

MAYA CROSSES DRESSED, FED, ALIVE. A CASE STUDY ON MAYA ANIMISM¹

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Abstract

Maya crosses have always inspired a sense of wonder in the modern observer, because they have been considered animate persons with whom people establish and maintain intersubjective relationships and whom they cherish and nurture. In this study, drawing on my ethnography of “dressing the cross”, an Easter ceremony, I suggest that what separates Maya traditionalism from globalizing modern Maya Spirituality is a particular form of “hierarchical animism”.

Keywords: cross; popular religiosity; spirituality; animism; ethnography; the Maya; Guatemala.

If you visit Guatemala today, it is by no means difficult to chance upon a Maya ritual, a burnt offering in which the symbol of the cross plays a key role. Especially in central Guatemala, where the K’iche’ Maya dominate, an abundant sacrificial practice has developed in recent decades, combining traditional elements with trends of contemporary religious revitalization. Maya spiritual guides prepare large “altars” or “tables” with candles of various colours, and resin products of different kinds, as well as fragrant plants and sweets, such as sugar, chocolate and honey. They pour sugar to form a circle, inside which they mark a “Maya cross/cosmic tree”, representing the world and its four cardinal points: the red, east; the black, west; the white, north; and the yellow, south. The centre is blue/green in colour. The greatest among the purists, who strive to purge Maya culture altogether of colonial impositions, reject candles and sugar as European imports.

I agree with those anthropologists who, in the context of contemporary Maya religion, find it necessary to distinguish between Maya traditionalism and Maya Spirituality.² Maya traditionalism, which the Maya themselves call *costumbre* (“custom”),³ is a hybrid religiosity with pre-Columbian as well as Roman Catholic elements. Maya ritualists thus worship God, Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints, as well as sky and earth, mountains and stones. Maya Spirituality

¹ Work on this study was supported by the Czech Science Foundation grant 23-06394S.

² Garrett W. COOK – Thomas A. OFFIT – Rhonda TAUBE, *Indigenous Religion and Cultural Performance in the New Maya World*, Albuquerque 2013; C. James MACKENZIE, *Indigenous Bodies, Maya Minds. Religion and Modernity in a Transnational K’iche’ Community*, Boulder 2016.

³ If I do not specify the language, it is always Spanish.

(*espiritualidad maya*) is also a hybrid religiosity, drawing for its part on current Maya traditionalism, academic and popular Maya studies, and Western alternative spirituality (formerly known as New Age).⁴ *Guías espirituales* (“spiritual guides”) seek to go back to original Maya cosmovision, primarily by reinterpreting pre-Columbian calendars and the early colonial text *Popol Vuh*. While the origins of Maya traditionalism, now virtually defunct, date back to the sixteenth century, Maya Spirituality has been developing in the last thirty years and is on the rise.⁵

This relatively successful religious revitalization took place against the backdrop of Maya cultural and political activism, with the gradual construction and constitution of a shared (neo)Maya identity.⁶ Maya spiritual guides began to claim that they were purifying *costumbre* from Spanish impositions and building on the “original”, “pristine”, “authentic” pre-Columbian spirituality.⁷ As is often the case with such modern cultural revivals and religious revitalizations, however, their fruits bear more of the features of the present than of the past, and the ancient is reformulated and redefined according to the needs and challenges of today. The practices of Maya spiritual guides are increasingly present in public places, in the media, and on the Internet. Maya Spirituality is beginning to attract appreciation and interest – domestically (and not only from indigenous people but also from some Ladinos) as well as internationally: many Europeans and Americans come to Guatemala for stays both short (participating in individual and collective ceremonies) and long (living in Maya communities or becoming spiritual guides themselves).⁸

Moreover, some Maya spiritual guides began to cross community and regional boundaries, meeting with other indigenous groups as well as Western spiritual seekers, travellers and tourists. They also began to travel abroad and participate in various events, including in Europe. As I am an ethnographer who spent over six months among traditional Maya ritualists in Guatemala, the experience of Maya spiritual guides performing their ceremonies in the Czech Republic stirs special emotions in me. It is strange to observe the act of marking a Maya cross in the grounds of the ruins of a Czech castle and to hear a prayer in a Maya language in

⁴ For a discussion on Western alternative spirituality as the New Age in a general sense, see Wouter J. HANEGRAAFF, *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Leiden 1996; Jan KAPUSTA – Zuzana Marie KOSTIČOVÁ, “From the Trees to the Wood. Alternative Spirituality as an Emergent ‘Official Religion’?”, *Journal of Religion in Europe* 13, 2020, pp. 187–213.

⁵ Jan KAPUSTA, *Obět' pro život. Tradice a spiritualita dnešních Mayů*, Praha 2020, pp. 41–50.

⁶ See Manéli FARAHMAND, “Current Faces of Maya Shamanic Renewals in Mexico”, *International Journal of Latin American Religions* 4, 2020, pp. 48–74; Andrea FREDDI, “‘Ahora también pedimos por nuestra gente en el Norte.’ Las chimanes de Todos Santos (Guatemala) entre migración, desarrollo y mayanización”, *Itinerarios* 33, 2021, pp. 167–187.

⁷ See Jean MOLESKY-POZ, *Contemporary Maya Spirituality. The Ancient Ways are Not Lost*, Austin 2006.

⁸ For more detailed comparisons of Maya Spirituality and Maya traditionalism in our globalizing world, see C. James MACKENZIE, “Politics and Pluralism in the Círculo Sagrado. The Scope and Limits of Pan-Indigenous Spirituality in Guatemala and Beyond”, *International Journal of Latin American Religions* 1, 2017, pp. 353–375; Jan KAPUSTA, “Indigenizace globálního spirituálního diskursu. O jednom setkání západní a máyské spirituality”, *Český lid* 110, 2023, pp. 303–321.

which some Czech topographical names are heard along with the Heart of Sky and the Heart of Earth. The Europeans came among the Maya with the cross; with the cross the Maya are now coming among the Europeans. A reverse mission? Religion for the third millennium?⁹ A specific Latin American New Age?¹⁰ What is actually indigenous and what is exogenous? What is indigenization and what is appropriation? Whether these phenomena are regarded as manifestations of successful religious revitalization with missionary potential or as bizarre products of a long history of Western colonialism and exploitation, they are undoubtedly the next chapter in the process of the globalization of religion.¹¹

With all this in mind, it becomes increasingly relevant and important to ask how key elements of globalizing Maya religiosity, such as the cross, are used, reused and reinterpreted. In what follows, I want to focus on the cross in Maya traditionalism, which occupies the space between pre-Columbian Maya religion and contemporary Maya Spirituality. I want to illustrate my point with one particular Easter event, the ceremony of “dressing of the cross” in Pacumal, a settlement of the municipality San Mateo Ixtatán, Guatemala. The cross is “dressed up” and “fed” to the sound of the marimba in order to fulfil human obligations to powerful nonhuman beings and to ensure rainfall, abundant harvest and renewal of the world. The evident animacy and agency of traditional Maya crosses will then bring me to a discussion of animism in anthropology and Maya studies in particular and I will conclude by suggesting that what separates Maya traditionalism from globalizing modern Maya Spirituality might be a particular form of “hierarchical animism”.

Changing the shirt

Although in my ethnographic work in the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes, located along the Guatemalan border with Mexico, I have mostly focused on a specific site, I have occasionally visited other communities for comparative reasons, with Pacumal being one of them.

The settlement of Pacumal is located about twenty kilometres from the centre of its parent municipality, San Mateo Ixtatán, and although most of the distance can be covered by a pick-up truck, the last stretch of rugged mountainous terrain must be travelled on foot. After two hours of hiking, I found myself in a small village in a deep valley dominated by a prominent rock massif, a sacred mountain with a cave that is the space where the prophecy associated with the coming of the Maya New Year is revealed.¹² I unfortunately missed the annual pilgrimage to this cave that takes several days and starts from the adjacent municipality of San

⁹ Jacques GALINIER – Antoinette MOLINIÉ, *The Neo-Indians. A Religion for the Third Millenium*, Boulder 2013.

¹⁰ Renée DE LA TORRE – Cristina GUTIÉRREZ ZÚÑIGA – Nahayeilli B. JUÁREZ HUET (eds.), *New Age in Latin America. Popular Variations and Ethnic Appropriations*, Leiden 2016.

¹¹ See Thomas J. CSORDAS (ed.), *Transnational Transcendence. Essays on Religion and Globalization*, Berkeley 2009.

¹² On the Maya New Year, see Gabrielle VAIL – Matthew G. LOOPER, “World Renewal Rituals among the Postclassic Yucatec Maya and Contemporary Ch’orti’ Maya”, *Estudios de Cultura Maya* 45, 2015, pp. 121–140.

Sebastián Coatán. However, I knew from the literature that a bearer (*portador*) from San Sebastián would bring a young turkey here, which he and a local ritualist would sacrifice to the mountain to allow them to enter the cave and make it talk to them. Around midnight, the bearer enters the cave and returns with a sign (*señal*) concerning the weather, the harvest and the nature of the coming year. The prophecy is eagerly awaited by Maya traditionalists and immediately disseminated throughout the region.¹³

When I arrived in the village, I asked the first man I came across where the *casa de costumbre* (ritual dwelling) was. Pascual, as he introduced himself to me, pointed to a nearby house made of unfired bricks and said that the *señor* (ritualist)¹⁴ was not at home, that he was praying to the cross, but that I could wait with him until he returned. When old Gaspar arrived, he received me at once. After the obligatory exchange of introductions and pleasantries, I said that I was interested in *costumbre* and that I had heard about the importance of the local tradition. When asked about the New Year prophecy, I was told that the omens for this year were good; there should be plenty of rain and a good harvest of maize, pumpkins and potatoes. However, in the same breath Gaspar added, “there will be yield, if there is *costumbre*; there will be no yield if there is no *costumbre*”. This is why, Gaspar and Pascual explained, they have a *comité de costumbre* (group of ritualists) in the settlement, consisting of five offices (*el primero, el segundo, tesorero, secretario* and *vocal*).¹⁵

I expressed regret for my absence from the prophecy pilgrimage and asked about local rituals in connection with the approaching Easter. To my delight, I learned that there would be a “dressing of the cross” on Holy Thursday and that I could attend. However, I would have to arrive the day before, as the ceremony takes place from the early hours of the morning. Pascual promised me that I would be able to stay overnight at his house.

It all happened as we had agreed. Pascual and his family were indeed expecting me on Wednesday afternoon. I gave the sweets I had brought to the children and Pascual told me that there was a meeting (*reunión*) with the mayor of the village (*alcalde auxiliar*) at six o’clock, which I was expected to attend.

The organizational meeting of the mayor and his associates (*consejo*) was to work out the details of tomorrow’s celebration and the financial contributions involved. I was brought in towards the end of the meeting. I had to explain again who I was and why I was there, and most importantly, to confirm that I did not belong to

¹³ Krystyna DEUSS, *Shamans, Witches, and Maya Priests. Native Religion and Ritual in Highland Guatemala*, London 2007, pp. 263–265; Ruth PIEDRASANTA HERRERA, *Los Chuj. Unidad y rupturas en su espacio*, Ciudad de Guatemala 2009, pp. 83–85.

¹⁴ In the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes, where I conducted my fieldwork, Maya traditionalists do not have a specific designation for their religious specialists and thus use words such as *señor/mamin*, which can be rendered as “gentleman” in English. Despite the widespread use of the term “prayersayers” in the ethnological literature, I refer to them as “ritualists” in my texts.

¹⁵ This is one of the forms of the hierarchically organized group of Maya ritualists typical of the region, who, through their “offices” (*cargos*), devote themselves to the religious service for their community. The role of the *comité de costumbre* is to assist Gaspar, “the pure ritualist” (*el mero rezador*), who clocks and performs the *costumbre*.

any political, economic or environmental organization.¹⁶ I also promised a financial contribution, which was expected of me.

We returned to Pascual's house after dark. The traditional Maya dwelling had a single room lit only by the flames from the stove on which dinner was being prepared. After the meal, Pascual pointed to a corner of the room where there was a plank bed with a wool blanket reserved for me. Soon the flickering light was extinguished, the voices of the children died away and the house and the settlement plunged into the silence of the night.

On 28 March 2013 at six o'clock in the morning, the bang of a firecracker (*bomba*) was an unmistakable sign that the celebration was about to begin. When I arrived at the crosses in the centre of the settlement at around seven o'clock, the marimba had already been playing and several *ancianos* (i.e. older men of repute known to perform and support the *costumbre*) had been standing around. Gaspar sat on a bench in front of the crosses, burning candles and praying half aloud. A group of ritualists started dressing the crosses. Previously, the crosses would have been dressed with pine branches and flowers, now the times had changed and the plants had been replaced with modern materials, in this case with coloured (blue and red) nylon sheets.

While the ritualists were "changing the shirts" (*cambiaron las camisas*) of the crosses, as the *ancianos* observed them, sipping liquor (*aguardiente*), an essential component of traditional Maya ceremonies, the area filled with people, including children, who were running around. Juan, the mayor, approached me and proposed we should toast as namesakes. I then joined Gaspar, the *señor*, and the other ritualists on a bench in front of the crosses for a moment. He turned to me and expressed his satisfaction that "everything was going as it should be" and that the atmosphere was "cheerful" (*alegre*). I knew well that this amounted to saying the feast was going well in the Maya traditionalist fashion that emphasizes the propriety of ritual activities and collective joy. Gaspar explained to me that he was "talking" to the crosses and "feeding" them through prayers and candles. I asked if there were other crosses in the settlement that needed to be talked to and fed; he replied that there were four more, but they were located in the surrounding hills and would be visited on New Year's days.

I spent almost the entire day in Pacumal. When I started my return trip in the afternoon, I had a two-hour climb to the village of Patalcal, where I planned to hitch a ride with a passing pick-up truck to San Mateo. However, the road was already empty this late afternoon and I had to walk a bit further. When I arrived in San Mateo it was already in deep darkness. Tomorrow would be Good Friday.

The meaning of the Maya cross

The cross is the main symbol of Christianity: it represents the suffering of Jesus Christ and refers to the theological concept of salvation. However, Maya

¹⁶ I only understood their initial mistrust later, when I had learned about the disruption and conflict caused by the introduction of hydroelectric projects by international companies in the municipality.

traditionalists do not associate the crosses they venerate, scattered throughout their villages and mountains, with the suffering of Christ and Christian symbolism.

When I talked to people in Pacumal about Easter and the processions,¹⁷ Passion stories and performances currently underway, they referred me to the church in San Mateo. And indeed, the Good Friday events in the centre of San Mateo Ixtatán, culminating in the impressive spectacle of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and two criminals on the ruins of pre-Columbian Maya temples, resembled nothing I had witnessed during the dressing of the cross in Pacumal. The obvious differences and discontinuities of religious life in the two places were also borne out by my later interview with the Catholic priest of San Mateo. Although he was himself of Maya descent and had a sincere interest in and understanding for Maya traditionalism, he had no idea of the pilgrimage for prophecy, the dressing of the cross and the local group of ritualists.

The ritual treatment of crosses in Pacumal is not part of Catholic religious practice. Maya traditionalism sees the cross as an autonomous living being, a person who is talked to, dressed and fed like other Maya saints and deities.¹⁸ For the cooperating religious (the *señor* and members of the *comité de costumbre*) and political (*alcalde auxiliar* and *consejo*) leaders of the community, it is an obligation and a commitment. Properly and joyfully performed, the replacement of the old “shirt” with a new one, this annual renewal just before the onset of the rainy season and the planting of maize, is perceived as essential for a good agricultural year and the proper functioning of the community.

The motif of “dressing the cross” is, of course, not unknown in Catholic Spain and Latin America. It is mainly linked to 3 May, the Feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross, celebrated by the Church to consolidate and strengthen respect for this key Christian symbol. The celebration of the Cross of May (*la Cruz de Mayo*),¹⁹ as the feast is sometimes popularly known,²⁰ was spread by Spanish missionaries as a Christianizing tool in many areas of Latin America, where crosses are still decorated and dressed, just like statues of the Virgin Mary and Catholic saints.²¹ Naturally, this practice has not escaped the Maya region, as evidenced, for example, by the description of the Feast of the Seven Crosses (*la fiesta de las Siete Cruces*) in

¹⁷ On Holy Week, the symbolism of the cross and the processions in the 16th century New Spain, see Monika BRENÍŠŇOVÁ, *Del convento al hombre. El significado de la arquitectura conventual y su arte en la Nueva España del siglo XVI*, (Tesis de Doctorado), Praga 2017, pp. 94–96, 136, 159–160; idem, “Picturing Monasteries. 16th Century New Spain Monastic Architecture as Site of Religious Processions”, in: idem ed., *(Trans)missions: Monasteries as Sites of Cultural Transfers*, Oxford 2022, pp. 60–77.

¹⁸ See Jan KAPUSTA, “Saint on the Run. The Dynamics of Homemaking and Creating a Sacred Place”, *Traditiones* 47, 2018, pp. 27–49.

¹⁹ On the Feast of the Holy Cross in the monastic architecture and art of the 16th century New Spain, see BRENÍŠŇOVÁ, *Del convento al hombre*, pp. 96, 100, 135–137.

²⁰ See Julio CARO BAROJA, *La estación del amor. Fiestas populares de mayo a San Juan*, Madrid 1979.

²¹ See Isidro MARTÍNEZ GARCÍA, “Los Mayos y las fiestas de primavera”, *Zenizate* 1, 2001, pp. 31–53.

a Yucatan community, where the crosses are “dressed up in *huipil*” and “fed”.²² The Spanish worship and decoration of the cross has clearly become intertwined with the native concept of deities that need to be cared for and nourished.

It is worth noting here that the decoration of crosses at Easter, typically on Easter Sunday, can of course be found in many areas of the Christian world. The Easter fusion of the commemoration of the death and resurrection of Christ with the celebration of the end of winter and the coming of spring certainly needs no lengthy elaboration, and it is the same case with its logical extension in the decoration of Christian crosses with spring flowers.²³ However, noting that fact is not to downplay the impact of Spanish colonialism on Maya culture, but rather to point out that the concept of the cross in Maya traditionalism is the result of many centuries of coexistence of both the indigenous Maya and the imported Catholic experience and imagination.

The cross, as a key religious and cosmological symbol, was not something that was new to the Maya, and that they only learned about from Spanish missionaries. In pre-Columbian Maya culture, the cross had a fundamental, if multifaceted and ambiguous, meaning, whose most typical aspects included delineation of geographic space and association with the tree and with maize. First, the cross treats space both horizontally, in the sense of the four cardinal directions, and vertically, in the sense of a connection between sky and earth. Crosses therefore serve both as the “guardians” of the community, positioned in the four corners of its geographic space, and as the “centre” or “heart” of the world at its core.²⁴ Second, as Pugh notes, “the Maya do not appear to have strongly differentiated between trees and crosses”.²⁵ The cross has always been associated, and even confused, with trees, especially with the *ceiba* (which, as a world tree, reaches underground with its roots and into the sky with its crown), with flowers and maize, and thus with the creation and renewal of vegetation and life in general.²⁶

The green Maya cross (*ya'ax che'*, literally the “first/green tree”) is probably most famously documented in the scene depicted on the lid of Pacal's 7th-century sarcophagus at Palenque. Its most spectacular contemporary examples are certainly the large crosses at Zinacantán and San Juan Chamula, decorated with pine branches or semicircles of flowers, in both cases evoking tree crowns. As Christenson writes, “In most instances the Maya probably adopted the Christian symbol of the cross willingly as a symbol of regeneration that fit well with their own indigenous

²² María Jesús CEN MONTUY, “La fiesta de las Siete Cruces de Tixméhuac”, *Estudios de Cultura Maya* 34, 2009, pp. 129 and 136.

²³ Readers familiar with Central European culture will have thought of the possible connection between Maundy Thursday (literally called “Green Thursday” in German, Czech and Slovak) with plants, vegetation and renewal. Spanish Catholicism, however, refers to the day as “Holy Thursday” (*Jueves Santo*).

²⁴ Zuzana Marie KOSTIČOVÁ, *Náboženství Mayů*, Praha 2018, pp. 293–296.

²⁵ Timothy W. PUGH, “Maya Sacred Landscapes at Contact”, in: Leslie G. CECIL – Timothy W. PUGH (eds.), *Maya Worldviews at Conquest*, Boulder 2009, p. 321.

²⁶ Karl A. TAUBE, “Flower Mountain. Concepts of Life, Beauty, and Paradise among the Classic Maya”, *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 45, 2004, pp. 69–98.

beliefs.”²⁷ “With the introduction of Roman Catholicism after the Spanish Conquest, the Maya of Yucatan soon conflated the Christian cross with their ancient World Tree and the Wayeb’ period with Easter”²⁸ that is, with the five-day delicate period that precedes the arrival of the Maya New Year and around which the most serious ritual and sacrificial activity is concentrated. Christenson describes how crosses in present-day Santiago Atitlán are decorated with palm leaves and flowers during Holy Week²⁹ and how Maya traditionalists dress up and raise the cross as a world tree on Holy Friday.³⁰

These meanings can also be observed in Pacumal. The cross organizes the world spatially and makes the tree and the maize present. The “dressing of the cross” is timed for Easter to foreshadow the arrival of the rainy season and the sowing of agricultural crops. The colours chosen for the “shirt”, blue/green (Maya languages do not distinguish between the two colours)³¹ and red, are strikingly reminiscent of Vogt’s Zinacantán ethnography, where wooden crosses were “dressed up” in green pine branches and red geraniums³² and then “fed” by candles, copal incense and liquor.³³ From my research in the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes, I know that the old traditionalists prefer wooden crosses and say they “plant” them just like plants and decorate them to look like trees. Crosses are seen as living beings, inviting interpersonal relationships and respect. An old wooden cross cannot be thrown away or destroyed, I was told by Maya traditionalists, it remains in place with the new one, or is given a different location.³⁴ La Farge and Byers, who were some of the first ethnographers of the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes, provide the following description: “These crosses see, think, hear, and also speak to those shamans who know how to put themselves in touch with them.”³⁵

Redefining animism

I remember a Maya traditionalist, who, during the feast described above, pointed to the crosses, explaining to me that “these are idols”. He did not mean to show disapproval, but rather his knowledge of how to bring this subject home to a foreigner. What came through in his words was above all what his ancestors had heard for many centuries from Catholic missionaries and what the current generation is now hearing again from Protestant missionaries: namely, that they had made pagan idols of Christian crosses, to which they wrongly attributed life and power. I could

²⁷ Allan J. CHRISTENSON, *The Burden of the Ancients. Maya Ceremonies of World Renewal from the Pre-Columbian Period to the Present*, Austin 2016, p. 127.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 60.

²⁹ Allen J. CHRISTENSON, *Art and Society in a Highland Maya Community. The Altarpiece of Santiago Atitlan*, Austin 2001, p. 191.

³⁰ CHRISTENSON, *The Burden*, pp. 309 and 332.

³¹ Many such crosses, painted blue-green, can be seen in the Chiapas mountains, for example in the aforementioned Maya communities of San Juan Chamula and Zinacantán.

³² Egon Z. VOGT, *Tortillas for the Gods. A Symbolic Analysis of Zinacanteco Rituals*, Cambridge 1976, p. 11.

³³ *Ibidem*, pp. 49–50.

³⁴ KAPUSTA, *Obět’*, p. 135.

³⁵ Oliver LA FARGE – Douglas BYERS, *The Year Bearer’s People*, New Orleans 1931, p. 186.

not help remembering E. B. Tylor's old concept of animism, the fundamental misunderstanding of the matter by evolutionist anthropologists and the just reasons for abandoning and re-evaluating this concept. I realized again how *little* use the basic assumptions and terminology that emerged in modern Europe are for research into such a remote religious practice.

Tylor conceived of animism as the oldest and most primitive form of religion: like children, who sometimes attribute life and personality to their toys and other objects, so too whole societies at the childhood stage of their development. In both cases, however, this is a fallacy, a *false epistemology*, refuted by Western modern science, the pinnacle of evolution of human knowledge.³⁶ It is likely that Tylor formulated his theory of animism primarily based on his experience with London spiritualists and simply projected the way modern European spiritualists conceptualized a person onto other societies.³⁷

Tylor's animism in the sense of "belief in supernatural spirits" or "spiritualization of inanimate objects", i.e., the insertion of some active, spiritual quality into passive, physical objects, was eventually rightly dismissed as ethnocentric by most anthropologists. It presupposes not only the idea of a rupture between the natural and supernatural, the physical and spiritual, body and soul, but also the idea of persons as *separate human entities*. In contemporary theories of animism, however, something quite different is at stake. The person is treated not as an individual but as a "dividual", to use Strathern's now classic term.³⁸ In conceptualizing the person, we thus start not from individuals as clearly defined and separate entities, but from the *relations* between them. The person is first and foremost a bundle of relations with others. But these others are not subjects that only secondarily relate to surrounding objects, but from the very beginning ones-in-relation-to-others, positioned outside the subject/object difference. What is more, as our Maya example makes clear, in some cultures there is no sharp distinction between the human and the nonhuman, and they refuse to attribute the notion of person only to humans. As Graham Harvey aptly sums up, "animists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and life is always lived in relationship with others".³⁹

Although the redefinition of animism is a relatively recent affair, it was foreshadowed by A. Irving Hallowell in his text "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View" (1960). In it, Hallowell shows that the Ojibwa category of person is not limited to humans but includes *other-than-human persons*. Moreover, the Ojibwa also use the animate grammatical category for entities such as the sun, thunder and stone. These Canadian hunter-gatherers, however, do not dogmatically attribute living souls to all objects. Simply, they do not, like us, reject *a priori* the possibility that

³⁶ Edward B. TYLOR, *Primitive Culture. Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*, London 1903 (1871).

³⁷ George W. STOCKING, "Animism in Theory and Practice. E. B. Tylor's Unpublished 'Notes on Spiritualism'", *Man* 6, 1971, p. 90.

³⁸ Marilyn STRATHERN, *The Gender of the Gift. Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*, Berkeley 1988.

³⁹ Graham HARVEY, *Animism. Respecting the Living World*, New York 2006, p. xi.

certain things can be alive under certain circumstances. The key test is experience, personal testimony that the entities in question *acted*, moved, were encountered in an unusual context, appeared during a ceremony, were seen in a dream, etc.⁴⁰

Hallowell stresses that this is not about “supernatural” beings, because there is no natural/supernatural distinction in Ojibwa ontology;⁴¹ nor is it about the “personification” of natural objects, because these things have never been purely natural, material, impersonal;⁴² nor is it about their “anthropomorphization”, because this concept is not of particular significance in this context: for example, the Thunder Bird can shapeshift and assume a bird form as well as a human form.⁴³ What is common to different other-than-human persons is their ability to communicate, to maintain social relations and to play a vital role in interactions with others. They are often more powerful than humans, can be unpredictable and deceptive in appearance. However, a good and happy human life cannot be achieved without their help and cooperation; so the Ojibwa emphasize the moral value of reciprocity and mutual obligations.⁴⁴

The text “‘Animism’ Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology” (1999) can be seen as a symbolic beginning of the comeback of animism in contemporary anthropology. In it, the author Nurit Bird-David aims to break away from the Tylorian heritage and define animism in a new way as a *relational epistemology*, i.e. as a way of getting to know the world in terms of relationality with other beings and aspects of the environment. Her example is the native concept of *devaru*, which the hunter-gatherer Nayaka of South India use to refer to powerful nonhuman super-persons. These “supernatural spirits”, as modernist anthropology would classify them, have, however, nothing to do with either “the supernatural” or “spirits”, but are a way to cognitively orient the interrelationships with beings that the Nayaka encounter in their lifeworld and that prompt them to ask questions and look for answers.⁴⁵

In her text, Bird-David draws on Strathern’s concept of “dividual” and takes *devaru* as emergent objectified relationships: a hill *devaru* objectifies and makes known the relationships between Nayaka and the hill, an elephant *devaru* objectifies and makes known the relationships between man and elephant.⁴⁶ These super-persons exist so long as there is a reciprocal relationship with them. This epistemology is not flawed, but simply different from the one developed by European modernity. “Against ‘I think, therefore I am’ stand ‘I relate, therefore I am’ and ‘I know as I relate’.”⁴⁷ Thus, knowledge proceeding from the “I” is replaced by knowledge

⁴⁰ A. Irving HALLOWELL, “Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View”, in: Graham HARVEY (ed.), *Readings in Indigenous Religions*, London 2002 (1960), pp. 24–25 and 39–40.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 29.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 44–46.

⁴⁵ Nurit BIRD-DAVID, “‘Animism’ Revisited. Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology”, *Current Anthropology* 40 (= Supplement 1), 1999, pp. 72–73.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 78.

proceeding from the “we”: “one we-ness” emerges, contrasting with the emphasis on “otherness”.⁴⁸

One of the most prominent contemporary proponents of animism is Tim Ingold. Against the backdrop of the cosmologies of native peoples of the circumpolar North, he presents animistic thinking as an *ontology* that can be relevant and inspiring for our Western knowledge, science and religion. In his influential text “Rethinking The Animate, Re-Animating Thought” (2006), he describes animism as a way of being that is open to a world in constant emergence, grounded in the permanent encountering and mixing of many different lifelines, in a web of relationality, reciprocity and coexistence. According to him, animacy is “the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence. The animacy of the lifeworld, in short, is not the result of an infusion of spirit into substance, or of agency into materiality, but is rather ontologically prior to their differentiation”.⁴⁹

In other words, life is not something ascribed to inanimate objects, but is already present in the very process of the *emergence* of things. Things are alive precisely because they *are not* objects animated by some active agent.⁵⁰ Ingold thus seeks life not in the interiority of objects but in the encounters between things, which together form a meshwork of relationships and commitments. Animistic being-in-the-world requires a cultivation of attentiveness to others, an active participation in the world of which we are a part and on which we depend. In this context, Ingold speaks of *correspondence* – the reciprocal relating of individual lifelines with the world in a constant state of becoming.⁵¹

Maya hierarchical animism

I believe that Maya cosmology can be characterized as animistic, but only if we avoid modern ethnocentric projections of Western ideas about persons and society. In fact, in the last decade Maya studies have begun to explore a distinctive animistic ontology, both in the context of the pre-Columbian Maya⁵² and contemporary Maya traditionalism.⁵³ The insights and reflections accumulated by anthropologists such as Hallowell, Bird-David and Ingold can serve as a good stepping stone in this regard.

In this text I have argued that the Maya cross involves the delineation of landscapes, the connection of sky and earth, tree and maize, and that it is a Maya microcosm. And like the Maya cosmos, it is alive. It requires the respect, care and work of people who participate in the generation and regeneration of the world as

⁴⁸ Ibidem, pp. 73, 78.

⁴⁹ Tim INGOLD, “Rethinking the Animate, Re-Animating Thought”, *Ethnos* 71, 2006, p. 10.

⁵⁰ Idem, “Being Alive to a World without Objects”, in: Graham HARVEY (ed.), *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, London 2014, p. 219.

⁵¹ Tim INGOLD, “On Human Correspondence”, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 23, 2016, pp. 9–27.

⁵² See, e.g., Eleanor HARRISON-BUCK – Julia A. HENDON (eds.), *Relational Identities and Other-Than-Human Agency in Archaeology*, Louisville 2018.

⁵³ See, e.g., MACKENZIE, *Indigenous Bodies*.

a whole. The relationships that the cross constantly objectifies and makes known (to use Bird-David's words) are thus relationships not only with the cross itself, but also with the tree, maize and landscapes. Crosses are embodiments of the Maya lifeworld and are therefore planted in the centre of the community, in its corners, and at the foot and on the peaks of mountains. Crosses are regarded as autonomous living and acting other-than-human persons (as Hallowell would say), they relate to what people experience, interact with them and have the power to influence their lives. Crosses, like saints and mountains, are seen as full partners in the ongoing formation and constitution of a single common world, as part of a meshwork of reciprocal engagement and correspondence (as Ingold would add).

The animacy and agency of Maya crosses are manifest, above all, in the existential-phenomenological reality of mutual relationship and correspondence as lived and felt by Maya ritualists themselves. They see their crosses as concrete, visible and tangible beings that inhabit a lifeworld similar to that of humans: they are born and die, they grow and shrink, they eat and starve. Here the human and the nonhuman are intertwined and brought together through mutual feeding, sacrificial giving and continual becoming. This binding reciprocity lies at the heart of participation in the course of a world that is fundamentally tricky, fragile and precarious.

An empirical and theoretical problem that arises in the context of postulating the existence of Maya animism is that the anthropologists mentioned above base their conceptions of animism on hunter-gatherer, highly egalitarian societies, while the pre-Columbian and contemporary Maya live in agricultural communities that are hierarchically organized. A key factor in the redefinition of animism has also been the study of Amazonian perspectivism, which is regarded as a fundamentally egalitarian or horizontal ontology.⁵⁴ From this perspective, Maya cosmology naturally appears to be distinctly hierarchical or vertical, and, as Descola would say, analogist.⁵⁵

However, this concept of animism has also been challenged by the ethnography of north-western South America. As Halbmayer argues, "In contrast to standard Amazonian animism, in the Isthmo-Colombian area more hierarchical forms of animism prevail",⁵⁶ making this form of animism resemble more that of Southeast Asia.⁵⁷ This may support Sahlins's intuition that analogism and animism may share some common ground and that, in fact, something like "hierarchical animism" might actually exist.⁵⁸ Finally, we should not forget his argument that "Amerindian

⁵⁴ See especially Eduardo VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism", *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, 1998, pp. 469–488; idem, "Exchanging Perspectives. The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies", *Common Knowledge* 10, 2004, pp. 463–484.

⁵⁵ Philippe DESCOLA, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, Chicago 2013.

⁵⁶ Ernst HALBMAYER, "Amerindian Sociocosmologies of Northwestern South America. Some Reflections on the Dead, Metamorphosis, and Religious Specialists", *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 24, 2019, p. 28.

⁵⁷ Kaj ÅRHEM – Guido SPRENGER (eds.), *Animism in Southeast Asia*, New York 2016.

⁵⁸ Marshall SAHLINS, "On the Ontological Scheme of 'Beyond Nature and Culture'", *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4, 2014, p. 282.

communal animism also knows a hierarchical aspect insofar as the spirit masters of game animals rule the individuals of their species”.⁵⁹ It seems, then, that what we are looking at is a continuum of more and less symmetrical and asymmetrical animist forms. Be that as it may, what is a fact is that a growing number of anthropologists are finding the re-defined concept of animism useful for understanding Maya cosmology.⁶⁰

Another issue debated in this context is the nature of Maya crosses’ animacy. Miguel Astor-Aguilera has advanced the idea that the Maya regard crosses as “communicating objects”, as material vessels by means of which people communicate with invisible and intangible beings, especially ancestors.⁶¹ I, on the other hand, have argued that the Maya understand crosses as living and acting on their own, i.e., as bodily-souled and immanent-transcendent beings, which, of course, can be – and indeed are – associated with ancestors or mountain and earth deities.⁶² It seems, however, that this is largely an empirical discussion and that both might be true in some ethnographic cases, sometimes even at the same time.

Conclusion

Finally, I would suggest that perhaps it is the Maya hierarchical animism that is the key variable in distinguishing Maya traditionalism from modern Maya Spirituality. After all, Maya crosses have always inspired a sense of wonder in the modern observer, because they have been considered animate persons with whom people establish and maintain intersubjective relationships and whom they cherish and nurture. In Maya Spirituality, by contrast, they are relegated to mere symbols of the cosmos. They refer to the ordering of the universe and ultimately to harmony with the Creator and Former, often merged with the New Age notion of Energy.

In fact, this is just another historical reinterpretation of the Maya cross, which remains a prime example of the dynamic and creative encounter between Maya and European cosmologies, first in the context of Spanish Catholicism, and now again in the context of Western alternative spirituality. As such, it deserves further study.

(Written in English by the author)

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

⁶⁰ See, e.g., C. James MACKENZIE, “Judas Off the Noose. Sacerdotes Mayas, Costumbristas, and the Politics of Purity in the Tradition of San Simón in Guatemala”, *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 14, 2009, pp. 355–381; Pedro PITARCH RAMÓN, “The Two Maya Bodies. An Elementary Model of Tzeltal Personhood”, *Ethnos* 77, 2012, pp. 93–114; Milan KOVÁČ, “The Worshipers of Stones. Lacandon Sacred Stone Landscape”, *Ethnologia Actualis* 20, 2020, pp. 1–27; Alonso ZAMORA CORONA, “Coyote Drums and Jaguar Altars. Ontologies of the Living and the Artificial among the K’iche’ Maya”, *Journal of Material Culture* 25, 2020, pp. 324–347; Jan KAPUSTA, “The Pilgrimage to the Living Mountains. Representationalism, Animism, and the Maya”, *Religion, State & Society* 50, 2022, pp. 182–198.

⁶¹ Miguel A. ASTOR-AGUILERA, *The Maya World of Communicating Objects. Quadripartite Crosses, Trees, and Stones*, Albuquerque 2010.

⁶² KAPUSTA, “The Pilgrimage”.

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