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## Twentieth Century Maya Worldview

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TWENTIETH CENTURY MAYA WORLDVIEW

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University of Pittsburgh 2011

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the department of Anthropology  
in the College of Science  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Summer Term  
2013

Major Professor: Arlen Chase

## **ABSTRACT**

Maya Folktales offer insight into how twentieth century Maya worldview is a hybrid of indigenous Maya and European beliefs. Analysis was conducted on twenty-eight Maya folktales from the highlands of Guatemala found in folklore anthologies. Stories like *The Spirits of the Dead* in folklore anthologies can reveal new perspectives on how the Maya feel about rituals spaces, the fabric that separates the land of the dead from the land of the living, and the importance of showing respect to the dead in one's community. Other stories, show the connection the Maya feel with their heritage and the connection they feel with the area where their ancestors lived. Twentieth century Maya folktales can provide insight into how the Maya view their landscape, including the realm of the dead as a part of the physical landscape and the belief that the landscape itself is a living spiritual entity.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Twentieth century Highland Maya worldview is important because it shows how five-hundred years after first contact, indigenous Maya beliefs have become inexorably linked with European views. Analysis of twenty folktales from the highlands of Guatemala shows this syncretization. There are many indigenous groups in Yucatan and Guatemala that scholars tend to cluster together and identify as “Maya.” It is worth noting that these groups do not necessarily identify themselves or each other as Maya and most of them do not recognize a social cohesion or necessarily a common ethnicity with other so-called “Maya” groups. The people identified today as “Maya” occupy a diverse space geographically, ecologically, and politically. The question of Maya identity deals with ethnic, religious, and political categorization. With over a hundred different Maya languages spoken, mostly throughout Guatemala but also in Yucatan and by Maya living abroad, most of which are mutually unintelligible, the question of what it means to be “Maya” today is complicated, and not something I expect to answer in this paper. For the purposes of my research, the folktales I have used come from villages in the highlands of Guatemala . It should also be noted that the tales in the collections I read were in English, so they had gone through several processes of translation before I interpreted them and some of their meaning, subtlety, and poetry could have been (and probably was) lost along the way. While it is not my intention to draw inappropriate generalizations about the populations from whom the tales are gathered, it is the purpose of this paper to make conclusions that may be applicable to the diverse set of groups we call Maya today.

## CHAPTER TWO: FOLKLORE BACKGROUND

People once believed that when someone dies, a crow carries their soul to the land of the dead. But sometimes, something so bad happens that a terrible sadness is carried with it and the soul can't rest. Then sometimes, just sometimes, the crow can bring that soul back to put the wrong things right (Proyas 1994).

These are the opening lines in the movie *The Crow*. Although the people who once held this belief are not identified, the implication seems to be that they belong to some now lost indigenous group who viewed interaction between the world of the dead and the world of the living as possible. This potential interaction has long been a subject of fascination for Western society. It has been more the focus of the entertainment industry than the subject of serious study in the scientific community, but legitimate scholarship has been conducted on how other cultures view the boundaries between binaries such as life and death and humans and nature. For many indigenous cultures, the idea that these things are perceived in Western society as separate entities rather than opposite ends of the same continuum seems illogical. One such group, the Maya, view the world as a place where the living have the potential to be influenced by the dead (Ashmore and Brady 1999: 134). Their contemporary folktales reflect this belief. This is linked to other Maya beliefs about sacred landscapes. As Ford and Emery note, “The legacy of the Maya forest is entwined with the Maya people who have lived and worked across this landscape over the past five millennia or more” (Ford and Emery 2008: 148). Dominant western hetero-normative culture views the landscape as an inanimate object. This contrasts with the Maya’s, view which holds the landscape as a living entity governed by powerful natural spirits. According to their folktales, the landscape is spiritually and magically connected to supernatural beings that personify nature. These beings are referred to using different terms. The most

common are the alux, which is often translated as the goblin, and the dueno, which is often translated as the lord of a specific natural object (Sexton 1999: 97).

In Maya folktales, landscapes can also be inhabited by spirits of individuals whose souls are no longer firmly in the land of the living. In *The Spirits of the Dead*, Don Rafael tells an unnamed narrator,

when a person becomes ill; that is, when a person is gravely ill, awaiting death, the spirit of that person leaves and travels through places where the person used to work, where the person used to live. When the body is dying, the spirit passes through many places” (Sexton and Rodriguez-Mejia 2010: 77).

This reflects the idea that according to the Maya, there are many more things inhabiting places than readily meet the eye. The idea that there are supernatural forces that interact with the people on a daily basis is heavily represented in Maya oral literature. According to Don Rafael, “if he had entered the cemetery to help, right there he would have fallen dead because he spoke with the spirit of the sick man that was travelling through the places where the body had spent time during his normal life” (2010: 78). In the story, not only is the spirit of someone whose physical body is somewhere else present with Don Rafael, but it is able to interact with him and influence his actions. According to the story, his proximity to the spirit is the cause of Don Rafael’s subsequent illness. If he had engaged the spirit by talking with it, it could have caused his death.

Many contemporary Maya folktales reflect ideas about the spiritual and physical landscape that have deep roots in Maya culture. Particularly, ideas about the potential for the dead to interact with the living reflect a culture that does not conceptualize the realm of the dead as purely spiritual in a nonphysical sense and that does not conceptualize the land of the living as purely physical in a nonspiritual sense. In the dominant western hetero-normative culture today,

the world of the dead is often thought of as existing only in a spiritual sense. It is not a physical place that one can get to in body. Likewise, the world of the living is often seen as only existing in a literal physical sense independent of influence by any supernatural or otherworldly forces. In Maya culture, there is less of a barrier between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead (Sexton 2001: 64). The two are seen more as part of a continuum than two separate entities existing on entirely separate planes. This allows for more potential interaction between the two, especially in places that are seen as gateways between worlds. For the Maya, sacred places are often also considered openings to the spirit world. These places include caves, hills, temples, cemeteries, etc.

Don Pascual discusses this belief in *The Old Cemetery*, “Back then, there was no cemetery, but they say that the dead were seen. Or it is better to say that the dead appeared in the place where they had been buried. The old folks were very scared of walking at night, frightened by the dead” (2010: 206). This reveals that in earlier times cemeteries existed for the Maya as part of and not separate from the larger contextual landscape. The idea that there was no designated specific place to bury the dead and they were instead buried where they lived, “In the past they say that the dead were buried in the sitios, or on their lands,” (2010: 206) represents the continued potential for interaction with them. The continued fear of the elderly to walk through cemeteries, especially at night, shows that the belief that the spirits of the dead still inhabit the world of the living is not a thing of the past. It is a continuing part of contemporary Maya culture, “they say that at night in the old cemetery, it seems as though the dead were alive, walking, speaking, and making noise. So, our grandfathers and grandmothers believe that they are the spirits of the dead who were buried there” (2010: 206). The idea that simply because the cemetery is abandoned it does not lose its spiritual power is also reflected in this story, “Now the

old cemetery is found abandoned in a place named Pacak'ay. Now no person dares to construct a house in that place out of fear- they say that the dead appear at this place at night," (2010: 206) and, "and present, this place is planted with coffee trees. But the owners do not dare build their houses for fear the dead will appear there" (2010: 208). This story also suggests that once a place has been appropriated as a sacred place for the dead it may not be possible or desirable to reappropriate it for another purpose, for example as a domicile.

Similarly, in *The Dueno of Death*, the spirit of death is believed to inhabit the cemetery (2010: 211). Maya people claim to have seen him at night carrying spirits of the newly deceased back to the cemetery with him. Brujos and Characotels are evil witches who usually do work for the devil. In *The Woman Characotel*, a man's wife turns out to be a witch who goes to the cemetery at night to eat the bones of the dead. She collects the souls of the sick people in the town and brings them to the cemetery for the dueno of death. When her husband finds out she turns him into a dog and he does not recover his faculties until she dies and he tells his friends and neighbors what he saw (Sexton 1992: 127). This story illustrates the potential for natural spirits to interact with the living. Although in this case the woman characotel is technically the one taking the souls of the sick, she brings them to the dueno of death who lives in the cemetery. The story reinforces Maya ideas about cemeteries as a sacred part of the landscape because the dueno of death dwells there and it is where the woman characotel consumes the bones of the dead. Although there is a wealth of recorded oral literature concerning cemeteries and other places associated with the dead as particularly important, the Maya consider many other aspects of landscape as sacred.

In the story *Mirandia Hill*, a disembodied voice tells Eulogio and his family that they may not take the fruit they find on the hill with them (Thompson et al. 2007: 29). Eulogio and

his family obey the voice because they believe that it belongs to the spirit of the hill, conscious natural entity who will know if they do not follow his instructions. In *Who Cuts the Trees Cuts His Own Life* an unnamed narrator recalls, “When I was a small boy my father used to tell me, ‘Son, don’t cut the little green trees whenever you please. When you do that you are cutting short your own life and you will die slowly’” (Montejo 1991: 62). This reflects the animistic Maya belief that the environment must be treated with respect. The narrator’s father is teaching him that if he behaves inappropriately toward nature, he will be harmed because nature is a conscious thing with the power to alter the narrator’s life. In *The Master of the Canyons*, a group of friends camping in a canyon hear mysterious noises and are unable to light a fire (2007: 39). They believe the master of the canyons causes these strange events. The friends are afraid of the master of the canyons because they believe he is a conscious entity associated with the canyon who can cause physical and spiritual harm to befall them if he wishes. In *The Spirit of the Water*, the water spirit appears in the form of an old man to offer assistance to an honest man who needs help getting his ax back (2007: 51). This story also reinforces the values of honesty and integrity in contemporary Maya society. The water spirit tests the man’s honesty when he offers to return a golden or silver ax to him instead of the one he has lost. The man only accepts the ax that he has lost even though he has the opportunity to obtain two other more valuable axes. This reveals that in Maya society, it is more important to be honest than wealthy. When the man’s friend encounters the river spirit and tries to claim the golden ax as his own, he leaves with nothing, but the man is rewarded because he does not try to take anything that does not rightfully belong to him. The common element in all of these stories is that supernatural beings associated with natural places interact with Maya people. Although the water spirit is the only

one who physically appears to the man, the master of the canyons and the spirit of Mirandia Hill both influence the behavior of Maya people in their stories.

In some stories, spiritual forces act as barriers to keep people from reaching certain places. In *The Hill of Gold of Atitlan* the Spaniards are unable to reach the gold and silver inside the hill because of a strange noise they cannot explain. In this story, a nature spirit serves as the guardian of Maya heritage by protecting the treasure from the Spaniards. According to the folktale

the Spaniards were able to enter the cave, but they could not reach the bottom because they heard a very loud noise like the noise of a river, a very strange noise. They were afraid, and the Spaniards did not reach that depth was about 120 meters. But because of that noise that they heard, they could not reach that place. They were just able to see the gold and silver, which was there below in that place, and they could not reach it,” (Sexton and Rodriguez-Mejia 2010: 194).

This story also serves as a metaphor for the preservation of Maya culture. Although the Spaniards can see the treasure, they cannot get to it to loot or destroy it. The treasure is like Maya cultural heritage. Years of colonization have let other people see it, but they have not been able to take it away. In *The Stonecutter and the Tree of Fortune*, a stonecutter is visited by the dueno of the tree while he rests under its shade. The dueno of the tree offers him wealth, but warns the stonecutter that he must share it with the poor. When he fails to do this, the man loses his wealth and must return to his original work (2010: 216). This story reinforces not only the belief in the power of spirits associated with the natural landscape to interact with humans, but also reinforces cultural values among the Maya. Giving to the poor is an important aspect of Maya society. As a culture where many of its members live in poverty, giving to those less fortunate is an integral part of Maya society and it helps ensure the continuation of communities where that culture predominates. In the *Story of the Enchanted Hill, Tun Abaj*, the dueno of the

hill offers a man his fortune if the man will work for him, but the work turns out to be slaughtering pigs, which are really the spirits of the dead whom the dueno has turned into pigs to be slaughtered. When the man realizes this, he refuses to do the work even in exchange for wealth (Sexton 1992: 222). The story reflects the way the Maya conceptualize poverty in their culture. The man realizes that, “when rich persons who take money from the enchanted hills die, their spirits stay in those hills in order to pay for all the fortune they had in this life” (1992: 224). For the Maya, it is better to be poor and remain Maya than to become rich and lose your soul. Since the souls of the rich who have died are turned into swine, the story also contains the metaphor that the wealthy are pigs.

*Heart of Heaven, Heart of Earth: A Tzutuhil Tale* reflects another Maya cultural value. The story tells how many of the great Tzutuhil warriors and shamans disappeared into the clouds and into the earth when the Spaniards came (Sexton and Ujpan 1999: 23). This reflects the Tzutuhil belief that people must trust the spirits in the clouds, lakes, and earth to watch over them or else evil will befall them. It also reflects their belief that their culture will be preserved even in the face of continuing persecution because their greatest cultural and historical figures have preserved their wisdom in the natural places where they now reside. *A Person of the Milpa and an Evil Thing and a Priest and a Small Friend* tells the story of a farmer who descends into the three levels of the underworld to search for his wife, who was tricked by a snake and kidnapped (Burns 1983: 120). The story has much in common with the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, but it also reflects the Maya concept that the existence of a spiritual afterlife is not mutually exclusive from the existence of a physical underworld that can be accessed if one takes the right journey. According to Burns, the presence of the skunk at the entrance to the underworld reflects the unpleasant odorous nature of many caves in the Yucatan (1983: 121). A

similar story exists called *The Sombreron and the Blue Fly*, but it ends with the death of the man several days after he returns from the underworld.

In *Story of the Goddess of the Lake*, a young man mourning the death of his parents in a canoeing accident is allowed by the goddess to visit them at the bottom of the lake where they now reside in order to ease his suffering (Sexton and Ujpan 1999: 25). This reflects the contemporary Maya belief that lakes are gateways to the underworld. Evidence that this belief has been widespread in Maya culture since before the Spanish conquest can be found in the archaeological record. Ashmore and Brady argue that, “As mouths of the Earth Lord and portals to the Underworld, caves have rich symbolic significance. What lies beyond the break is the Underworld, a realm inhabited by powerful supernaturals” (Ashmore and Brady 1999: 127). It also reinforces the importance of respecting one’s parents in Maya culture. It is because the young man is respectful to his parents and honors them in life and death that he is allowed to visit them. In *Story of an Enchanted Place, Paruchi Abaj*, the dueno of Paruchi Abaj, appears as a red man at midnight every twenty days. Those who wish to hunt at Paruchi Abaj make offerings to the dueno, otherwise they would have bad luck (Sexton and Ujpan 1999: 67). The story tells of a man who failed to make offerings before hunting. The man encounters the spirit of his dead uncle, who warns him that if he accepts anything from the dueno, his soul will become trapped in the enchanted place and he will be killed and eaten by the duenos, only to be reincarnated and killed and eaten over and over again. This tale reinforces the Maya value that people should be respectful of where they hunt and make offerings to the appropriate spirits to avoid misfortune. The *Story of the Emigration and Tragedy of a Cakchquel People* tells of a group of Maya people who were forced to immigrate to many different places before they were finally able to settle down because everywhere they went they caused conflict with the other

residents through theft (1999: 88). This story reflects the Maya value of working hard to earn enough to support one's family without having to steal from others. The first time the Cakchquel people were displaced from their home by natural forces through no fault of their own, but subsequently their laziness and refusal to work caused them to steal from their neighbors. Their neighbors then tormented them until they moved again. If they had worked hard and been honest, they would have only had to immigrate once. *The Seven Turns to Lose the Way* also deals with a Maya group's displacement from their original homeland and subsequent travel and settlement in another place (Maldonado 1960: 33). In the story, one group invades the land of another group and there is a bloody conflict in which many lives are lost. The priests discover that if they wash the bodies of the dead and perform the proper funerary rites, than the spirits of the dead will go free and after seven turns will lose their way from the land of the living and never return. This story shows that the Maya believe that the journey between the spirit world and the world of the living is a physical as well as a spiritual one. The soul of the deceased must physically travel to another world, and it only departs or loses its way from the land of the living after seven turns. For the Maya, the spiritual landscape and the physical landscape are often one and the same.

In *The Hill of Chua Kopo*, a man runs away from the town where he lives out of shame that he cannot afford to rent a suit for the fiesta where his daughter has been chosen to dance (Sexton 1992: 3). The dueno of the hill loans the man a suit so he can return to his town and watch his daughter dance. By returning, the man saves his family from jail since attendance at the fiesta is compulsory. The man disobeys the dueno's instructions not to tell anyone where he got the suit. As a result, the dueno of the hill carried off the man's daughter to live with him in the hill and her parents died of grief. This story shows that while nature spirits can be

benevolent and help the deserving, they should also be feared because if their wishes are not honored, they can exact revenge.

Some Maya folktales literally reflect ideas about the physical landscape and how it came to be. *The Black Head of the Indian in Esquintla* a physical feature on a hill that looks like the black of an Indian is explained (Maldonado 1960: 41). In the story, a warrior named Balaam Conache is about to be married to a beautiful woman named Ixtaj. Their wedding is interrupted by the arrival of the Spaniards. The men are either killed or taken prisoner and the Spaniards take the women as spoils of war. Ixtaj is taken by the commander because of her beauty and she throws herself in to a ravine out of despair. Balaam stalks the Spanish commander until he can take his revenge. He kills him in a duel, but the other Spaniards kill him and put his head on a lance. In the story,

the earth rose around the lance and pushed the head of Balaam skyward. And as the earth rose and the hill grew larger, so did the head grow gigantic, facing Kumarkaaaj. On the road from Esquintla to Antigua, on land that is part of the Hacienda Mirandilla, one can see perfectly the prominence with the feature of Balaam Conache that is called The Black Head of the Indian (1960: 42).

This folktale explains the formation a feature of the physical landscape through supernatural means. It connects the Maya to the place where they live and to their history.

The folktales, folklore, and oral traditions of any culture reflect that culture's ideas about self, memory, language, communication, narrative, and power (Abrams 2010: 7). Folktales specifically often serve a didactic purpose. They are passed down through generations with the goal of sharing a cultural value or a teaching a lesson about culturally appropriate behavior. While the orality of folktales means they are mutable in ways that written documents are not, many contemporary Maya folktales that have been recorded claim to have been told to the

narrators by elderly members of the community who heard it from their elders. In order for these stories to continue being told, they must contain elements that resonate with the listeners. They must reflect values, events, humor, etc. that resonates with those who hear them or they would cease to be told (2010: 16).

Gossen believes that contemporary Maya oral tradition can be understood as, “a complete information system” (Gossen 1974: vii). According to him, “the specialized knowledge and linguistic forms contained in an oral tradition are always related to the rest of that society’s language, cosmology, and social behavior” (1974: vii). Gossen also argues that language and oral tradition cannot be separated. The knowledge inherent in the native languages spoken by contemporary Maya peoples cannot be separated from the knowledge contained in their folktales because as part of an oral tradition, the tales reflect aspects of the language that can only be attributed to speakers of that group. Gossen cautions against the use of terms that may yield a Western bias. He is particularly wary of the use of the term folklore to describe Maya oral tradition because he claims that the term is ambiguous and may therefore be interpreted differently by people from different disciplines (1974: viii). He prefers the term oral tradition because he believes it, “describes the whole of the verbal aesthetic tradition in all cultures without an ethnocentric bias,” and it, “emphasizes the process of oral transmission while allowing for each culture’s particular tradition” (1974: ix). Gossen suggests that like language itself, folktales can be analyzed as symbolic systems, “symbolic systems provide in their respective codes, implicitly and explicitly, the cultural guidelines of form, sense, and meaning that give order to a potentially chaotic world” (1974: x). He asserts that in order to fully understand a society’s oral tradition a more contextual analysis of their language is necessary since, “Myth, of course, is only a fraction of traditional verbal behavior” (1974: xi).

Folktales cannot be understood in a vacuum. They must be examined within the context of the verbal and cultural traditions of a society. Maya folktales reveal the way they conceptualize their landscape as a conscious living entity and the hazy boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead. Although these ideas are in some ways fundamentally different from the way the dominant western hetero-normative culture understands landscape, current archaeologists are taking steps to bridge this gap in understanding and incorporate contemporary Maya beliefs into their interpretations of archaeological sites.

### CHAPTER THREE: FOLKLORE ANALYSIS

In *The Dog Who Spoke*, an old man is given the reasoning of a dog when his family pet passes away from supernatural forces. According to the story, “the gentleman reasoned like a man, but saw like an animal at night” (Sexton 2010: 38). After the death of his dog, the man was able to see what the animals saw at night. In the tale, the term dog-man appears several times. The dog tells his master that he will become a dog-man, implying that he will have the consciousness of both a man and a dog. The use of this term is important because it implies the existence of a consciousness somewhere between dog and man, a hybrid or syncretic awareness of both dog and man’s perceptions of reality. The existence of such a consciousness seems to exist in opposition to Western perspective that focuses solely on the human perspective. The story does not draw a clear delineation between dog desires and human desires, since the man seems to retain his desire to act human and to interact with his family, “the man went upstairs to tell his family what dogs see during the night (2010: 39),” while simultaneously wanting to act like a dog, “the dog-man, they say, wanted to bark too, but could not do as dogs do” (2010 39). This reflects the twentieth century Maya worldview that human and animals are connected and under the right circumstances can communicate with each other.

In *The Story of the Toad and the Deer*, God punishes the earth with a severe drought because of the sins people have committed. This story shows how after five hundred years of contact European and Maya beliefs have merged to create a new cultural continuity. Twentieth century Maya worldview is a hybrid of these two different belief systems. As such, many Maya people held in the twentieth century and continue to hold today seemingly contrasting beliefs as simultaneously true. In this story, the Maya believe that God sent the drought as a punishment for man’s sin, a belief with clear origins in Catholicism. The phrase from the folktale that best

exemplifies the syncretic culture it reflects is, “The animals, large and small, that were still alive, met to send a commission to heaven to ask for forgiveness, and at the same time to ask for rain so that the rivers and streams on earth would once more spring forth” (2010: 44). In addition to moving the plot forward, this part of the story showcases how the characters, in this case the animals, simultaneously hold Christian and traditional Maya values as true. The idea that the animals need to ask God for forgiveness comes down from the Catholic tradition, but the idea of asking God for rain comes from the Maya tradition. The rest of the story is reminiscent of the tortoise and the hare structurally, a reflection of the European influence on storytelling structures, but the story’s moral instead of rewarding steady work rewards trickery and teamwork on the part of toads in the face of their opponent, deer.

*The Inheritance of the Old Man* reveals hybridization of European and Maya beliefs that was inherent in twentieth century Maya worldview. In the story, a poor man asks the dueno of an enchanted hill for wealth and makes an offering to him. The use of the world dueno is important here because it is most commonly translated as owner or lord. The dueno is a familiar figure in Maya folktales. He appears as the nature spirit or guardian associated with a particular natural feature, most often a hill, tree, or cave. In many Maya folktales the dueno will grant a human wealth or good fortune in exchange for the proper ritual and provided he or she follows the dueno’s instructions exactly. In this story, the man follows the dueno’s instruction and blessed with great wealth in his lifetime, but his children fail to honor the dueno’s wishes so the man suffers in the afterlife and his sons die early deaths. The dueno shares many similarities with nature spirits in the European folktales. For example, the leprechaun in Irish folklore is said to dwell at the end of the rainbow with his pot of gold. When captured, the leprechaun grants his captors three wishes, but if the captor is greedy and makes more than three wishes the leprechaun

can choose not to grant any of them. In this case, the lord of the hill referred to as the dueno. In other stories he is referred to as the alux, which is more commonly translated as goblin. A figure best known in Germanic folklore, the goblin is regarded as a close relative of the leprechaun.

*The Arrival of the Dog into the World* contains examples of syncretism and twentieth century Maya worldview. In the story, Dog has a conversation with God,

I see you sad, forlorn, and solitary in the world; you need to search for a being, and this being, which you will find, will be your companion. You have to go wherever he goes, and he will give you food, even if it is just the leftovers from his food. You will be fed with these and the two of you will be very good friends. At night, you will look after the house. The being that you find is your owner and your best friend because he is the strongest being in the world. The dog replied, ‘Thank you, great lord; I know you are the god of animals. You have power over us, the animals, and I will obey your commands.

This story offers some unique insight into the twentieth century Maya worldview on the relationship between God and animals. The story contains some European elements. The dog accepts that God, who he seems to perceive as the traditional Catholic deity, has dominion over him and promises to obey his authority. Likewise, despite the traditional Catholic doctrine that animals have no souls and thus have no place in heaven, in this story, God appears to have a plan for the dog and his natural place as the companion for humans. The dialogue between the dog and the God illustrates a parent-child relationship between them, apparently similar to the one God shares with people. Structurally, the tale is European. Dog asks several other animals to be his owner only to realize that they are not the strongest beings on earth and therefore cannot be the ones God spoke to him about. Eventually, Dog meets man and agrees to be his faithful companion forever. The tale contains some Maya elements because the dog imparts some knowledge to the man. He offers to tell him about the deer, the raccoon, and the jaguar. This element is in opposition to the traditional European view that man is superior to animals because it implies that man can learn from animals.

Many parallels can be drawn between *The Young Lad and His Sister* and *Hansel and Gretel*. In both stories, the father is convinced by his new wife to leave his children in the wilderness because there are not enough resources for everyone in the family. Unlike the European counterpart, however, the lad and his sister are helped by animals and not by people. At the end of the story the lad gives his sister to the animals who helped him as food. In the European tale, Hansel and Gretel appear to be at odds with the forest. It is in the forest that they find the witch's hut where the witch tries to eat them. In the Maya story, the forest comes to the aid of the children in the form of animal helpers.

In *The Stonecutter and the Tree of Fortune* the use of the term stonecutter is important. It is significant that the man is a stonecutter because it is the profession of the common man. Part of the story's message would be lost if the man had a more reputable profession. The story tells us that the stonecutter does not feel envy and respects other people, even though he wishes he had been able to go to school. The man's humility is important to the story.

In *The Man Who Went Crazy*, Raul Vidal, "went up the direction of the mountain to cry bitterly and recite the forty-five prayers that he knew for nine days," (2010: 174). The numbers nine and forty-five were important to Maya calendar. This shows the blending of indigenous and European traditions because Raul Vidal goes to pray, presumably to the Judeo-Christian God, but he keeps in mind the traditions of his ancestors as well.

*Everything Was Created* is a creation story explaining the origin of different ethnic groups. It shows both European and Maya influences. According to the story, Grandfather and Grandmother created the first black people by forming dolls out of dry lianas and beeswax and hitting them with three lashes to make them move. Then they created white people out of wheat dough. Last, they created Indians out of corn dough, "Since we Indians were created after the

others, we turned out to be shorter and smaller. We eat a lot of tortillas because we were made of the dough of corn” (Sexton 1999: 39).

*The Story of the Owl* is a didactic tale about why people should respect the owl. According to the story, the owl is sent to act a policeman by the dueno of the land. The use of the word dueno here is important because this is the only story out of those analyzed where dueno refers to a general Earth lord rather than the spirit of a specific natural feature. The tale says, “As a very old story goes, our old folks of earlier times and those of present times maintain the idea that one must be careful not to kill owls because they are guardians and policeman of the world. They only follow orders of the dueno del mundo” (1999: 100).

Folktales have long been the subject of fascination and study among scholars. Folklorists have focused on categorization and typology, psychoanalytical interpretations, socio-cultural interpretations (i.e. what the stories tell us about the society that perpetuated them), and feminist interpretations. In all of these interpretations, descriptions of the supernatural are studied for their symbolic importance rather than their representation of a fundamentally different non-western view of reality. In Maya folktales in particular, descriptions of the supernatural, particularly the realm of the dead and interactions between the realm of the dead and the world of the living, could be viewed as a road map to a place that even today many Maya believe literally exists and be reached via a journey through the physical world.

There are many well-known scholars of western European fairy tales. Jack Zipes, Bruno Bettelheim, Susanna Gilbert, and Sandra Gubar are some of the most famous. Although there are no famous scholars of Maya “fairy tales” per se, there are some well-known ethnographers and folklorists who have conducted research on the oral tales of indigenous people in Mexico and Guatemala that today we largely recognize as Maya. Although the question of Maya identity

remains a complicated one, tales from these groups share many commonalities including similar themes about honoring family and distributing wealth among the community, as well as similar characters, including nature spirits, some of whom could be loosely construed by the Western definition as fairies. In some ways, these stories mirror their better known Western European counterparts. Descriptions of the forest as a dangerous place governed by the laws of nature rather than men appear universally similar. The forest plays by its own rules and only those who obey them are safe in its domain. While these stories may reflect some universal human experience and/or anxiety about the natural world as a realm beyond human control, for the Maya specifically they reflect the everyday experience of interacting with the supernatural. Levi suggests that mythology and archaeology may be used conjunctively to find and interpret ancient Maya sites based on contemporary Maya myth. He claims that, “By showing how a modern Maya myth reveals significant information about an ancient Maya site, this study illustrates the complementarity of archaeology and ethnography through a suggested relation between myth and history” (Levi1988: 605). Levi’s study concerns the literal rather than the philosophical connection between mythology and archaeology. Much research exists concerning the insight to be gained by the scientific community by using contemporary folktales to understand the way ancient people conceptualized the world around them, but Levi offers a more practical use for ethnography. He suggests that modern incarnations of ancient stories can literally offer a map to the ancient landscape and can be used to pinpoint the physical location of significant events.

The contemporary Maya view the forest as an animate and conscious entity. Physical remains in the archaeological record similar to those found at modern hunting shrine would suggest a long presence for this belief. Many Maya folktales discuss interactions with a *deuno*, *alux*, or other forest spirit guardian. Since these figures are not often portrayed in iconography,

their place in the history of Maya belief can be difficult to document. That said, the animal guardian of the forest, a similar figure who is often, “associated with animate topographic features in forests,” is more visible in the material record (Brown and Emery 2008: 301). The use of an animal as a guardian of a powerful place makes sense in the larger context of Maya spirituality and belief. The highland Maya understand, “the forest as an active agent capable of taking revenge against disrespectful or careless humans who enter this realm” (2008: 302). In other words, not only are humans more likely to be attacked in body by wild animals while hunting or otherwise disturbing the forest, they are also more vulnerable in spirit because animal guardians and other nature spirits hold sway in the forest domain.

To complicate things further, not only do flora and fauna have, “active spirit guardians who watch over them,” they also have animate spirits of their own. Theoretically, someone walking through a forest who steps on a flower could be the victim of revenge via the spirit of the flower itself or the flower’s animal guardian spirit, or any nearby *dueno* or *alux* who witness the transgression and is not properly appeased ceremonially (2008: 304). To stay on the safe side, “animate beings of various ontological statuses – humans, wild animals, spirit guardians, topographic features, dogs, weapons, and skeletal remains - must maintain engaged relations based on commensality and mutual respect to avoid negative repercussions” (2008: 304). Maya belief can be summarized as, “the forest is occupied by sentient non-human agents who are capable of taking action against human interlopers” (2008: 303).

The contemporary Maya may be described as practicing a kind of animism, although Bird-David argues that animism has become a loaded term in the social sciences (Bird-David 1999: 67). She believes that the term animism carries over the connotation of a simplistic belief system practiced by undeveloped populations (1999: 67). She cautions against using an

oversimplified definition of animism when discussing its current practice among indigenous people and offers an alternative definition of animism as, “relational epistemology” (1999: 68). Although Bird-David caution about oversimplified Western definitions of animism is warranted, she has been criticized for implying that one universally accepted Western definition of animism exists, when in fact, scholars in many fields disagree on the exact definition (Guthrie 2000: 106).

In the words of Brown and Emery, Western culture is a, “modernist dichotomy that splits the world into people and things,” therefore it is the challenge of today’s archaeologist anthropologists to set aside their Western preconceptions of how the world is organized in order to attempt to truly understand how the ancient and contemporary Maya viewed and view their landscape.

In order to fully understand how the Maya viewed and understood their world, archaeologists must understand that they not only perceived the world in ways that are fundamentally different from the way modern Western culture perceives it; they inhabited a reality that, while equally real, actually *was* different from the one most Westerners experience today. Changing views in the scholarly community suggest, “the notion of opposition and complementary counterparts is rooted in Western epistemology and that its indiscriminant use can sometimes obscure more than clarify our understanding of alternative ontological views” (2012: 64). In other words, Western preconceptions of the unconscious forest and conscious human beings as binaries could obscure someone’s ability to truly understand landscape from the Maya perspective, where no such binaries exist. Harrison Buck argues that although some scholarship claims that the, “nature-culture dichotomy suggests that nature is not only separate from culture but also antecedent to it, such a perspective relies on Western taxonomies that re not universal ontological categories and that may mislead” (Harrison Buck 2012: 66).

The way the Maya conceptualize their landscape as a negotiable animate entity may be related to the way they conceptualize other aspects of their spirituality. Western culture views the body and the soul as two and only two separate entities. While some form of mind-body connection is undisputed, for the most part, someone's spirituality is not directly connected to their corporeal being. For the Maya, the soul has many parts and there is no dichotomy between mind/spirit and body. If the objects were seen as active social participants by the people making and using them, then this limited understanding can lead to incorrect interpretation (2008: 298). "Ethnographic accounts attest to the complexity of the Maya relational ontology, whereby the *ch'ulel* (a soul or life force) 'typically with several parts' routinely engaged singly or in combination with other nonhuman agents in an ongoing negotiation," according to Harrison-Buck (Harrison-Buck 2012: 67). The idea that the soul has multiple parts that are able to exist in multiple places and serve multiple purposes at the same time is another example of the difference between the Maya way of seeing the world and the Western way. Harrison-Buck claims that, "although divisions, such as body and soul, are not exclusive to Western culture, this strict dichotomy cannot fully account for the complexity and fractal nature of the soul for some indigenous groups for whom multiple souls with detachable parts are an irreducible multiplicity" (2012: 67). Also, the idea that the soul is not static, but that it engages in negotiation is an example of something other than the forest that is living, animate, and changeable.

Likewise, it is important not to let modern Western conceptions of the word "forest" inhibit true understanding of how the Maya conceptualized their landscape. For generations literature and film has painted a picture of the forest as a "pristine and unmodified wilderness" untouched by man especially when it comes to the so called "new world" (Brown and Emery 2008: 306). According to Harrison-Buck,, "the tendency to describe nature and culture as

discrete categories, with the latter replicating the former, is prevalent in many landscape studies” (Harrison-Buck 2012: 66). The idea of Native Americans as a simple people who inhabited the forests without modifying them to their advantage is prevalent in the Western consciousness today. Linguistic and ethnographic evidence indicates that the ancient Maya concept of landscape included, “forested and unforested terrain, as well as active and resting agricultural lands” (Brown and Emery 2008: 306). Animism is often conceptualized as the interaction between humans and the “other”, usually natural spirits, that have the power to affect their lives (Rosengren 2006: 803). This interaction is often mediated by shamans who have the power to interact with both worlds (2006: 804). Such interaction is possible because the human world and the spirit world exist as part of a continuum and are only significantly separated by the inability of ordinary people to perceive the goings-on of the spirit world around them. Castro believes that the enmity between the view of nature and natural objects as animate or inanimate can be resolved if their spiritual rather than their corporeal aspects are examined (Castro 1998: 469). He suggests as an alternative method of labeling introducing the category of supernatural. This way, rather than labeling things as animate or inanimate, they could be labeled as natural, unnatural, or supernatural. He argues that the use of the supernatural category could be useful for controversial objects because their physical inanimateness is not called into question, but their spiritual animateness is noted (1998: 483).

Modern Maya people draw distinctions between appropriate and inappropriate use of spaces (Brown and Emery 2008: 303). For example, some spaces are social. In other words, they are meant for social activities to take place there. A social function in such a place is considered an appropriate activity and is sanctioned by the community. The community views such places as safe. Forests are viewed as the opposite of socially safe spaces. They are seen

antisocial, isolated, and dangerous (Brown and Emery 2008: 303). A social gathering in a forest, especially without the proper ceremony to appease the spirits, would be deemed inappropriate by the Maya community. According to Clendinnen, “An account of the world which dismissed the forests as mere nature... could not, in the ironic context of the Yucatan landscape, compel belief” (Clendinnen 1980: 393). The Maya conceptualized their universe, from the smallest elements of their houses to the largest elements of the cosmos, in terms of the four directions, “The village itself was located firmly in the same frame, its four ceremonial entrances aligning it with the great orientations of the universe and marking the boundary between the unsafe, because not ritually controlled, world of the forest” (1980: 382). Due to these conceptualizations about landscape, Clendinnen believes that the reorganization of Maya communities under the mission system was not as disruptive as it could have been otherwise, “The world as the Maya experienced it, even in the relocated villages, remained the traditional world” (1980: 392). She suggests that the Maya concept of the universe survives today because it was malleable enough to be adapted to Spanish social structure. This, along with the syncretization of indigenous Maya religion with Christianity resulted in contemporary Maya culture existing today as a hybrid of Maya and Spanish tradition. This hybridity can be seen in contemporary Maya folktales.

## CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Similarly, aspects of Maya folktales today that are passed down from generation to generation contain information about how the contemporary and the ancient Maya viewed their ancestral home and landscape and how these beliefs reflect a syncretization of indigenous and European perspectives, “The religion of contemporary Middle American Indian communities fall neatly enough under the descriptive category we call ‘syncretic’” (Clendinnen 1980: 374). According to Clendinnen, “Myths and rituals, integrated experiences for the participant believers, betray to the outside observer, their Spanish and Indian antecedents” (1980: 374). In other words, it is possible to observe the religion practiced by an indigenous group such as the Maya and discern which elements of the religion they practice today come from their indigenous spiritual tradition and which elements are derived from the Catholicism that came with Spanish conquest. In part, this syncreticism can be explained by the fact that the Maya did not and do not today see Christian faith and practicing their native religion as mutually exclusive. They viewed Christianity and their native religion as compatible to the extent that they believed, “When the Lord Jesus Christ entered at last upon his rule, it was the Maya lords who would rule under him” (1980: 392). Although Clendinnen accepts the value of this form of analysis, she cautions against generalizing the experience of one indigenous group under Spanish colonialism to the experience of all groups. In her opinion,

The method has its utility, not least in that it facilitates comparison between cases and allows some estimation of degrees and rates of acculturation. Its defects lie in the assumption that Spanish presence was a constant and was identically perceived by all Indian groups (1980: 374).

She goes on to say that the length and intensity of Spanish conquest in present day Latin America varied between and among indigenous groups. There was no unifying practice

concerning groups like the Maya who were spread over large and often geographically difficult to access areas,

In Yucatan, the combination of slash and burn agriculture, and dependence on natural wells, or cenotes, for reliable water supplies, together with the need for protection from interprovincial raids and the attractive power of a developed collective ritual and social life had dispersed the Indian population in villages and hamlets distributed fairly evenly over whole rocky surface of the peninsula (1980: 375).

She suggests that the structure of the Spanish mission system may actually have contributed to the preservation of Maya culture and that this process can be traced using sixteenth century Spanish records,

The documents permit the identification of those concepts of the old religion consciously and conscientiously preserved by the Maya and the tracing of the processes by which particular Christian elements were selected and incorporated within that familiar frame. It is possible to glimpse the conceptualization of the generic features of their landscape through which they were able to recreate their traditional social worlds within the physically restructured villages imposed on them by the friars (1980: 375).

The way that the Maya conceptualized their landscape helped preserve aspects of their culture because they were able to conceptualize the redefined Spanish villages in the same way. This conceptual element and others can be seen in contemporary Maya folktales today, which contain a mix of indigenous Maya and hybrid Spanish elements.

Future research on this topic could incorporate tales outside of the existing collections that were analyzed for this paper. In person interviews could be conducted with Maya participants in Mexico and Guatemala as well as Maya people living in other countries. Interviews could be taped and transcribed. Since folktales are meant to be heard instead of read seeing and hearing the stories in interviews might lead to other conclusions about the data not readily apparent from reading the stories from collections. Analysis of a wider range of folktales might reveal trends not evident in the limited sample analyzed here. Plans for future research

might include dissertation work on this topic with the aid of a grant to cover travel and research expenses.

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