qualifies the term “border gnosis” as “the subaltern reason striving to
bring to the foreground the force and creativity of knowledges demoted during a long
process of colonization of the Western hemisphere, which was at the same time the
process in which modernity and the modern Reason were constructed” (13).

Here it is apt to note that gnosis, as he explains, is a type of knowledge that is
acquired through spiritual or mystical means. In other words, it is knowledge that is
simply known without having to study it, which is an accurate description of the type of
knowledge that Mayan ajq’ija’ purport to possess. While the term “gnosis” may be applied to many religions, what is particular about Mignolo’s use is that he understands it in the context of subaltern groups who utilize their cultural systems of knowledge production in dialectic with Cartesian reason and science. Thus this previously marginalized and violently oppressed group exerts their possession of an inherited knowledge which is necessarily non-Cartesian and non-Western. More importantly, they are most often classified as the sole possessors of this knowledge due to a bloodline that connects them directly with the ancient Mayas, which therefore means that it cannot be reproduced by anyone other than themselves. Ironically, this places them in precisely the position to be attractive as an instrument of tourism: as foreigners come to the country looking for an “authentic” experience, these claims to intellectual property and authority reproduce the typecast of the ancestral, Mayan, knowledgeable “shaman.” Revisiting our definition of “spiritual” reminds us that this relatively recent concept reveals a particular interest in indigenous beliefs as it also seeks to integrate supposed true knowledge not found in religious institutions. This scheme fits neatly within the rising interest in spirituality in the past sixty years in the United States, and it at least partially explains why American tourists to a country like Guatemala would show interest in this topic.

Because the Kaqchikels understand their spiritual practices as an inheritance of ancestral “Mayan” knowledge, their spirituality is also a cultural expression. Both the Kaqchikels themselves and the tourism industry characterize Mayan spirituality as a type of knowledge produced and inherited by the Kaqchikels (or other Mayan peoples). As such, we can also situate it within a paradigm of cultural property. Bendix and Hafstein
explain that the concept of cultural property has historically been a function of nationalism, which moved artifacts between states that claimed them as restitution (6). In our contemporary context, however, cultural property has been utilized as a means for the groups whose property was adapted to nationalist projects to reclaim that property:

Cultural property is (re)claimed in the aftermath of war or colonial rule as an assertion of sovereign powers and an affirmation of cultural integrity vis-à-vis foreign invasion and foreign rule, or else in the face of globalized markets and the universalist aspirations of foreign science. In other words, claims to cultural property are a technology of sovereignty. (Bendix and Hafstein 7)

Once a tool to appropriate cultural expression for a homogenizing national formation, cultural property becomes a “technology of sovereignty” by which culture can be restored to its original possessors. In the post-colonial nation of Guatemala, Kaqchikel spiritual practices are reclaimed as the Mayan populations seek a manner through which to assert their authority over these practices and thereby assert their validity within the nation-state. Furthermore, the global tourism market in Guatemala has provoked increased instability which has stimulated Kaqchikel efforts towards revindication of what was once their cultural property. Through a kind of perverted logic, tourism provides an audience which simultaneously validates cultural practices through the acknowledgement of their authenticity, while at the same time it distorts them through misrepresentation and alteration of their original symbolic meaning. The Kaqchikels, in their attempt to reclaim their cultural property, are making a claim to possession not of an object, but of
knowledge. These efforts are playing out in the field of spiritual tourism and specifically in response to the 2012 phenomenon, wherein the Kaqchikels assert their authority over these knowledge systems.

4.3.2 “Pirates of Our Spirituality”: Authority and Agency

The second main theme to emerge from the symposium was a direct discussion surrounding the topic of tourism. Other ajq’ija’ I have spoken with in other mediums have also expressed strong viewpoints in this regard, insisting that “tourism has exploited our history and our identity, our landscape, and has not left anything for this excluded people” (Cojtí b n. pag.). A similar preoccupation on the part of the ajq’ija’ in the symposium was also evident, expressed by the second panelist to speak, again Baldomero Cuma Chávez, who referred to the ways in which Hollywood has speculated about and “taken advantage of” the 2012 concept. At another point in the discussion, K’iche’ ajq’ij Vilma Poz agreed with this sentiment, lamenting the carefree use of Mayan spiritual concepts by foreigners without their understanding what it “really” means. She analogized her statement, explaining that the multicultural nation of Guatemala has taken advantage of Mayan spirituality and turned it into a business, making those who appropriate spiritual practices in this manner little more than “pirates of our spirituality.”

While the tourism industry appropriates and assigns economic value to culture through exchange value, the Kaqchikels value their culture as inherited, veritable knowledge over which they are the authorities.

66 “piratas de nuestra espiritualidad”
Through these interactions, it is safe to posit that the Mayas feel a certain amount of disdain for the way a concept that they consider innate to their culture has been used by both the national government and international factions. Vilma Poz’s reference to the creation of a “business” which necessarily earns revenue is a clear allusion to tourism, and her pirate metaphor is quite revealing. Pirates are known for both taking what is not theirs and specifically for using stolen merchandise as a way to maintain themselves economically, through the proverbial treasure. What’s more is that pirates were deliberately employed by the British Empire most notably in the early 1600s, in which they were “highly serviceable tools in the formation of an English maritime and colonial empire” (Jowitt 2). The property claims of the empires of this time were not limited to land (although the seas later became common property, thus allowing pirates to operate with a sort of lawlessness), and maritime domination was understood as key to imperialist success (3-4). Piracy has always been, therefore, intrinsically tied to colonialist ventures of economic expansion. Furthermore, the notion of something that is pirated also suggests that it is not authentic. Guatemalans are more than familiar with pirated media and technology, as the markets are filled with kiosks selling pirated movies, music, and computer software. This analogy therefore also suggests what the panelists hinted at throughout the symposium, and what others also have suggested in my additional interviews and interactions: that the adaptation of Mayan spirituality for the purpose of tourism necessarily causes it to lose its authenticity. Appropriated for another purpose, spiritual tourism moves Mayan spirituality from the framework of a devotional practice to a type of spectacle, a simulacrum of the actual event upon which it is based. As Walter
Little also suggests when dealing with tourism more broadly (39), this is in fact how tourism as an industry operates. Tourism is only made possible through a process of commercialization which severs the ties to the meaning of the actual practice and replaces it with simulacra that, absent of its original meaning, can be consumed by anyone. In this paradigm, a participant need not be Mayan to consume Mayan spirituality, as it is not necessary to understand how that spirituality functions within the culture when viewing the practices as a tourist. Paradoxically, the desire for an encounter with authenticity by the tourist is made possible by losing that which is authentic.

Furthermore, Cuma Chávez also elaborated regarding his view on the involvement of these international actors:

Unfortunately our country is a country very sought after for its tourism. Mayan spirituality often, in this era of the 21st century, has become a tourist attraction. People from the outside have a certain motivation to discover how Mayan spirituality is dealt with in our environment. I think that it’s not bad at all that people want to get to know or be a part of this movement. The most important thing is that they respect and value the essence of this spirituality.67

He went on to clarify that when a tourist arrives to observe a public ceremony, they may take pictures without first asking the permission of the Daykeeper leading the ceremony. However, he also explained this idea in ways emic to the Mayan cosmovision. He stated

67 “Lamentablemente nuestro país es un país muy cotizado por el turismo. La espiritualidad maya muchas veces en el medio actual en el pleno siglo 21 se ha convertido como un atractivo turístico. Las personas del exterior que tienen esa motivación de conocer cómo se maneja la espiritualidad maya en nuestro medio. Yo pienso que no es nada mal que las personas quieran conocer o quieran ser parte de este movimiento. Lo más importante es que valoren y respeten la esencial de esta espiritualidad.”
that every person in the ceremony brings their own energy which influences the overall energy of the gathering. Therefore the mere presence of the foreigner, whose intentions may not be entirely in accordance with those of the Maya participants, brings an energy that can cause a degree of imbalance to the ceremony (and which the Daykeeper understands that he or she must then sense, mediate, and resolve.) Interestingly, this as well as my other interactions with the Kaqchikel reveals that they are not rejecting any and all participation by foreigners. In fact, the presence of a foreign energy which the Daykeeper must resolve further verifies the Daykeeper’s own facility in their practice, as they demonstrate that they are capable of expertly handling the energetic forces that they purport to mediate. The noteworthy claim here is that the Kaqchikels, while they condemn the appropriation of their spiritual practices for the purpose of the business of tourism, they do not entirely reject tourists. In some cases they lament their lack of courtesy and ceremonial etiquette, such as knowing not to take pictures, but at the same time they do not wholly reject the participation of foreigners in Mayan spirituality. In addition, the acceptance of foreign presence reinforces that Mayan spirituality in tourism functions via a simulacrum which allows a certain degree of universalization so that it can be applied to many people’s situations, thus making it possible for non-Mayas to participate.

In fact, many of my interactions with the Kaqchikels have been mostly inviting of my (or others’) participation as foreigners. Their welcoming attitude towards outsiders is exemplified in the multiple collaborations that they have realized with other groups. Some ajq’ija’ take advantage of the opportunity to travel to other locations in Chile or in
In the US, such as the Southwest or Hawaii. There they are invited guests of Native American groups and participate in collaborative ceremonies with the goal of achieving communion with ancestral spirits as well as among the participants. While there is certainly the attitude that there is something innately similar among various Native American groups such that their spiritual coalescence is more effective, they also welcome collaboration of well-intentioned foreigners. During Kaqchikel ceremonies it was not uncommon for participants to tell me that it was a pleasure to have my participation, explicitly stating their appreciation for the multicultural element which I contributed. Their opinions were expressed, of course, after I had arrived with the endorsement of one of the Kaqchikel participants and displayed sufficient communicative competence in the ceremony. These interactions are indicative of the way in which the spiritual beliefs of the Kaqchikels, situated within an orientation of animism which purports that all natural objects possess an energy or life-force, have influenced their interactions with outsiders. Under the assumption that every person retains a different energy, the Kaqchikels pride themselves on being accepting of humanity as a whole and better able to include other people and their religious beliefs (Ajquijay n. pag.).

Moreover, these attitudes also exemplify the Kaqchikels’ response to their increasingly globalized environment and therefore the presence of foreigners. Some ajq’ija’ view their responsibilities as not only to serve their individual community, traditionally the organizing social structure in Guatemala, but also as the manner in which they “help humanity” (Hernández n. pag.). Many provide spiritual services, such as guidance and natural remedies, to ladinos and foreigners as well as to the Mayan
populations. This is a point of pride among ajq’ija’, who view the interest of foreigners in Mayan spirituality as a form of recognition which builds a sense of value in the practices, “the practice of traditional [Mayan] medicine was left to us by our ancestors many years ago, and now we share with ladinos, indigenous and, […] on some occasions, people visit us from afar, from other countries” (Hernández n. pag.). The knowledge possessed by the Kaqchikels in this regard enables an inverted relationship of power, in which they are the authorities in control of the production and regulation of knowledge instead of the usual First World agents. As they also believe that international participation in their spirituality will promote national recognition of the legitimacy of these practices, they utilize the tourism market to foment their goal of recognition and equality. Kaqchikel spirituality, not an isolated religious function but rather an intricately interwoven social performance, necessarily functions within a global perspective, an opportunity which they have employed to their advantage. As the New Age movement has recognized and capitalized upon, the contemporary world has provoked an increased interest in individual quests for spiritual meaning. The Kaqchikels have also commanded the idea that “spirituality is universal. It’s for everyone, like the sun” and that “everyone is looking for spiritual help” (Rodas Hernández n. pag.), adapting their cosmovision vis-à-vis a progressively globalized worldview. As in other moments of my analysis, spirituality reveals itself as a unique and important barometer of social interactions and cultural adaptation.

At first, it may seem a dichotomous contradiction to claim that the Mayas both reject and accept tourism. What is interesting is that, while they do claim that their
spirituality is ancestral and inherent to the Mayan populations, the Mayas are not claiming that their traditions are or even should be unmediated by outside forces. Cuma Chávez stated in the symposium that the real question should be “what do the Mayas say?” because they are the ones who should be credited with the creation of these spiritual beliefs. Vilma Poz reiterated a similar sentiment when she declared, “We live it, we feel it,” reinforcing the idea that Mayan spirituality is found innately and mystically within the Mayan culture. Throughout the discussion, it became clear that the Mayas view themselves as the authorities on the subject, and not merely that, but also as the group which owns almost a copyright, possessing these ideas as a type of cultural property. Their concern is maintaining their status as experts and the respect for what they view as sacred ancestral knowledge. This discourse is fundamentally an offspring of authority, reviving the model of Weber’s “traditional authority,” which finds its validation in generational inheritance. That is to say, while modernity generally has relied increasingly more on authority extracted from the Cartesian process of reason and formal education, the Kaqchikels have responded with an assertion of traditional authority, which claims its source from inheritance of ancestral, non-Western knowledge systems. To revisit Mignolo’s terminology, just as the Kaqchikels possess a type of gnosis which conveys a knowledge that is not Cartesian, they use this claim to traditional authority to trump foreign attempts to possess that knowledge.

These claims to knowledge reveal that the Kaqchikels and the tourism industry use culture differently. George Yúdice explains that the function of culture in the capital-generating industry of tourism is a relatively recent and world-wide phenomenon,
resulting from the need to legitimize culture based on utility following the US civil rights movement. This shift in the acceptance of national culture as plural, as well as globalization, made it problematic to continue to affirm nationalist sentiment based on culture since homogeneity was impossible, thus generating the need to legitimize culture in other utilitarian ways (11). This utilitarian legitimization has primarily been achieved by generating economic value. Beginning in the 1990s, cultures international and domestic began to attract the interest of banking investors which saw an undeveloped area for potential economic gain: “Heritage gives value. Part of our joint challenge is to analyze the local and national returns on investments which restore and draw value from cultural heritage – whether it is built or living cultural expression, such as indigenous music, theater, crafts” (World Bank qtd in Yúdice 13). This is a mutation of culture which construes it as a resource (Yúdice 16), a change which has been adapted to fit the changing demands and desires of the global economy. In fact, this is how culture enters into the global economy. In late capitalism, not only material goods but even (and perhaps especially) culture begins to acquire value. As culture becomes commodified, it behaves like other forms of commodity and becomes a resource capable of possessing value. In free enterprise, value is created through exchange; a commodity’s worth is determined by how much of another commodity it can be exchanged for. Thus value is always “objectified as capital,” and culture must become capital so that it can be exchanged with other types of capital in the form of money, labor, or commodities (Lee 16).
Understanding the production which makes value from culture requires an understanding of social signs, and my claim is that we can evaluate the dynamics of spiritual tourism as conflicting constructions of social signs. Simply stated, culture acquires its ability to possess value through the formation of social signs. Like other semantic signs, the social sign simply indicates the relationship between the signifier and the signified, the object (or practice, in the case of culture) and its meaning. As Lee elaborates, cultural value is generated upon society’s creation and acceptance of the relationship of social signs to one another:

Cultural value may be defined as the objectification of relationships of cultural difference which materialize as cultural objects and practices. Similar to the model of economic value outlined by Marx, cultural value too never appears in its ‘pure’ or abstract form, and it cannot be recognized as such prior to the moment of its materialisation as a social sign. We may say, therefore, that cultural value is always objectified in the form of the social sign. […] It is in this moment of symbolic exchange, or in the moment of equivalence that exists in the inter-articulation of social signs, each of which is the bearer of a cultural value, that social meaning is produced and cultural value is reproduced. (161)

Thus value is only created in the relationship between and the exchange of objects or objectified practices. For this to be possible in the realm of culture, a cultural practice must be made into a commodity, as without that transformation its value in the capitalist market cannot be determined since it would not be able to be exchanged. Examining our
specific case of Kaqchikel spiritual practices, we can understand that there are, therefore, at least two different agents that are creating social signs. The tourism industry, which consists of interactions both in the national and international fields, fabricates social signs as it utilizes Mayan spirituality in its campaign, attracting foreigners to Guatemala as they seek the source of ancient spiritual “wisdom.” The Kaqchikels, however, have not been idle in their reaction to this process. As evidenced in the statements by Kaqchikel ajq’ija’, the issue is not that they seek to extirpate foreign influence and foreign tourism. In fact, in many cases, they welcome it as an added source of revenue for them in a country with both an informal and depressed economy. The Kaqchikels instead seek to create their own social signs of Mayan spirituality. Mayan spirituality is still signified, materialized, and even capitalized (see Section 4.4), but the Kaqchikels stake a claim as the rightful agents of the creation of the image that is transferred to the market. Much like the familiar trope of the Latin American Calibán, who uses the language of the conquerors to curse them, the Kaqchikels subvert the system by using the system itself.

The Kaqchikels claim to possess their spirituality via inheritance, endowed to them by their ancestors. While heritage is the proof of their authority, the Kaqchikels do not claim it as some lost artifact; rather, what they claim is authority over that heritage. This reveals a fundamental difference between the Western, tourist-centered construction of Kaqchikel heritage and the one that they themselves construct of what they consider their herencia. The tourism industry utilizes a framework which builds value based on heritage as an artifact of universal appeal, a process which has often been facilitated by the concept of intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO has been a driving force in the
international efforts both to define and to preserve world heritage, as the organization seeks to identify and safeguard cultural knowledge worldwide. Although Kaqchikel spiritual practices are not on the official list of world heritage, UNESCO has produced reports about Guatemala. Moreover, the touristic approach to these types of practices tends to view them in a similar manner as the process by which intangible cultural heritage is defined, which identifies practices that are “valuable” and of interest to the human community. For these reasons, it is a useful paradigm to help us understand foreign constructions of Mayan spirituality.

UNESCO serves us with a general description of intangible cultural heritage as “living expressions and the traditions that countless groups and communities worldwide have inherited from their ancestors and transmit to their descendants, in most cases orally” (“Intangible Heritage” n. pag.) At the root of this often problematic paradigm is a question that revolves around how value is assigned to a set of practices. The concept of intangible cultural heritage operates with the assumption that practices are valuable because they possess an “authenticity” which would assumedly be lost if not preserved, in the same manner that a tangible artifact could be lost. However, in assigning value in this way, it facilitates conflicting uses of the image portrayed by tourism and the one communicated by the Mayan communities themselves. The practices and public image transmitted of the Mayas serve tourism through their economic exchange value, drawing foreigners to the country as they are able to purchase an “authentic experience,” either through tours (services) or goods. The value of these practices to the tourism industry

68 see Núñez de Rodas (1981)
resides in their classification as an endangered artifact, the principal assumption behind the Western construct of intangible cultural heritage. Meanwhile, the pan-Maya cultural movement seeks to reassign a contemporarily relevant cultural value, a process which generates valorization as the Mayas (re)possess their authority on a set of practices of which they are the genealogical inheritors.

With this framework we can begin to unravel the ways in which intangible cultural heritage serves the tourism industry as a means to construct value. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains that in the age of tourism, heritage-as-history has become central to minority groups’ identities (54). While other forces, namely violence and discrimination, have threatened the livelihood of the Kaqchikels, they seek to bind and validate their group through a common heritage. Furthermore, the heightened interest in the process of making heritage, most notably through the formalized procedures of UNESCO but also in a broader array of informal instances, is a byproduct of the contemporary economic climate. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett elaborates:

> While persistence in old life ways may not be economically viable and may well be inconsistent with economic development and with national ideologies, the valorization of those life ways as heritage (and integration of heritage into economies of cultural tourism) is economically viable, consistent with economic development theory, and can be brought into line with national ideologies of cultural uniqueness and modernity. Fundamental to this process is the heritage economy as a modern economy. (61)
The Kaqchikels now find themselves under a continued threat, not necessarily of military violence,69 but rather of an ideologically violent process which appropriates the symbolism of their spiritual practices and their culture for the purpose of consumption. The tourism industry needs their heritage in order to continue to drive the economic industry, while at the same time the Kaqchikels claim ownership of this heritage that has been “pirated” from them.

It is not unexpected that we would see from the Kaqchikels a cultural approach to respond to these capitalist ventures within their country. As Dorothy Noyes elaborates in discussing UNESCO’s treatment of intangible cultural heritage:

Groups that have suffered discrimination and indignity naturally seek to revalorize their own experience. […] Furthermore, subaltern actors tend to invoke their cultural identities when seeking recognition or political opportunities because other idioms of valorization, such as citizenship or professional qualifications, may not be available. Marked by culture, they must make culture the lever to pull themselves upward. (“Traditional Culture” 1-2)

As they are not permitted entry as benefactors of the money-making machine of tourism, groups such as the Kaqchikels seek another means of valorization. This expands on our previous discussion of the value held in cultural practices. While the capitalist tourism industry both interpolates and appropriates the object of cultural production (the Mayas and their spirituality), the Kaqchikels respond by staking claim to the only means

69 Although make no mistake that Guatemala is still plagued with violence, from vigilante justice to drug cartel-related murders.
available to them: their cultural heritage. This process exemplifies the difference between the Kaqchikels’ and tourism’s use of heritage. The Kaqchikels are not preserving an inert heritage from the past, but rather they inherit a dynamic set of practices that are relevant to both their daily and future ways of life.

4.3.3 “Because of Capitalism, We Are Exhausting Mother Earth”: The Changing Climate of Culture

At this juncture, it is perhaps apt to note the apparent contradiction that Kaqchikel ajq’ija make in claiming that 2012 is “a lie” while also asserting their knowledge that the doomsday is approaching. We should situate these claims in two ways. First, we must remember, as stated in the introduction to this chapter, that every ajq’ij has a different opinion on the meaning of 2012. There is no doctrine for Mayan spirituality and no central authority issuing decrees, so conflicting opinions between ajq’ija’ are inevitable and are indeed the nature of the practice. Second, the implication of the previously quoted statements that 2012 is a lie or a misunderstanding about the end of the world were a response to outside interpretations of this date. The continued attempt to prove 2012 by Mayan ajq’ija’, therefore, further reinforces their claim to authority, as they insist that they know best. The lie is not necessarily 2012; rather, the lie is outsiders’ interpretations of 2012.

The last major topic discussed in the symposium was climate change and natural disasters. It is very common for climactic events to be given as evidence of the approaching date of 2012: the doomsday must be coming because we experience more
and more apocalyptic phenomena. When discussing the approaching doomsday, it is often implied that we are bringing this all on ourselves. The Kaqchikels will explain that these natural disasters are a direct result of the way humanity has taken advantage of the Earth’s natural resources. They usually refer to the most recent news stories of hurricanes and earthquakes (in 2010 it was the earthquakes in Chile and Haiti and tropical storm Agatha in Guatemala) as evidence that “the planet is complaining about the wrongdoings that man has created, or carved, into the environment” (“El día y el destino” n. pag.).

Despite the insistence of certain political factions, climate change is generally considered both a scientific fact and a byproduct of our ever-more industrialized existence. If we examine the discourse of natural disasters that often appears in discussions with the Kaqchikels about 2012, we can also understand 2012 as a means not just to respond to, but also to make use of this ecological and scientific reality. As natural disasters resulting from weather and seismic events are easy to observe, it is not difficult seemingly to find evidence that points to the conflict between man and nature that has arisen as industrialization has ramped up and required the use of more resources.

The scenario of climate change thus becomes the stage for the Kaqchikels to play out their retort to the tourism industry of their country. To elaborate, I will refer to a public ceremony I observed at Iximche’, the archeological site of the Post-Classic period Kaqchikel capital that is now a national park. Public ceremonies are led by the spiritual leaders of the community, of Tecpán in this case, which is adjacent to Iximche’ and considered an important center of Kaqchikel spiritual activity. This is one of the public ceremonies that is held regularly to mark important dates in the kaqchikel calendar.

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70 “Es que el planeta se está quejando de los males que el hombre mismo ha creado, o ha esculpido, en su entorno.”
ceremonies I discussed in Chapter 2. It was a seed blessing that took place on 21 March 2010, the Spring Equinox, as the rainy season drew near. There were perhaps 100 or more attendees (mostly Mayan but also ladino government officials), and about seven or so Mayan Daykeepers who led the ceremony. As they performed rituals based on the burning of natural elements in a fire, they also gave extensive speeches, a display of communicative competence that is common among the Kaqchikels. As the central theme of the day was agriculture and a blessing for the growth of these crops, the topic of climate and soil quality was also central. One ajq’ij discussed at length the role of humans in the maintenance of the land, proclaiming at one point in his speech, “Because of capitalism, we are exhausting Mother Earth.”71 Statements that reprimand the exploitation of natural resources are common among the Kaqchikels with whom I have spoken, and this is particularly true in the case of Tecpán, which has been the ground for recent debate surrounding the implementation of contracted government extraction of resources by foreign companies.

There is a subtle dialogue here. While spiritual beliefs cannot be proven scientifically by their very nature as faith-based phenomena, the Kaqchikels can point to natural disasters as evidence of the truth of their prophecies. Although not everyone will believe in the experience of Mayan spirituality, everyone can believe in the scientifically provable experience of natural disasters that are, moreover, not solely occurring in Guatemala and are extensively covered by international news media. The “proof” of 2012 occurs worldwide, an assertion which allows the Kaqchikels to position themselves in the

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71 “A causa del capitalismo, estamos agotando la Madre Tierra.”
authoritative seat as possessors of knowledge not accessible to Western actors.
Predicating this assertion that natural disasters prove the forthcoming 2012 doomsday is the assumption that “Mother Nature” is in direct conflict with the process of the extraction of resources, a result of industrialization and the capitalist economic system which drives societies towards development. As expressed in the July 17th symposium as well as many other interactions with members of the Kaqchikel community, the message is that capitalist and therefore inextricably foreign ventures in Guatemala are fundamentally damaging both ecologically and, in the subtext, culturally. Coupled with the appropriation of natural resources is the implied appropriation of cultural resources, also by international actors. One reference to exploitation correlates with another, as the Kaqchikels disavow the appropriation of their inherited cultural knowledge. Their authority on the subject of the 2012 prophecies is the way they fight the capitalist system that foments tourism, giving natural disasters as proof when they cannot provide any evidence that would otherwise convince the scientifically (that is to say, Cartesian and therefore Western) minded. In this way the inherited knowledge of the ancient Mayas, adapted by the contemporary Kaqchikels, finds a means to contradict the dominant discourse. Scientific empirical evidence becomes the tool with which the Kaqchikels can verify the truth of their prophecies, proving not merely a singular warning to humanity, but rather also validating the whole of the Mayan knowledge system itself. They are able to use their traditional authority, contracted through the transmission of a subaltern episteme found in ancient Mayan wisdom, as their linchpin to claim valorization of their culture.
4.4 The Telescoping of Cultural Capital

While the Kaqchikels utilize the public tourism stage to stake a claim as the authoritative creators of Mayan spirituality, there is, furthermore, a tangential process occurring simultaneously in the Kaqchikel community. Lacking many monetary resources with which to support their families, Guatemalans often display ingenuity in creating economic opportunities. As foreign tourism is an unavoidable presence in the Kaqchikel region, many spiritual practitioners have utilized this increased access to global markets to invent creative solutions to their fundamental economic needs of providing food and clothing for their families, expanding the construction of their home (a process that is often piecemeal in Guatemala, as many people add rooms and levels to their house as additional funds become available), and so forth. It is important to remember that while the Kaqchikels generally disavow the tourism industry’s use of their spirituality for its own purposes, they do not entirely disavow tourists. Instead, their claim to authority on matters of spirituality that are of interest to foreigners serves to facilitate their placement as the active agents in the production and transmission of the knowledge found within Mayan spirituality. By becoming active producers of their own social signs, the Kaqchikels may attempt to shift the balance of power, as they move from passive recipients to active agents.

According to the World Bank, the number of tourists arriving in Guatemala has been steadily rising at a fairly rapid rate since about 2004 and was reported at almost 1.9 million in 2010. Contact with tourists in the Kaqchikel region, which abuts the capital and includes the major tourism hub of Antigua Guatemala, is particularly common. Given
this scenario of constant contact between the Kaqchikels and foreign tourists, some Kaqchikel ajq’ija’ have either begun to or have shown interest in tourism-related business ventures. Of particular note are a team of a Kaqchikel ajq’ij and his assistant, an artist working mostly in wood carvings of Mayan symbols. They perform a monthly ceremony at one of the numerous restaurants that cater to foreigners in Antigua. This event is a truncated version of a Mayan ceremony, lasting about forty-five minutes as opposed to the usual two hours. Observers sit in the area immediately surrounding the restaurant’s interior patio, and the ajq’ij maintains the ceremonial fire while his assistant explains various aspects of the Mayan cosmovision to the audience. Towards the end of the ceremony, each audience member is given a handful of sesame seeds and small pieces of pom resin to add to the fire. Upon the completion of the event, the two men request donations from the audience and thank the crowd for their participation.

This scene, when interpreted as an act of tourism, is interesting for two reasons. First, there was a discrete and easily identifiable audience of foreigners, a demographic that is abundant in Antigua, making this ceremony an intentional spectacle. This is an important deviation from the usual Mayan ceremony, which sometimes acts as a spectacle when it is intended to have community participation but most often acts as an event of a personal nature, specific to the individual participants, even when conducted in a public space, not to mention the assumption that the participants will likely be Mayas themselves. To contrast, take for example the Mayan invocation that Daykeeper Baldomero Cuma Chávez performed at our El día y el destino symposium. He was receptive to the idea of doing the invocation, and before the event he even asked me to
buy candles of the six key colors utilized in ceremonies. Nevertheless, during the symposium itself he expressed verbally that it was unusual (and perhaps somewhat uncomfortable) for him to do an invocation before an audience, since the environment is typically more intimate. Cuma Chávez’s invocation at the symposium was an intentionally self-conscious act with an audience due to the nature of the event, and he noted that this spectacle was strange to him. In the case of the aforementioned partners, however, an audience’s gaze is explicitly and overtly what they were seeking, as their ceremony was geared and advertised towards tourists.  

Second, the concurrent explanation of Mayan cosmovision, narrated by the artist assistant throughout, indicates the event’s nature as a spectacle for tourists who, presumably lacking knowledge of the basics of Mayan spiritual beliefs, needed to have the meaning of these actions explained to them. Additionally, the two partners utilized the common elements of a Mayan ceremony, such as incense, alcohol, and candles, but they also drew particular attention to what might be easily identified to a foreign eye as salient “Mayan” symbols. The assistant made specific references to other sources of ancestral knowledge, including the Popol Wuj and the Mayan Codices. In addition, there was also a wooden statue of Rilaj Mam carved by the artist himself, which he explained represented the “wisdom of thousands of years.” He characterized Rilaj Mam as the personage responsible for upholding the practice of Mayan spirituality so that it was not “lost during the conquest.” This claim to ancestral wisdom was further reinforced by the declaration of the familial line of inheritance of this particular ajq’ij. In these ways, the

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72 This restaurant advertises in the local tourist magazines, and one of the co-owners even asked me for any photographs or video I had of the ceremonies I observed there so they could use it to promote the events.
intentions of the discourse of the ceremony were centered on creating an image of Mayan spirituality grounded in ancestral knowledge. Drawing on our previous understanding of the production of social signs by utilizing cultural heritage, we can therefore understand these to be explicit ways in which this ajq’ij and his assistant attempt to produce these signs. In the presence of outsiders, these two men endeavor to articulate the salient symbols of Mayan spirituality, drawing the connection between contemporary and ancient practices. In this regard, this spectacle is truly tourism, as it reinforces the claim to heritage and traditional wisdom that is the object of the tourism industry’s fetishization of Mayan culture.

However, there is a key difference between the tourism industry’s appropriation of traditional knowledge and the transmission of this knowledge by these spiritual practitioners. Once again the question is centered on that of authority and agency, as the Kaqchikels consciously participate in tourism as long as they are the agents controlling the production of cultural signs. While the Kaqchikels do not appreciate outside forces making their spirituality a spectacle, they will sometimes create the spectacle themselves. In this manner, they control the construction of the imagery, or social signs, of their practices. Moreover, we can understand this phenomenon in light of Gayatri Spivak’s term strategic essentialism, a somewhat common occurrence in which members of a marginalized group seize control of the production of the imagery of their often folklorized group. Although Spivak has disavowed the term since coining it (although not the concept), I still find it useful and accurate in this scenario. Marginalized groups essentialize their own group for a specific and strategic purpose, in this case in order to
control the production of the public image of their group. Excluded from the monetary benefits of national tourism, which has little trickle down into the lower class, these peoples display a great degree of ingenuity in creating alternative means to gain access to the economic resources by using their own culture. Thus their strategy is two-fold: strategic essentialization not only makes possible a recuperation of the agency of the Kaqchikels, but it also allows them to access the economic resources which they are denied but help produce.

The concept of authenticity provides elucidation of the difference in the Kaqchikel representation of their spirituality and the representation presented by the tourism industry. An authentic experience of another culture is, after all, what the tourist seeks. Due to this study’s folkloristic turn, materials from that field may assist in understanding how authenticity is constructed in this scenario. Although the following criteria refer to storytelling specifically, that oral genre shares characteristics with the performative practices explained in these chapters. Indeed, much of folklore is concerned with situating narratives within a specific social and cultural function, and in that regard Kaqchikel spiritual practices are certainly accurately described by this definition. The term “authenticity” itself has a peppered history, as it has been employed throughout the modern era for various national as well as scholarly projects. Perhaps the most useful understanding of the scientific construction of authenticity for our purposes comes from Regina Bendix’s explanation of the Grimm brothers’ conceptualization: “[…] authenticity has been divided into two parts. The texts are externally authentic, verified by the internal honesty of the people who transmit the texts. While the people’s honesty
cannot necessarily be preserved, the textual authenticity of the tales and poetry can be” (54). In this interpretation, texts (or in our case, performative spiritual practices) are construed as authentic in two ways. They are authentic because the people are “honest,” that is to say that they believe in the communally shared ideology of these texts and/or have an affective relationship to them. Second, for the Grimms working on the basis of folk tale archetypes, there was an assumed original on which variations were based; thus the second measure of authenticity was that they need be accurate (or modified) continuations of an original text. These two litmus tests for authenticity lend the interpretation that “the Grimms’ goal was the genuine representation of an authentic cultural past” (Bendix 62).

In the case of our example of ceremonial practices, outsiders accept their authenticity for the dual reasons above: the practitioners are “genuine” i.e. knowledgeable, having inherited a sort of genealogical gnosis, and the authenticity of these practices as representative of a cultural past is, often exceedingly, well established. These tacitly understood displays of good faith among the practitioners of Mayan spirituality in the Kaqchikel community are the criteria utilized in Western constructions of authenticity. Displays of honesty and faithfulness to a cultural past are precisely what the tourism industry seeks to emulate in the experience it provides for foreigners, a process which builds the idea of “authenticity” based on practices that are, among the Kaqchikels, simply the way things are done. It is fitting to mention that the concept of authenticity, as Regina Bendix (1992) explains, was employed during the nation-building projects in Europe, which relied on “authentic” folktales to construct a nationalist spirit.
This is not unlike the usage of folk practices contemporarily, which are utilized by national agents not only to continue to create a national imaginary but also to support nations economically. Therefore, due to its innately Western perspective which adapts local practices into its global designs, authenticity is ultimately a performative and ideological construction. Indeed the concept of authenticity in performative genres, among local performers without a tourist audience, is notoriously (and rightly) difficult to ascertain as a result of the innate flexibility of this form of expression. Authenticity, when understood by its rigid Cartesian definition, functions as a tool of tourism with which to construct an experience that, in reality, cannot be reproduced artificially.

What is interesting about a scenario such as the tourist ceremony is the duplicitous usage it lends to the idea of authenticity. On the one hand, practices such as these depend on their authenticity to maintain their attractiveness to tourists, evident in the reinforcement of the transmission of ancestral knowledge. This means that the Kaqchikels are, in fact, utilizing this notion of authenticity to their advantage. On the other hand, while these practices do not become unauthentic, their authenticity is deliberately displaced. The practitioners remain honest and the ancestral authenticity is still intact. However, as the practice of Mayan spirituality is removed from its usual venue and utilized for a different purpose - namely, to earn money through the exchange of cultural capital for monetary capital - the accepted authenticity within the Kaqchikel community shifts along with its intentions. No longer singularly a self-referential and closed act of communal shared practice, the tourist ceremony transforms into the spectacle of an outside gaze. Mayan spirituality is still consumed by the foreigner, but the
social sign that is consumed has been produced by the Kaqchikels instead of non-Mayan actors. The Kaqchikels are able to create new ways to gain monetary resources by utilizing the tourism industry, a process in which they become authoritative agents and producers of social signs.

In order to accumulate foreign interest in their practices, some Kaqchikel ajq’ij are turning to the internet to expand what functions, perhaps best expressed in business terms, as their consumer base. The same ajq’ij who performs the restaurant ceremonies approached me about one month before the termination of my Fulbright to ask whether I would be able to help him establish an online presence to attract more tourists to his services. He referenced a celebration and ceremony he had scheduled for the end of the month, suggesting that perhaps electronic means of communication would spread the word to more people. I stated that a Facebook account, a growing social media form in Guatemala, would be a good place to start, as well as a Twitter account. I gave him the websites and suggested that he make an account and take a look around, then call me so that we could meet to fill out the specifics. While he never contacted me to help him set up these social media accounts, his intentions lend themselves to an understanding of the manner in which the Kaqchikels are attempting to utilize the already established field of interest in Mayan spirituality for their economic benefit. Because all ceremonies, celebrations, and spiritual consultations assume that the participants will be making offerings in honor of the pertinent ancestors invoked that day, monetary exchange will increase as attendance increases. In a similar enterprising venture, I recently became aware of a Kaqchikel ajq’ij advertising the artistic production of individual Mayan
glyphs, which are based on a person’s date of birth and purport to reveal their characteristics and destiny, for varying fees.

The increased international accessibility of social media also provides a field for Mayan aq’ija’ to project their views and their voice. Lacking entry into the official national or touristic discourses, they have begun to make use of the accessibility, and visibility, of social media in order to disseminate their ideas and assert their authority over Mayan spirituality and 2012. The most salient example I have found is Julio Menchú, a K’iche’ ajq’ij who has both a blog and a Facebook account simply named Espiritualidad Maya de Guatemala. He describes himself as “an ajq’ij or Spiritual Guide that seeks to transmit our culture and spirituality by means [of social media]”73 and who purports to be “working on a project about Mayan spirituality so that our cultural and spiritual knowledge is not lost.”74 He frequently writes blog posts which include detailed explanations of various aspects of Mayan spirituality as well as posts images and quotations to Facebook that attest to the veracity of the perspective of the Mayan aq’ija’ regarding 2012. He explains the reasoning behind his use of social media:

I have used the space of social networking to promote our spirituality and, at the same time, as a platform to defend the human rights of the indigenous peoples […]. It bothered me to see people who were not Mayan talking about fabrications […] and presenting them as true, and

73 “Soy un Ajq’ij o Guía Espiritual que busca por estos medios difundir nuestra cultura y Espiritualidad”
74 “Estoy trabajando una investigación sobre espiritualidad Maya para que nuestro conocimiento cultural y espiritual no se pierda.”
that they even portrayed themselves as experts… And so I began to use this medium to tell everyone what we think, as the contemporary Mayas.75

This ajq’ij, in addition to the aforementioned examples of other ajq’ija’, has utilized the capabilities of social media and mass communication to promote and circulate their message of authority that is not given a space in national discourse. For the purpose of this chapter, I will focus on the “postales”, postcards, which he has posted regarding

![Hacia el Oxlaju B'aqtun](http://espiritualidadmaya.blogspot.com/)

Figure 24. Definition of ajq’ij. All post cards reproduced with the permission of Julio Menchú.

75 “He tomado este espacio de las redes sociales para promover nuestra espiritualidad y a la vez como plataforma de defensa de los derechos humanos de los pueblos indígenas […]. Me molestaba ver que gente que no era maya hablaba de inventos […] y los daba por ciertos, y que encima se la llevaban de expertos... Entonces comencé a usar estos medios para dar a conocer lo que pensamos los mayas actuales.”
Oxlajuj (13) B’aqtun, the calendrical cycle which completes on December 21st 2012. These postcards often cite texts such as the *Popol Wuj* and the *Chilam B’alam* and emphasize the Mayan epistemologies contained therein. I will analyze 3 of the 19 postcards available in relation to the claims of this dissertation.

Figure 24 shows a direct reference to the September 2011 legislation (Acuerdo 981-2011) which allows Mayan ajq’ija’ to enter known sacred spaces for the purposes of realizing Mayan ceremonies. A small step in a country that largely disenfranchises its Mayan populations, Acuerdo 981-2011 provides at least documentation and law which supports the rights of Mayan ajq’ija’ to practice publicly. This legislation also supplies a definition of relevant terms, one of which is shown on this postcard: “An Ajq’ij or Spiritual Guide is the person that serves as an intermediary between the God, nature, and the individual, who exercises his function as such, by an innate means, for the benefit of the collectivity.” This statement affirms claims that have been made in this chapter and others, namely, that the ajq’ij serves as an intermediary between the ancestral spirits and humans, that the ability to do this innate to the individual, and that these practices are strongly rooted to a sense of community. The image in the background is a Mayan ceremony performed at night; the fire is certainly the most notable characteristic, but the ceremonial materials discussed in Chapter 2 are also visible, most notably candles as well as outlying flower petals. The purpose of this postcard seems to be twofold. On the one hand, it portrays “accurate” Mayan spirituality by use of images of actual Mayan practices, precisely the goal that Julio expressed in his communication with me. On the
other hand, it seeks to affirm the authority of the ajq’ija’, which, however superficially, has in this instance at least been seemingly affirmed by official legislation.

Figure 25. 500 Years of Resistance.

The second postcard, Figure 25, is most notable in the way it references the cultural past of the Mayas while also utilizing that cultural heritage as motivation for present goals. The central text reads:

They wrote their knowledge in Codices and they expressed their history on stelae. Their constructions speak to great architectural and astronomical knowledge, the remains of which are today covered in dense tropical jungle, their Gods silenced forever… But despite the fact that they wanted to kill our branches, our roots continue living…
The image of an ancient Mayan artifact to the left of the text speaks to this same harkening of a glorious past built by the ancient Mayas that, despite the efforts of the Spanish conquerors, continues on in the practices of the contemporary Mayan peoples. Also of note is the text in red below the main text, which reads “Unified and strengthened… 500 years of Resistance.” This concept of cultural resistance is precisely what these chapters have sought to demonstrate and to explain. By validating and praising their ancestral history, the Mayas are able to resist centuries of acculturation and attempted cultural extermination, thereby finding validation in a society that does not generally value them otherwise through the usual means of social equality and political representation.

The last postcard, Figure 26, references the figure Rilaj Mam, the subject of Chapter 3 of this dissertation. As with the other postcards, its title is “Towards the 13 B’aqtun,” indicating that these messages intend to interpolate the discourse surrounding 2012. The painting is an original work of art depicting Rilaj Mam, and its text reads:

RjlLaj Mam – The Great Grandfather – called Maximón, is an ancestral Divinity as old as the existence of the original peoples. It is said that after teaching the people about time and how to be in equilibrium on the face of the earth, he went away to the mountain, burned his pom, made his ceremonial invocations, took fermented honey, and disappeared into atemporality; he did not die like common beings because he was a guardian, an entity, and for that reason he simply dispersed when he had
completed his mission in this historical time. He is remembered every October 28\textsuperscript{th} (by a mistaken tradition) and on 13 Tz’i’.

This perspective confirms much of what was discussed in Chapter 3. Most notably, it expresses that Rilaj Mam was an aq’ij himself who predated the arrival of the Spanish and that, as is endemic to the trickster figures, he did not die. The text here even rebuts the common practice of revering him on October 28\textsuperscript{th}, the day on which Saints Simon and Jude are revered in the Catholic Church. Julio Menchú calls this a “widely accepted confusion.” Furthermore, the ideas here reinforce my claim regarding Rilaj Mam’s importance: regardless of his actual origins, Rilaj Mam represents something very

Figure 26. Rilaj Mam postcard.
specific for the Mayan peoples of Guatemala. He is a Mayan ancestor and, perhaps more importantly, is the preeminent example of a Maya who has been successful in the preservation of his traditional spirituality. Much as the postcard in Figure 25 states, Rilaj Mam metaphorically is “resistance” to Spanish conquest, a resistance that has been occurring for 500 years, represented in contemporary times by opposition to continued foreign intervention in Guatemala through capitalist business ventures and tourism. It is highly important that we note that the popularity of Rilaj Mam has arisen during a time when the Mayan populations experience both physical and symbolic violence; crime rates and impunity are undoubtedly high, but they also experience a symbolic violence which aims to appropriate and misconstrue their knowledge for touristic ends.

Through virtual means which provide them a space to speak, the Mayas attempt to repossess symbols of their spirituality that have been taken and adapted by foreign entities, from the Catholic Church to the Guatemalan nation-state to the tourism industry. Just as the discourse analyzed from the El día y el destino symposium clearly portrayed that the Mayas assert themselves as the authorities on these subjects and the bearers of its wisdom, here too these pictorial images also seek to set the record straight on this issues by telling “everyone,” as Julio Menchú stated, what they’re really about. While these are my limited experiences of the adaptation of electronic networking for the purpose of selling Mayan spirituality and/or its symbolism, there are certainly other examples. These ventures illustrate the ways in which spiritual practitioners are not just adapting to but
also utilizing the new and multifaceted opportunities provided to them by the global tourism market.

The contemporary social milieu of Guatemala has resulted in an inevitable interaction between Kaqchikel ajq’ija’s practice and the tourism market. As economic opportunities present themselves in the form of an exchange with foreigners, many community members have sought ways to benefit from these interactions. This was poignantly exhibited in an interaction with a Kaqchikel ajq’ij with whom I was particularly familiar but had yet to talk with formally during my field experience. After months of circumvention and missed connections, I finally attempted to make definitive contact for an interview a few weeks before I was scheduled to leave the country. My request was answered with a petition for $100 USD for an hour-long interview and an explanation that this was merely an attempt to “valorize Mayan knowledge.” As I explained that I was not permitted to pay for interviews due to my university IRB protocol and the risk of coercive sums of money, I was still denied a formal interview and given the explanation that “I am only valorizing what is inherent to me, and what has been exploited and speculated about by the world.”

While at the time I considered this interaction a failure on my part in the establishment of personal relationships or at the very least the establishment of rapport, I could nevertheless recognize its insight into the dynamics taking place between the ajq’ija’s practice of Mayan spirituality and the international tourism market of production and consumption. What makes this example ideal is that it explicitly demonstrates the production of the two different types of value which I discussed in Section 4.3.2 The
majority of efforts by the Kaqchikels have been to valorize their culture through reclamation of the accuracy of the knowledge that produced the 2012 prophecies, an episteme which is understood to extend to the contemporary Mayas through an inimitable line of inheritance. Thus value is held in Mayan spirituality’s characterization as cultural heritage that still exists among the contemporary Mayas. While my failed interaction with this particular ajq’ij revealed this same attitude that Mayan spirituality was “something inherent” to this person and their culture, at the same time, the assignation of value lay elsewhere: in economic gains. The reference to “valorization” thus bears its double meaning, masquerading as cultural capital when, in reality, it refers to monetary capital.

In discussing this particular interaction, as well as my other examples of the Kaqchikels’ attempt to enter into the tourism market, I want to be clear that my goal is not to take a critical stance of these actions in the least. We should understand the continued transmission of cultural traditions not as the reproduction of an inherited practice that maintains the “purity” of its original manifestations, but rather as the constantly changing offspring of a continuous interaction and dialogue of marginalized groups and their increasingly globalized milieu. Given that orientation, these serve as examples of the adaptiveness and ingenuity of the Kaqchikels. With the understanding that they must find a way to survive economically, we witness a strategic usage of their cultural resources, an opportunity provided to them through tourism. The foreign gaze is, in fact, vital to this process, as it provides a form of recognition as well as confirmation of the Kaqchikels as the true and knowledgeable authorities. Thus the battle of the signs ensues, as the Kaqchikels employ the symbolism of their culture to preserve their per
diem livelihood, countering the national exploitative imagery over which they have no control. In the absence of the ability to receive the economic benefits of the official tourism industry, they create new economic opportunities by telescoping cultural capital into monetary capital.

4.5 Conclusions

There has been no shortage of fascination with the prospect of doomsday in our contemporary era. Tragedies and conflicts surrounding cults which purport to have knowledge of approaching cataclysmic events, such as The Peoples Temple at Jonestown, the Branch Davidians at Waco, and the Heaven’s Gate UFO religion, appear in the news every decade or so. Not limited to cultish religious groups, the Y2K debacle and the recent instance of Televangelist Harold Camping in 2011 are examples of predictions made by secular factions or mainstream religious leaders who claim that the end of our society is near. As each date comes and goes without fanfare, humanity continues to look for the next prediction of end times. Just as the well-known Kaqchikel author and ajq’ij Calixta Gabriel Xikin expressed that “[The appropriation of 2012 by foreigners] is normal because people are very materialistic. They worry whether the world is going to end, or if tomorrow they are going to die,” the attraction to doomsday phenomena revolves around questions of our own mortality. In much the same way that individuals turn to religious practices to make sense of a sometimes seemingly random and disorderly existence, people also seek to give meaning to their lives by playing with the concept of an unavoidable end. The idea of an apocalypse is attractive to humans due
to its abject morbidity, allowing us to understand our society and our lives by fantasizing about a scenario in which basic social life structures are taken from us.

The way many Kaqchikels interpret their recent history’s connection to the 2012 prophecies is well summed up by Baldomero Cuma Chávez’s statement:

[2012] is a time of transformation. It’s a time that brings, for us the Mayas, a light for the future. We have been stepped on for more than 500 years, but we are still alive. We are the grandchildren of our ancestors. We still practice our spirituality. There was an earlier reference in this presentation about when the spiritual movement really emerged, and what it is driving towards. Supposedly it started in 1996 [after the war], but that is not the case. Our ancestors or our grandparents, our predecessors, [practiced their spirituality] secretly because of the repression that existed due to such a difficult, unjust war that our country lived through. (“El día y el destino” n. pag.)

As post-colonial countries like Guatemala become increasingly globalized as they continue to enter the international markets of production and tourism, subaltern populations find themselves in a dialogue between tradition and modernity, a hybridity described by Nestor García Canclini. These multiple logics are in continuous articulation and response, as they mutually inform each other in the public forum. Lacking other

76 “[El 2012] es un tiempo de transformación. Es un tiempo que nos trae para nosotros los mayas una luz al futuro. Nos han pisoteado por más de 500 años, pero todavía estamos vivos. Estamos nosotros los nietos de nuestros ancestros. Todavía practicamos la espiritualidad, hacían referencia anteriormente en la presentación que, cuando surgió realmente este movimiento de la espiritualidad y hasta donde nos conduce. Desde 1996 supuestamente empezó, en realidad no. Nuestros ancestros o nuestros abuelos, nuestros antecesores lo hacían a escondidas por la represión que existía por una guerra tan dura, tan injusta que vivió nuestro país.”
modes to valorize their culture in an environment that has historically threatened their way of life, the Kaqchikels stake a claim to heritage. They strategically make use of a touristic moment, in which they are witness to a captive audience eager to consume their heritage, to fabricate the cultural value that they have been denied. Whereas the tourism industry relies on the Mayas as authentic bearers of an intangible cultural heritage in order to drive the authenticity of the tourists’ experience, the Kaqchikels counter this appropriation with a claim to that very same heritage. Thus the cycle continues, with each faction claiming the heritage for different purposes as they respond to the presence of the other. Then, in a discursive twist, the Kaqchikels employ public knowledge and experience of natural disasters as the arena in which they can prove not just the accuracy of the 2012 prophecies, but also therefore prove the value of their knowledge systems (and thus their group) which produced those predictions. In these ways, the milieu of 2012 and spiritual tourism is fundamentally tied to a claim to knowledge. The Kaqchikels do not merely claim their rights to an inert cultural heritage, but rather they assert their authority as bearers of a knowledge that actively constructs the future in a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse. So if the question is, as Slavoj Zizek has proposed, are we living in end times?, many Kaqchikel imply when asked about 2012 that no, we are not. They are arriving back at the beginning.
Conclusions

The Heart’s Resting Place: Final Reflections and Further Considerations

5.1 Towards an Understanding of Mayan Spirituality

Late one night as I was in the finishing stages of writing my dissertation, I stumbled across a discussion of shamanism in Hmong culture in The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down, my bedtime reading at the time. Suddenly many pieces fell into place regarding my arguments in these pages. Some portions of Mayan spirituality may seem contradictory, a fact which I struggled to explain to the reader on occasion. How is Rilaj Mam both Mayan and ladino and yet not syncretic? How is it possible that a Kaqchikel ajq’ij can still attend Catholic mass? How can the Kaqchikels scorn tourism but not tourists? How can Mayan spirituality be constructed by the Kaqchikels as a form of inheritance from the ancestral Mayas, and yet it is possible for non-Mayas to become ajq’ija’? These issues were resolved for me when I read the following. Anne Fadiman quotes Dwight Conquergood’s explanation of Hmong shamans’ comportment when faced with Western medicine, historically a highly incongruous interaction:

It is the special responsibility of the shaman to celebrate and actualize the coincidences between these two kingdoms and to amplify their resonances, one into another. Perhaps that is why shamans do not resist prescription medicine and treatments. These forms of medicine do not
directly compete with the shamans’ manipulation of symbols and management of belief. (qtd. in Fadiman 267-8)

In reality, the reader’s preoccupation with the contradictions I outlined is a symptom of a Cartesian mindset. It is the result of a *prima facie* conceptualization that the world functions by means of dichotomies, which are *always* opposed and can *never* overlap. Good/bad. True/false. Sacred/secular. Catholic/Mayan. These dichotomies make contradiction possible. But this is not how Mayan spirituality works. For the Kaqchikel spiritualists, other beliefs do not interfere or “compete” with their own. Alfredo López Austin in fact explains this very idea in Mesoamerican cosmovision: “Complementary opposites were not polar but, rather, dynamic values whose existence in the world was indispensable and obligatory. Death, for example, engendered life” (n. pag.). The whole universe, the realm of the dead included, is imbued with energy. It is primarily the function of ajq’ija’ to manage this energy (a facet of their shamanic capabilities), but all people possess it. Not everyone understands how to wield it; those who can, have a special gift which they must learn how to use by means of an apprenticeship. Even non-Mayas possess this energy and these capabilities. What is important is not that the person be ethnically Mayan or eschew Catholicism, but rather that they adopt and understand the Mayan way of conceptualizing the universe, a framework which I have called the Mayan episteme. This episteme, regardless of who believes in it at any given time, is innately non-Western because it predates the arrival of the West to the Americas. This is the argument of the Kaqchikels. Faced with the domination of Western forces in the form of the socio-political power of the elites, of prominent churches, or of tourism, the Mayan
episteme is the Kaqchikels' trump card. They are the bearers of this knowledge system which, by claims to better medical cures, a trickster who outsmarts his conquerors, and ancient Mayan calendrical knowledge, often outsmarts and outperforms the Western knowledge system. But I reiterate: they are the bearers, not the hoarders. The episteme contained within Mayan spirituality is not just for the Mayas but for everyone, but to understand it requires truly separating oneself from Cartesian reason and from the dichotomies contained therein. I urge the reader to view these practices with that in mind.

5.2 Final Reflections

After taking a broad spectrum view of Kaqchikel ceremonial practices, it is evident that they seek to reshape, rearticulate, and indeed (re)traditionalize ancient Mayan epistemology. For these purposes I understand tradition not as a static cultural structure trapped in the past but rather as a process of (re)traditionalization in which marginalized groups find a means to reshape their traditions to respond to their contemporary needs. This is carried out in Kaqchikel ceremony most notably through the occupation of the ajq’ija’, the symbolism of the materials used, and the language and verbal references to ancestral figures and concepts.

Although it may seem a controversial paradigm to undertake, understanding the occupation of the ajq’ija’ as shamanic in nature reveals many details about the functioning of their spiritual work. The central guiding principle of shamanism is to convene with spiritual beings for the purpose of achieving mental and physical health for members of the community. Kaqchikel ajq’ija’ purport to manage the divine energies of
the universe as well as open the lines of communication with ancestral forces through fire-centered ritual. In so doing, they necessarily draw on past traditions, and their discourse reveals a conceptualization of these traditions as an inherited gift which they are charged to maintain by their ancestors. Furthermore, the tradition of the ajq’ija’ is both a calling as well as a trade, and a training period is necessary before an individual destined to become an ajq’ij is able to take up the occupation. This vocation-centered teaching method has the result of perpetuating the Mayan traditions which the Kaqchikel ajq’ija’ view themselves as upholding, since the tools and methods of the trade are handed down through the generations. Notably, Kaqchikel ajq’ija’ also enter into a dialogue with the other religious presences in their communities, asserting the efficacy of their practices in the face of Western medicine or Christian-centered beliefs and thereby responding to their contemporary environment.

An examination of the structure of Kaqchikel ceremonies reveals a useful field of information for claiming that the Kaqchikels contemporarily utilize pre-Columbian Mayan ways of knowing. Beginning with the materials utilized to construct offerings to the ancestors, Kaqchikel ceremonies are highly encoded events. Many of these substances are considered to have natural or pre-Columbian origins, such as pom and chicha, and moreover the materials that are “modern,” such as refined sugar and soda, are examples of the ways in which the Kaqchikels are in fact reworking their past to fit their present. Indeed even the primary driving mechanism of the ceremonies, the concept of presenting an offering or a toj (debt payment), is nestled within a pre-Columbian
episteme which expects humans to repay their ancestors for having sacrificed themselves to create humankind.

Furthermore, an understanding of the types of discourse produced once ceremonies are underway reveals a means by which these rituals effectively serve to mediate the complex social scenarios of the Kaqchikels’ diurnal existence. On the one hand, the discourse of these ceremonies relies on ancestral Mayan figures as well as contemporary markers of Mayan identity, but on the other, these events also provide a means to dialogue with the plural societies of the Guatemalan highlands. The Kaqchikels do not eschew the use of other religious symbols in their traditional spiritual practices, and in fact they are welcoming of any faction of society which shows respect for their beliefs. These apparent contradictions, which are in fact simply a flexibility common in the performative genres and endemic to Mayan spirituality, are what allow ritual to respond to the changing needs of a Kaqchikel society faced with divisive religious interests, a past history of violence, and continued violence throughout Guatemala in the form of lynchings and drug-related murders. We therefore best understand Kaqchikel ritual expression as cultural memory, in which subsequent generations maintain cultural epistemes, but with an understanding that this memory is manifested in the form of traditions which are not static but instead are adaptive and changing as they confront shifting and difficult cultural scenarios.

The adaptive needs of the Kaqchikel community are also met in part through the figure of Rilaj Mam. This effigy is central to a comprehensive understanding of Kaqchikel spiritual practices, as his presence is prolific and indeed almost never absent.
from the altar of Kaqchikel ajq’ija’. He is often also included in ceremonies, both
figuratively and literally: while he is commonly invoked by the ceremonial language of
the ajq’ij, his wooden effigy sometimes makes an appearance in these ritual events as
well. What is particularly revealing about the study which I conduct is a distinct
perspective on the question of syncretism or hybridity. Although Rilaj Mam likely
emerged in his present-day form from a heterogeneous cultural contact due to
colonization and has typically been studied as a syncretic form, my hypothesis is centered
on the ways in which the contemporary Kaqchikels utilize him as a specifically – and
strategically – Mayan figure. We see this evident in his origin tales, which typically
portray him as an ajq’ij who lived at the time of the conquest and resisted the Spanish, as
well as through his present-day characterization which associates him with Kaqchikel
ancestral traditions and Mayan cosmovision. For these reasons, I reiterate that it is more
useful to understand Rilaj Mam as an example of an intentional reworking of Mayan
history. While it is likely that he emerged in his present-day form as a result of cultural
and religious plurality, that is not what is communicated about him by contemporary
Kaqchikels. He is characterized as a Kaqchikel ajq’ij, or even a Kaqchikel king, who
vehemently resisted the Spanish conquest. For these reasons, I contest that to approach a
contemporary understanding of him that is the most accurate according to Kaqchikels, we
should understand Rilaj Mam not as a hybrid figure, but rather as a response to a hybrid
environment. Rilaj Mam mediates the Kaqchikels’ tenuous social position, in which they
find themselves marginalized ethnically and economically, as they are simultaneously
excluded and exploited by the dominant culture.
Central to understanding Rilaj Mam’s function in Guatemalan society, and indeed his hybridity, is his characterization as a trickster figure. I first describe his societal function by means of his festival day, where he is utilized as a marker of Mayan cosmovision and group membership. Notwithstanding, Guatemalan society and particularly everyday life in small towns is riddled with spiritual heterogeneity as Catholicism is ever-present and Evangelism is growing. Due to these dynamics, the categories which Rilaj Mam defines and occupies must be fluid in order for him to continue to serve the needs of the people. This is why understanding the nature of the trickster is so important. Trickster figures, a common folkloric storytelling trope, are characterized by an ability to evade categorization as well as defeat higher or stronger forces not by strength but by cunning. They also transcend social and natural laws; for example, they may die yet still live. Most importantly, we see them emerge in specific cultural scenarios. This is the point of most interest to us. Tricksters appear in colonial scenarios and among the subaltern populations, as they seek a narrative means to symbolically resist the powers that dominate them. Moreover, tricksters actually invert these power structures through their deception and subsequent defeat of the higher powers, making them a truly subversive figure. Because their physical forms are often malleable and because they don’t neatly fit into any particular category, tricksters also become useful means to navigate postcolonial scenarios in which we encounter culturally and ethnically heterogeneous environments with drastic power differentials. This is why it is so difficult to articulate Rilaj Mam’s version of hybridity. He is a trickster, so this task is, well, tricky. He has decidedly Mayan characteristics, and yet his physical
appearance often looks like a ladino. He can be both the colonizer and the colonized. He is abhorred by the Evangelicals and officially shunned by the Catholic Church, and yet some of his followers may be occasional or lapsed Catholics, and he may appear next to Catholic saints on altars. He is duplicitous, and this is, in fact, the point. He mediates these categories by burlesquing them, which effectively criticizes the hierarchal (and indeed hybrid) structure itself that produced them. This is what makes him an effective communicator of an encoded counter-narrative, as he is able to criticize social structures through his capabilities of inversion and subversion.

One of the unifying concepts of this dissertation has been how the Kaqchikels utilize Mayan spirituality as a form of resistance to continued internal colonialism. A potent way this internal colonialism manifests itself is in the tourism industry, and perhaps most relevantly given the timeframe, in international distortion of the meaning of the date December 21st, 2012. I situate this increased interest in Mayan spirituality in general, and in regards to 2012, within the recently developing field of what I have called “spiritual tourism.” This term refers to the increased tourist activity in a country like Guatemala as a result of a desire to observe or participate in a type of spirituality, and by implication the “truths” of those beliefs, which is considered innate to the culture of the destination country. This is at least partially a function of an increased interest of spiritualist movements in the West, such as the New Age, which seek to construct a sense of transcendent experience in response to daily life. This is achieved by creating a sort of pastiche of various worldwide beliefs, a process in which Native American spiritualities have been of particular interest to foreigners.
The Kaqchikels have responded to increased tourism in two ways: they both rebut it and utilize it to their advantage. The rebuttal involves three primary arguments. First, Kaqchikels generally view foreign interpretations of 2012 as incorrect. Most outsiders will claim that December 21st, 2012 will bring about some sort of apocalypse, and the Kaqchikels directly counter that assertion with explanations of their own knowledge of the true meaning of the completion of this B’aqtun cycle. Inherent to this dialogue is the claim that the Kaqchikels possess the true knowledge about 2012, thereby claiming it as cultural property. What’s more is that this actually becomes a tableau where larger conflicts can play out. The Kaqchikels typically state that 2012 will bring about some sort of change and that it will break with the trends of the past cycle, during which the conquest of the Americas occurred. These claims to “true” knowledge of 2012 are therefore embedded in rhetoric which resists not only the colonization of the contact-period Mayas but also the continued domination of the contemporary Kaqchikels by the descendents of the Spanish who hold political and economic power in Guatemala. Unable to achieve social and political representation and recognition in a highly stratified and exclusive society, the Kaqchikels achieve legitimization by using the very tool which sets them apart: their culture.

Second, close examination of the opinions of Kaqchikels regarding tourism reveals that they do not eschew tourists all together; rather, they criticize the appropriation and misconstruction of their spiritual beliefs by the tourism industry. This sector seeks to appropriate Mayan spirituality in order to draw tourists to the country (although this appropriation process has also been occurring in contemporary nationalist
projects) and thereby feed the economic system, a process made possible by converting culture into capital. Conversely, the Kaqchikels resist that outside intervention and seek to define and articulate Mayan spirituality themselves. This is primarily about control of the present through the control of history, one of the central aims of the pan-Maya movement. The Kaqchikels seek to repossess their ancestral history, which they have inherited from the ancient Mayas, because that allows them to control how the contemporary Mayas are constructed in society. Therefore although their heritage is the proof of their authority, the Kaqchikels do not claim it as an inert artifact of the past; rather, what they claim is authority over that heritage so that it can continue to validate and construct the present.

Third, climate change is often cited as evidence of the approaching date of December 21st 2012, a claim which serves to attest to the accuracy of the Mayas’ knowledge. This is a very interesting discursive twist when carefully examined. The discussion of climate change is typically linked with a discussion of the abuse of natural resources and unsustainable development projects, which are generally viewed as the culprit that has produced this ecological instability. These are by-products of the West, where industrial development has traditionally been valued above all else and the desires of the individual, driven by the libidinal economy of capitalism, supersedes the good of the community. While it is unlikely that all of Western society will believe in Mayan spirituality due to its religious nature, what can “prove” these claims is science. Thus citing science in this manner is a means to prove that the Mayas’ predictions are correct, and, in the subtext, prove that they know more than their opposing Western factions. This
is how the Kaqchikels validate not just the 2012 prophecies themselves, which implies that the Mayan way of doing things is better than the Western way of doing things, but also the whole of the Mayan episteme with produced them.

Many Kaqchikels have begun using the industry of tourism to their advantage, as they also seek to profit from and participate in a system which excludes them otherwise. As post-colonial nations like Guatemala become increasingly globalized, the local populations find ingenious ways to adapt to their changing environment. By rejecting and outwitting the Western perspective, the Kaqchikels have discovered a way to use the touristic moment of 2012 to draw foreign attention to the veracity, validity, and worth of the Mayan peoples. This is a noteworthy method to create value in a country that does not provide it for them otherwise.

5.3 Further Considerations

While I have not taken the theoretical orientation of decolonization in any particular chapter of this dissertation other than at a very cursory level when I mention Walter Mignolo in Chapter 4, I do wish to address it here. Chapter 1 clarified my theoretical approach as that of a ground-up understanding of cultural practices, as I have attempted to avoid the imposition of high theory onto a situation that has little to do with the broad stroke of its literary discourse. However, although decolonization is certainly one of the most popular orientations in contemporary cultural studies of Latin America and, like other trends of the field, might indicate merely a fashionable theoretical lens, it is more practical than that. Decolonization is not a rhetorical trick that was invented by
lofty Parisian intellectuals (as has too often been the case in literary and cultural studies), but rather it describes the political and social reality of many Latin American countries in the 21st century. As such, I find it to be aligned with the orientations I have adopted throughout this investigation, and it is another tool we may utilize as researchers in an effort to understand and explain events occurring in these countries. I have omitted it from the previous chapters for the sake of coherence and congruence, but it is worth presenting here.

Emilio del Valle Escalante, a K’iche’ himself, explains the political and cultural movements in Guatemala in the context of other decolonization efforts in Latin America. The relatively recent development of an effective indigenous voice, in the sense that it began to effect real political changes, has fundamentally changed the way the Latin American nation-state is imagined. In the case of Guatemala, this revolutionary way of viewing the nation is characterized as the manner in which “indigenous intellectuals are not only reimagining Guatemala but also developing proposals and political strategies to reconstruct the nation within and outside the indigenous movement” (6-7). More specifically, this stems from “an unfinished colonial experience and the efforts to eradicate that experience via nationalist discourses […] within a structure of knowledge derived from Europe and appropriated specifically to repudiate colonialism and propose a new national order” (7). These efforts have been carried out by the pan-Maya cultural movement, which I extensively elaborated in Chapter 1, although Valle Escalante concisely explains the conflicts contained therein. Most prominently, he calls for a rigorous questioning of modernity and globalization in general as the continuation of a
colonial order (which Valle Escalante aligns with Quijano and Mignolo). Decolonization (as well as post-colonial theory) seeks to problematize the very condition of coloniality and the modernities which produced and continue to reproduce it. Decolonization involves the recognition and the criticism of the “coloniality of power,” the way in which colonization established far-reaching social and political structures which produced the colonial hierarchy and the systems that still produce it. We should, then, fundamentally understand the efforts of the pan-Maya movement, situated within this broader context of decolonization, as an attempt to “eradicate its condition of subalternity” (8). Decolonization, at root, would seek to eradicate the systems which produce the coloniality of power and its hierarchies.

Del Valle Escalante describes his ultimate goal as “proposing Maya-ness as an alternative locus of enunciation for Guatemala” (16). If this becomes our primary understanding of decolonization efforts in Guatemala, then the function of Mayan spirituality as I describe in this dissertation provides an apt complement to these efforts. The political and social movement that produces decolonialist claims ultimately seeks the recognition and legitimization of the numerous Mayan groups in Guatemala. As I have argued, this is also one of the central accomplishments of the revalorization of contemporary Mayan spirituality. Indeed, Mayan spirituality is one of the most salient means of inverting the modern/colonial world dichotomy, due to its foundations in an ancient pre-Columbian episteme. Mayan spirituality necessarily stems from a non-Western perspective, and the Kaqchikels’ attempts to foment its importance within the culture can be read as a form of resistance to Western knowledge structures. For these
reasons, it would be potentially productive and provocative to further examine the role that Mayan spirituality is playing in decolonization efforts.

In this regard, we can also understand these cultural phenomena the context of the decentralization of the subject. When attempting to unravel claims involving representation, identity, and group valorization, we are fundamentally asking questions that relate to subjectivity. How do individuals conceptualize themselves vis-à-vis their society? Paul Smith explains that the term “subject” will often appear to be synonymous with “individual,” “person,” or “the self.” He clarifies that the origins of this concept in its contemporary manifestation are “the product of traditional western philosophical speculation” (xxvii). Indeed, the conceptualization of the subject contemporarily is in fact the direct effect of the Cartesian reason mentioned in the opening of this chapter. The individual is just that – indivisible – and this concept is a result of the unfolding of the Cartesian way of imagining persons beginning in the 17th century. What Smith claims, however, is that our present way of imagining the subject, including its various feminist and Marxist flavors, is largely theoretical and not socially practical. For these reasons he seeks to “de-center” the subject:

And thence the commonly used term ‘subject’ will be broken down and will be understood as the term inaccurately used to describe what is actually the series or the conglomeration of positions, subject-positions, provisional and not necessarily indefeasible, into which a person is called momentarily by the discourses and the world that he/she inhabits. (xxxv)
The subject which is “individual” is nothing more than a cultural and ideological construction. With Smith’s understanding of a subject which is de-centered, that is to say, which can occupy various types of subjectivity in different situations, may create room for other formulations of subjectivity. A culture such as that of the contemporary Mayas is interpolated by the Western globalized episteme and ways of imagining the subject, and yet they still possess a non-Cartesian way of viewing the role of a person in society and in the universe. We may therefore view the coexistence of these multiple logics of subjectivity as a de-centering of the subject, an orientation which could be examined further.

Although I have tinkered with religious studies methodology in this work, there is much left unexplored. Ritual may be studied from various perspectives. Even studying ritual as a performative genre offers various approaches to understanding what is accomplished through ritual. One approach which may be studied in the future could involve examining rituals from a linguistic perspective, based on the common cross-religious concept that language has the capability to make things happen, an idea commonly seen in studies of magic, for example. Additionally, the many important and highly varied uses of the human body (and the animal body) in ritual could also be analyzed from a ritual perspective. Ajq’ija’ frequently use signs in their own bodies as well as the bodies of their patients to divine their problem and treatment. In ceremonies, the participants are required to perform certain corporal actions such as kneeling or walking in a specific manner or holding their arms a particular way, and bodies are often oriented to cardinal axes. There are also numerous ways in which ajq’ija’ assert that the
human body manifests Mayan cosmovision, such as in their 20 fingers and toes, the same number of *nawales* in the sacred calendar. As such, it would be possible to conduct a reading of Mayan ritual which claims that the human body also reproduces and produces a specifically Mayan episteme:

> Embodiment may refer to the body as repository or deposit of collective cultural capital, as the medium into which norms and values are inscribed which are called upon in enacting practices. Embodied activities are then but ‘representations’ of previous inscriptive practices as well as of that which was inscribed. (Kopping 131)

This investigation would be a well-suited complement to the one undertaken in this work. The human body, in this view, becomes an instrument in the creation of cultural knowledge. Lastly, because I discuss an event which has a deadline, December 21st 2012, it would be an important continuation of this project to investigate the discourse that is produced in Guatemala once this ominous date has come to pass.

### 5.4 The Heart’s Resting Place

These pages have sought to situate Kaqchikel spirituality in a socio-cultural context in order to understand how the Kaqchikels utilize these practices to respond to complex social scenarios and resist internal colonization. The Mayan episteme is an apropos tool with which to carry out these goals, as it allows the coexistence and negotiation of what would otherwise be viewed as conflicting dichotomies. Faced with a volatile and threatening reality, it is not surprising that the past two decades have
witnessed an increase in the practice in Mayan spirituality in Guatemala. It is fitting, then, to mention that the Kaqchikel term for “Mayan spirituality” is *uxlanib’äl k’u’x*. *Uxlan* is an intransitive stem that means “to rest” and -*b’äl* is a suffix that derives nouns from verb stems. These resulting deverbal nouns denote places where events that the verb describes take place or tools to bring about the events that the verb describes. *K’u’x* simply means “heart.” Therefore, *uxlanib’äl k’u’x* literally means “the heart's resting place.” As the Kaqchikels have sought to thrive and to valorize their existence in a contemporary milieu which has made those goals exceedingly difficult, not only has Mayan spirituality provided a means, but it is also the ends. *Uxlanib’äl k’u’x* hopes to present them with a way not just to resist and enact their agency, but, like many spiritualities, to find rest and evanescent peace.
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