

The Face of the World: A Study on the  
Cosmological among the K'iche' Maya of  
Momostenango

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*Declaration*

I, Alonso Rodrigo Zamora Corona, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

**Abstract:** The relationship between cosmology and social life has been a long-standing theoretical problem in anthropology: why do people in many different societies often assert that their social actions proceed not from themselves, but from ancestors, gods and cosmological forces? Despite general calls for a holistic understanding of social life and native ideas, cosmology as a topic in social anthropology has been understood in a reductionist sense, as a system of representations that ‘justifies’ or guides the actions of people within a social system, a reflection of more ‘real’ or ‘rational’ underlying notions uncovered by the anthropologist. Inspired by non-reductionist models of causation which arose in the study of emergence in biological systems, this thesis proposes to understand cosmological action in social life as an instance of “downward causation”, a phenomenon where a high-level entity may influence and exert causation upon its own constituent parts.

Inspired by my own ethnographic study of the cosmology of the K’iche’ Maya of Guatemala and its influence in concrete lives, I propose a twist to former sociological applications of this concept. In K’iche’ cosmology, sacred altars are actual containers of copies of cosmological entities and powers; by interacting with these places, people can act interact with ancestors and the gods, changing their own social fortunes and even acting in behalf of cosmological forces. Following the proposals of the ‘ontological turn’ to take people’s conceptions about their own social experiences seriously, I propose that, in anthropology, downward causation must be ‘flipped upside down’ to better grasp the point of view of the other: instead of conceiving cosmology as an emergent property of social systems which acts upon its own constituent parts, we should understand

social agents as emergent properties of cosmological systems, defined by their capacity of exerting cosmological actions upon social life.

## IMPACT STATEMENT

The data, analyses and insights contained in this thesis have different potential impacts both for academics and non-academics. From an academic perspective, this thesis presents information and proposals that could be of relevance for scholars within its topic, mainly social anthropologists and Maya ethnologists and ethnohistorians. Within ethnology, this thesis shows new and until now unknown aspects of the *costumbre* cosmology in indigenous communities of Guatemala. For ethnohistorians, this thesis reveals some unknown aspects regarding the war between Guatemala and El Salvador (1906) from an indigenous perspective. Regarding social anthropology itself, this thesis advances an original conception regarding cosmology in social anthropology, that of cosmological downward causation, a proposal which hopes to make a pertinent intervention in the debate on a topic that has been generally recognized as having entered in a recent crisis.

Regarding potential impacts outside academia, this thesis engages with a number of political topics of importance, both local and global. It shows the relevance of cosmological ideas in the organization and experience of daily life and local politics in a local level, information which could perhaps inform the understanding of the many humanitarian agents and policy makers that work in Guatemala. Ultimately, the thesis deals with authority and power, and as such it has the potential to contribute to studies of governance, issues of social order and disorder, and conflict. Finally, this thesis also engages with the topic of indigenous resistances against extractivism, a subject of great importance today. In contrast to more pessimistic assessments or prior local characterizations of

political indifference, I try to show how indigenous activists have successfully articulated a resistance against mining concessions by working within their own local power structures. Thus, in these times where effective actions against extractivism and (consequently) climate change are needed, the understanding of how indigenous agents of resistance are articulating their own projects can lead us to a better articulation of our own ideas and projects regarding this struggle.

Finally, one of the main aims of this thesis is to present the understanding that indigenous people in Guatemala have about all sorts of social, political and historical subjects. The presentation of indigenous knowledge and insights is not only of relevance to scholars or anthropologists, I think, but holds great importance to our understanding of the present, a present so beset by ecological, political and ethnic frictions that need to be effectively addressed not only by activists or policy-makers, but by each one of us as members of a community that is more global, and yet more diverse, with every passing day.

*To my late brother, Julio, and to Sol, my sister*



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## **NOTE ON K'ICHE' ORTOGRAPHY AND TRANSLATIONS**

The K'iche' orthography used in this thesis is that established by the Academy of Maya Languages of Guatemala (Cerezo Arévalo 1987). All the translations from Spanish are mine, all the translations from K'iche' are by Abraham Ajiataz.

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. The crisis of cosmology in social anthropology

It is difficult to begin a thesis by addressing the recent crisis of its main subject, a crisis that could probably mean none other than the definitive decline of the topic itself in social anthropology. However, in the case of cosmology, the subjects of this thesis, it is imperative to do so. In recent times, perhaps the most complete assessment of this crisis and the most relevant proposals for future engagements with the topic are to be found in the introduction to the collective volume *Framing Cosmologies: The Anthropology of Worlds* (Abramson and Holbraad 2014), which is the product of the work of the Cosmology, Religion, Ontology, and Culture Research (CROC) Group at University College London. Particularly poignant there is the observation formulated by the late Mary Douglas: “hasn’t the urbanisation of the developing world together with the concerted repatriation of anthropology to the metropolis in recent decades rendered our traditional concern with indigenous cosmologies well-nigh anachronistic?” (Abramson and Holbraad 2014: 1). If so, one wonders: what value could it have to engage with cosmology as a topic nowadays? How to engage in a relevant way with the cosmological ideas of the people of Momostenango, Guatemala, a topic which has been already studied before in the collective, totalizing, holistic sense I have alluded to, as the classical works on the region (Carmack 1998a; Tedlock 1992, Cook 2000) have already done?

As an assessment of the conditions of this crisis, Allen Abramson and Martin Holbraad have presented a series of criticisms to the notions that underlay the treatment of cosmology as a subject in classical social anthropology,

notions that were problematic to begin with, and which have conditioned the recent decline of the subject in the discipline. Thus, according to these authors, the holistic, static, totalising and organic cosmologies presented in classical anthropology were somewhat a reflection of the hierarchical, ethnocentric way in which anthropological theory was constructed during the XXth century, a theory that could be characterized itself as “anthropology’s cosmology of the social” (Abramson and Holbraad 2014: 7). In general, during the XXth century, anthropological theories of all kinds tended to coincide in the notion that ‘indigenous cosmologies’ were more or less holistic totalities that could be mapped into the social, in the assessment that they were scientifically *false*, and in that they were mere reflections of the more important and “more rational” underlying principles uncovered by the theoretical activity of social scientists: “basic human needs (functionalism), moral and socio-political order and reproduction (structural-functionalism), ecological adaptation (cultural materialism), individual agency (methodological individualism), the expression of underlying social values (interpretativism, symbolism), situated social relations (practice theory) or of a gestalt personality (culture and personality school), ideology and false consciousness (Marxism): all of these classic anthropological positions were posited as competing explanations as to why societies the world over set such great store in imagining the totality of the world in ways that have to be recognised as false.” (Abramson and Holbraad 2014: 8). Thus, what anthropologists sought to do, in a perhaps ironic way, was to try to subordinate indigenous cosmologies to their own cosmologies of the social. However, as soon as these classical perspectives were criticized and the pre-

globalization conditions from which they arose started to fade, the topic went into a continuous decline, from which perhaps it has not really escaped.

As a chart or guideline for future fructiferous engagements, Abramson and Holbraad suggest that we should be wary of holistic schemes and totalizing pretensions (2014: 3), and have insisted that cosmology should stop being assumed as a 'baseline' for a cultural kind of explanation of people's lives, nor serve as a departure for totalising and exotic discourses; instead, cosmology should be engaged with a spirit of ethnographical experimentation and imbrication with other dimensions of people's lives, taking the ethnographic contingency seriously (cfr. 2014: 15). And indeed, along with this critical balance, the engagements and proposals presented by the contributors of the mentioned volume, as well as the rest of their anthropological production, are not only valuable analyses that both anticipate and follow this spirit, but also an encouraging and constant guidance for this thesis.<sup>1</sup>

However, one wonders: if we are critical with the totalising ideas of old-school social anthropology, and even more, with the idea of totality itself, is cosmology still valid as a topic? Isn't *κόσμος* (and its modern calques along with it) a word that conveys the idea of order and even some totality<sup>2</sup>? If this has become problematic, why not abandon the term at all? Isn't cosmology the activity of "imagining the totality of the world" (Abramson and Holbraad 2014: 8)? Why not disperse then *cosmology* into some of its sub-topics like personhood, temporality or spirits, to name a few? Is it possible to even study cosmology by itself in a way that doesn't fall into the reductionist conundrums of former theory? How to talk about the totality par excellence, the *cosmos*, in a non-totalising way?

This thesis strives to achieve a non-reductionist conception of the relationship between cosmology and social life. This proposition would seem particularly difficult to defend, particularly because of Holbraad and Pedersen's convincing call, within the ontological turn, to avoid any pretensions of establishing ultimate statements on reality proper of the 'bullet-proof' ontologies of contemporary philosophy (Holbraad and Pedersen 2018: 36), and to fully embrace the spirit of contingency proper of ethnography as a conduit for theoretical experimentation (cfr. Holbraad and Pedersen 2018: 48). I hope that, despite this caution, with which I agree and which I will follow, my argument in favour of a new vision of cosmology remains convincing. However, before outlining my proposal in a preliminary way, perhaps a useful way to deploy the problem within a context that is closer to that which this thesis deals with will be to present things from a regional theoretical perspective.<sup>3</sup> I hope that the reader will excuse this detour of sorts, but I also consider it imperative to get the reader closer the theoretical horizon recalled in the preceding lines as it manifested in the study of materials closer to my own ethnography.

## **1.2. The study of cosmologies in indigenous communities of Mexico and Guatemala**

In general, the anthropological study of cosmologies in indigenous communities of Mexico and Guatemala, and particularly of those groups that have been labelled by the ethnologists as Maya, seems to have ran along the aforementioned developments of classical anthropological theory. However, I will ask the reader to bear with me, for the local proponents of those theories are not only important

interlocutors to this thesis but, as I hope to show, both my problem and my proposed solution cannot be understood without engaging with this context.

If a starting point for the modern anthropological study of ‘indigenous cosmologies’<sup>4</sup> in both Mexico and Guatemala could be established, it definitely should be the work of Robert Redfield, who studied the notion of “world view” among the Maya of Yucatán, whom he characterized as conforming peasant communities, which he studied in relationship to his ideas on “localism”, “folklore” and “survivals” (1941); this led him to develop the now discredited notion of a “primitive world view” (1952). Of course, in account of its contradictions and problematic elements, like the difference between a “primitive” and a “rational” worldview, the whole conception entered into a prolonged crisis in the following decades (cfr. Kearney 1975), which has finally led to some contemporary anthropologists to even declare it definitely dead (Beine 2010). However, Redfield’s influence was strong both in Mexico, where he did fieldwork with anthropologists of such prominence as Alfonso Villa Rojas, and in Guatemala, in which he also did fieldwork along with his disciple Sol Tax between 1934 and 1941. Redfield’s and Tax collaboration defined regional research to the point that it became the core of the so-called “Redfield-Tax program” that deeply influenced Guatemalan anthropology (cfr. Rubinstein [1991] 2017). While Tax (a student of Radcliffe-Brown at Chicago) eventually diverged from Redfield’s “folk-urban” program (Rubinstein [1991] 2017: 10-11), he would essentially follow his mentor’s lines in regard to a “primitive world view” (Tax 1941: 38) which, in his opinion, emerged from a unified “social-political-religious system” that was proper of indigenous communities (Tax 1941: 28). Thus, Redfield’s influence defined the particularistic, exoticizing

character of the depiction of indigenous cosmologies in Guatemala from that time on. Deeply linked with these depictions, and as an important basis for the later structural-functionalist oriented ethnography that would develop in the region, Tax would be the first to recognize and describe the indigenous religious *cargo* system (1937), defined as a limited number of hierarchically organized politico-religious appointments that are distributed in a rotating basis among the members of a community. The participation of individuals on this system gives them prestige, but appointments in it often imply a great deal of expenditures for the participants because of its non-remunerated character and because of the expenses incurred through the organization of religious festivals. Both the religious and political hierarchies are kept separated, but they are strongly linked. The system as such has been defined as the typical regional institution of indigenous social organization (cfr. Korsbaek 2017: 176), and as such it would become the “socio-political-religious system” preferably associated with this “world view”: thus, a certain holistic integration of cosmology and society that guided classical regional anthropology in the zone was born.<sup>5</sup>

Independently from Redfield’s programme, Tax’s contemporaries Ruth Bunzel and Maud Oakes produced deep accounts of indigenous calendrical shamanism in Guatemala, the first working in Chichicastenango (1952) within the framework of the “culture and personality” school of Ruth Benedict, the second via a more eclectic approach developed during her fieldwork in the Mam village of Todos Santos (1951) which would later develop into a proximity with the Jungian school (1987). Meanwhile, in Chiapas (Mexico), the pioneering study of Calixta Guiteras Holmes (1961) on Tzotzil “world view” paved the way for

detailed, engaged descriptions of indigenous cosmologies, somewhat echoing Redfield's terminology but not sharing his theoretical assumptions completely.

In general, however, during that time, studies and theories that considered indigenous communities as either "peasant" or "isolated" appeared, proposing models deeply informed by the ideas of Redfield. Despite Tax's own pioneering economic-anthropological study of indigenous forms of capitalism (1963), the most influential definition of the social systems of indigenous communities of the region was without a doubt Eric Wolf's notion of "closed corporate peasant communities" (1957), which would define regional ethnography from that point on. Meanwhile, as an important political context to the development of regional anthropology, *indigenismo* was adopted as the official cultural policy towards indigenous people by the governments of Mexico and Guatemala. *Indigenismo* was a policy defined by the idea of isolated indigenous communities that had to be developed and integrated to "national progress" via acculturation (cfr. Caso 1958: 49-50), and it was influential in many Latin American countries, especially after the Interamerican Indigenista Congress of Patzcuaro, Michoacan, in 1940.<sup>6</sup> In Guatemala, the *indigenismo* program influenced the creation of the National *Indigenista* Institute (*Instituto Indigenista Nacional*) in 1945. The leading figures were Antonio Gobaud Carrera, who made a summary and an outline of the history and program of *indigenismo* in Guatemala (1964) and Joaquín Noval, whose main concern was the political application of *indigenismo* to solve the socioeconomical problems of the indigenous population (cfr. 1962: 5).<sup>7</sup> In Mexico, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, the director of the National *Indigenista* Institute of Mexico (founded 1948), developed from his own initial studies on indigenous forms of government



(Aguirre Beltrán 1953) an *indigenista* theory of indigenous “refuge zones”, buffer-zones that were more or less isolated from Mestizo influence (cfr. Aguirre Beltrán 1967), and which had to partake of an inevitable “acculturation process” facilitated by the government (cfr. Aguirre Beltrán 1967).

Thus, on the basis of such depictions of isolated, corporate peasant communities depictions which were conditioned by more or less pre-globalized conditions, structural-functionalist ideas began to be influential in Mexican and Guatemalan anthropology, and deeply marked assumptions about cosmology. The pioneering work of the local structural-functionalist approach was that of Alfonso Villa Rojas, a colleague of Redfield (as mentioned earlier), who characterized the indigenous cosmology of *nagualismo* in Oxchuc as a “means of social control” (1963), a classic structural-functionalist thesis. After Guiteras Holmes and Villa Rojas came the equally influential work of William Holland (1964), who studied medical practices and cosmologies among the Tzotzil of Larráinzar, establishing the first “mapping”, in the vein of old structural-functionalist diagrams, of the supernatural hierarchies of *nagualismo* and the social hierarchies of the community (cfr. Holland 1961: 170). Meanwhile, starting at the end of the 50s, the Harvard Chiapas project (1957-1977), directed by Evon Vogt, which worked among the Tzotzil of Zicacantan, Chiapas, achieved spectacular results in the form of a monumental monograph, *Zinacantan* (1969), orienting future efforts in an influential way. Along with the massive ethnographic data obtained by the project<sup>8</sup>, Vogt developed particularly compelling conceptions regarding structural “replication” and “encapsulation” (1969: 571-587) which I will re-appraise later in this thesis. Finally, as the last great representative of the classical structural-functionalist school in Chiapas,

Esther Hermitte defended a similar structural-functionalist orientation, characterizing, like Villa Rojas did, the cosmology of the Tzeltal of Pinola as a means of “social control” through “supernatural power”, while making a particularly rich and compelling description of it (Hermitte 1970).

Starting with the works of Richard Adams (1952, 1968), a strong and decisive presence of American anthropology began in Guatemala. This has been called “the anthropology of occupation” by Guatemalan anthropologists and, in general lines, it developed along an “ahistorical, structural functionalist” line (Pérez de Lara 1993: 19). Due to the deep political crises of Guatemala, which eventually led to the prolonged “internal armed conflict” or Civil War (1960-1996), the discipline entered into a crisis; thus, “until 1974 the formation of human resources in anthropology was practically non-existent at the University of San Carlos”, the most important of the country (Pérez de Lara 1993: 20).<sup>9</sup> Thus, a void in Guatemalan local ethnography began, which only ended in the mid-eighties.

In general, all the regional works of the late 50s, 60s and 70s were more or less aligned with the aforementioned Wolfian idea of “closed corporate peasant communities”, deeply related to study of the so-called religious *cargo* systems.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the classical depiction of indigenous communities by regional anthropology could be (stereotypically) summarized as describing closed corporate peasant communities characterized by vertical cosmologies used as a means of social control and tied to social hierarchies via the religious *cargo* system. This vision proceeded to consolidate itself as the synthesis that defined classical anthropology in Mexico and, with varying conditions, in Guatemala. In general, studies either developed and refined this synthesis (Korsbaek 1990,

1996), or described the local crises of the system, as Douglas E. Brintnall did in the case of the Aguacatecos of Guatemala (1979) and Frank Cancian himself in the post-Harvard project Zinacantan (1994). The influence of this model was so strong, that authors working in the Chiapas region to this day still feel the need to explicitly distance themselves from it (cfr. Pitarch 1996: 21-24) or acknowledge it as a valuable, although somewhat outdated, background (cfr. Figuerola Pujol 2010: 25-27); likewise, we have mentioned the lasting influence of the Redfield-Tax program and the structural-functionalist approach in Guatemala, which have elicited similar judgements regarding its influential, all-pervasive character (cfr. Rubinstein [1991] 2017.).

However, during the late seventies and the eighties, both *indigenismo* and structural-functionalist theories entered a deep crisis, and were the subject of a powerful political and theoretical critique from Marxist anthropologists. The paternalistic political project of *indigenismo*, based on the theory of acculturation (cfr. Aguirre Beltrán 1957) fell to timely accusations regarding its promotion of ethnocidal policies, and the exoticization and racism associated with them<sup>11</sup>, while the theoretical views of the more politically neutral, regional structural-functionalist school were similarly criticized from an economic point of view, on account of defending the notion of closed corporate peasant communities, free from external influences, something which was patently false even in pre-globalization times. This criticism was masterfully formulated in the classical thesis of Beatriz Andrea Albores Zárata, *Functionalism in Tzeltal-Tzotzil Ethnography* (1978). While these criticisms were theoretically pertinent and politically sympathetic towards indigenous struggles of liberation and self-determination, Marxists did little more than characterize indigenous

cosmologies as ideological superstructures that were important for the reproduction of social structure, thus still not escaping the dynamic of classical anthropological theories criticised above (cfr. Albores Zárata 1978: 100).

After this crisis, the nowadays dominant local model regarding 'indigenous cosmologies' in Mexico and Guatemala, called *cosmovisión*<sup>12</sup>, emerged. This model was not born out not of anthropology, but of history. Its main proponent, Alfredo Lopez Austin, incorporated ideas from history (especially *la longue durée* of the French Annales school), Marxism (considering indigenous cosmologies as essentially ideological), along with the findings of the structural-functionalist school regarding the relationship of contemporary and precolonial indigenous cosmologies. López Austin's *cosmovisión*, a Spanish term which is equivalent to that of "world view", has been defined by this author as "a systematic ensemble (...) constituted by a collective network of mental acts by which a social entity, in a given historical moment, seeks to apprehend the universe in a holistic way" (2018: 92); regarding their truth character, indigenous cosmologies are characterized by the author as ideological, in a Marxist sense (cfr. López Austin 1984). Thus, the *cosmovisión* model of López Austin could be perhaps characterized as a re-defining of the old "world view" concept of Redfield through a synthesis of structural-functionalism and Marxist views within a historical framework. López Austin's model has since acquired a sort of 'official' character within Mexican anthropology and it has some influence in Guatemala too, even in the political context of Neo-Maya movements (cfr. Cano Contreras, Page Pliego and Estrada Lugo 2018); however, it has entered somewhat of a crisis itself in recent times.

One of the most important authors that began to question the *cosmovisión* model is Johannes Neurath, an anthropologist that has worked among the Wixarika or Huichol people of Western Mexico. Based on his fieldwork findings, Neurath proposed to questioned the epistemological essentialism inherent in López Austin's proposals (cfr. Neurath 2008: 52) and, inspired by Melanesian and Amazonian ethnography, he made a call to "stop the obsession with concepts (about reality) and (culturally relative) classifications, and instead privilege relationships, practices, procedures and, last but not least, epistemologies" (Neurath 2008: 56). Thus, in his work, Neurath has appealed to the original, Kantian idea of *Weltanschauung* as a "faculty" instead of a template, and strove to show how, through the acts of having visions and building ritual relationships, Huichol shamans can be said to create the world (Neurath 2012: 18).

Among the members of the *cosmovisión* school, Neurath's arguments were dismissed at first, somewhat crudely, as pure postmodern "idealism" (cfr. Espinosa Pineda 2015). However, as a consequence of the reception of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's ideas perspectivism in the Amazon (1998), which have shown that the beings that populate 'Amerindian' cosmologies have perspectives on their own which effectively mean a multiplicity of natures; and also as a consequence of the reception of the so-called ontological turn, which departs from symbolic and representationalist explanations when theorizing the conceptual worlds of others,<sup>13</sup> López Austin's *cosmovisión* model has been increasingly challenged as of late. The official response of the *cosmovisión* school has been to declare indigenous cosmologies as only symbolical in nature (Martínez González 2016).

In the side of those anthropologists influenced by the ontological turn, the pioneering study of Miriam Lamrani on *nagualismo* is to be mentioned as a relevant critical departure point, proposing a “shared animality” instead of the “shared humanity” of the Amazonian ontologies of Viveiros (Lamrani 2008). Further developments include the works of Isabel Martínez (2012) and Alejandro Fujigaki (2015) on the Tarahumara, deeply marked by an interplay of assimilations and departures from the positions of Descolá, Viveiros de Castro and Holbraad. Other authors have subscribed Viveiros’ and Descola’s ideas enthusiastically, having affirmed their importance to understand indigenous ontologies (Millán 2015, 2019). In a similarly critical vein, a recent collective volume on ancient Mesoamerican cosmologies (Díaz 2020) has called into question the unitarian and static character of the scholarly interpretation of indigenous cosmologies in the region, although relying for the most part in historical rather than anthropological criticisms. As a part of the debate, I have proposed a somewhat divergent alternative ontological model within perspectivism, which I intend to develop further in the future; however, admittedly, I gave little thought to the notion of cosmology itself (cfr. 2020).

From this summary we can conclude that one of the problems with the study of cosmology in Mexican and Guatemalan anthropology is that the debate receded into more and more localism after a period in which it formed part of an older but not ethnological model, that of structural-functionalism. Thus, in my opinion, what is necessary to overcome this difficulty is to work close enough to the contingency of the ethnographic, not privileging ethnological nor historical contents, in order to create a new conception that is non-particularistic, non-

localist, non-essentialist, and non-historicist, in summary, something non-ethnological, but anthropological instead.

### **1.3. The idea of cosmology that this thesis seeks to explain**

What is the vision of cosmology I try to research in this thesis? How does it contrast with the aforementioned dominant conceptions in local ethnology? While I cannot reply to this question in full now, perhaps I could indicate what I am seeking with a particularly rich quote by Edmund Leach. Reflecting about the difference between cosmology as conceptualized in Western tradition and Western science *vis-à-vis* the cosmologies that anthropologists can find in the field, Leach makes a poignant and evocative observation that is worth to be quoted in full:

The traditional (religious cosmology) of Western civilization has become frozen by its literary form into a pattern which is wholly anachronistic. A deity which is the 'King of kings, the only ruler of princes' made sense in the days of the Emperor Constantine and even in the England of the sixteenth century, but in a world cluttered with formulae about the equality of man and institutions such as the United Nations Assembly, the imagery of God as a Supreme Emperor has no place at all. Alternatively, the modern (scientific) cosmology of the astrophysicists, with its fables of the beginning of time in a Big Band and a universe filled with inconceivable numbers of entities spaced at inconceivable distances of time and space, leads us to think that the cosmos is, in all respects, vast, so that the 'other world' if there were such a place, would certainly be a very long way away.

But the cosmologies encountered by anthropologists in the field are quite of a different kind. It was Vico who observed that, for the Greeks, the Underworld was no more distant than the bottom of a plough furrow, while the abode of the gods on Mount Olympus was at the top of a visible mountain of quite moderate size. In the course of my Kachin fieldwork I was told of a procedure whereby a spirit medium, in a state of trance, would ascend a ladder into the sky to consult personally with the sky deities (*mu nat*); the rungs of the ladder were sword blades with the sharp edge upwards. When I came to witness the actual performance of this miraculous event I found it something of an anti-climax. The medium ascended on to a platform about twenty feet on the ground and, although the rungs of the ladder did include one upturned sword blade, I noticed that the medium took good care not to step on it! (Leach 1982: 213-214).

In this quote, we can see the main dilemma of cosmology as understood by social anthropology laid before our own eyes. Western medieval cosmology, which is actually somewhat still the mould of many of our accounts of 'traditional' cosmologies (the aforementioned treatment of indigenous cosmologies of Mexico and Guatemala being a prominent example) is wholly 'conventional' and 'frozen'; the modern image of cosmology conveyed by Western science is less centralized and rigid, but still completely representational: it talks about the totality as a map of a faraway place which remains somewhat alien to us despite *ourselves being actually there*. To introduce a third possibility, Leach mentions Giambattista Vico's depiction of actual Greek cosmology, not that of philologists or historians, but that of ancient Greeks themselves: for them, the Hades was nothing but a place that was a bit further down the plough of a farmer, while Mount Olympus was simply a mountain visible from the province of Pieria. Following this



example, Leach offers a different image of Kachin cosmology, presenting almost before our eyes not another instance of a frozen, erudite cosmology, but the cosmology that he found *in the field*, a cosmology which can perhaps give an inkling of the idea that this thesis will defend: he offers a vision of the Kachin cosmos as it emerges in the theatrical performance of a seer. In this performance, the actual cosmological ladder in the sky, filled with sword blades as rungs, is an actual ladder build on a platform located in the village, with a sword placed as a rung occasionally: the cosmological sky, which is the supreme dimension of the universe in which the gods that are the ancestors of the Kachin clans live, is simply that space which is at the top of this seemingly all-too mundane platform.

This is the cosmology that this thesis will strive to explain: the cosmology that we find in the field, not our visions of what cosmology should be. Thus, the questions that this thesis deals with are the following: 1) Why do people in so many societies often say that their actions proceed not from themselves, but from ancestors, gods and other cosmological entities? 2) Can a non-reductionist and yet holistic understanding of cosmology be proposed for social anthropology? 3) How to engage with cosmology while avoiding the classical understanding of the cosmologies of others as being subordinated to the theoretical activity of the anthropologist? The first question can be said to be the *quid* of the ‘cosmological dilemma’ in social anthropology, and thus is the most important, but of course it cannot be answered now, as it needs to develop from my ethnography. The third one is of course another ‘big question’ that pertains more to the conclusions of this work, and that, I hope, will be answered to as a logical consequence of my main argument. However, the second question, that on a ‘non-reductionist understanding of holism’, can partially answered now, because a crucial part of

the answer to this question won't arise directly from ethnography, nor from anthropology either: it pertains to an already extant philosophical conception that I will try to transform in contact with my ethnographic experience, in order to render it into a properly anthropological idea.

The truth is that, having seemingly exhausted the possibilities of former theoretical outlooks, which didn't escape the criticisms outlined in the preceding lines, I ended turning towards conceptions developed outside the discipline in order to answer to the 'cosmological dilemma' of this thesis. This notion is indeed rather complex, and, after many deliberations, it became impossible to me to introduce it just as 'naturally arising' from my ethnography, because such presentation would introduce an unnecessary complexity to my ethnographic account. Also, my objective is not to remain with this idea as it has been formulated before, but to transform it with my ethnography so an anthropological understanding of it can be achieved. I therefore hope that the reader excuses the rather non-anthropological introduction to one of the theoretical foundations of this thesis that follows, but I promise is that this idea, as it will be introduced in the next section, is not really the 'solution', but a necessary step towards it.

### **1.3.1 Downward causation: A non-reductionist view on holism**

As I have outlined earlier, one of the seemingly unsalvageable theoretical perspectives that is deeply linked to the problem of cosmology is that of holism, which has been defined as a the claim that "science (...) is a web that must face experiences as a whole and be modified as a whole" (Auyang 1999: 68). Holism has been generally regarded as a crucial methodological imperative of

anthropology regardless of schools: thus, a holistic understanding has been posited as a desirable outcome of the anthropological endeavour either in cultural anthropology (Boas 1940 [1896]: 276), social anthropology (Malinowski 2005 [1922]: 24), and ethnology (Mauss 2006 [1924]: 58). Thus, it is safe to say that holism an undeniable part of anthropology, something at the core of the discipline in all traditions. However, despite the unanimous historical relevance of the notion and its continued presence in the discipline, today holism remains not only “vaguely defined” but is considered to be a “scandalously outdated, theoretically suspect, and conceptually vacuous” notion, “a fraught term that is best avoided” (Bubandt and Otto 2010: 1-2). Thus, perhaps the crisis of holism in anthropology can be characterized by the contrast between the continued relevance of the subject and a certain abandonment of the task of achieving a deeper theorization.

Similarly, as we have seen, the main conceptual problem with old anthropological theories on cosmology was *reductionism*. Either the cosmological was reduced to the social, or the social was reduced to the cosmological via culturalist baseline explanations, or both were subordinated to more ample systems according to prevailing theoretical trends. And yet, despite all of this, a recent definition (with which I agree) states that the mission of ethnography is to achieve “a nonreductive account of somebody else’s holism” (Marcus 2010: 33), cosmology being one of many of such possible ‘holisms’ and the one that this thesis will deal with. In my point of view, what we are lacking is not so much a new definition of holism itself or a description of its instantiations, but an explicitly non-reductive and theoretically sound conception of the way in which ‘wholes’ operate.

Fortunately, there is an idea that could lend more depth to our current anthropological understanding of holism while explicitly avoiding reductionism: I am referring to the notion of ‘downward causation’, defined as “the causation of lower-level effects by higher-level entities” (Paolini Pauletti and Orilia 2017: 1). This notion, which was formulated in the study of emergence in biological systems (Campbell 1974), has been extensively debated in philosophy and science since its introduction (Sperry 1976, Popper and Eccles 1977, Kim 1992, Simons 2002, Hulswit 2005; Bickhard and Campbell 2011, Gillet 2016), and has been applied to subjects such as textual criticism (Bøgh Andersen 2011), and sociology (Hodgson 2002, Elder-Vass 2011), where it has been posited as a plausible mechanism of social action.

As mentioned, the term ‘downward causation’ was originally coined by the social and evolutionary scientist Donald T. Campbell and it was defined by him as the way in which “the laws of [a] higher-level selective system determine in part the distribution of lower-level events and substances”, or, paraphrasing, that “processes at the lower levels of a hierarchy are restrained by and act in conformity to the laws of the higher levels.” (1974: 180). Since its inception, downward causation has been closely related to the so-called ‘emergentist principle’ in evolutionary biology, that is, the idea that certain evolutionary laws ‘are not described by the laws of physics and inorganic chemistry, and (...) will not be described by the future substitutes for the present approximations of physics and inorganic chemistry” (Campbell 1974: 180). In a more general way, “something emerges from some other thing, roughly, if and only if the former is not predictable from the latter” (Paolini Paoletti and Orilia 2017: 2); that is, when it is not possible to reduce an entity to the laws that govern the phenomenon

from which it 'emerges'. Thus, downward causation has sometimes been generally considered as the way in which emergent properties exert causal influence or acquire causal powers (cfr. Heil 2017: 43).

As Dave Elder-Vass considers, at least two different versions of downward can be distinguished. The first one would be unproblematic in appearance: "Perhaps the least problematic version of ontological dependence is that entities of a higher level are composed of entities of a lower level: the parts of a whole are at a lower level than the whole. We may argue, for example, that human individuals are at a higher ontological level than molecules, as they are composed of molecules. Hence, an experiment in chemistry would be a case of this kind of top-down causation, if the human scientists create the conditions in which a particular molecular reaction occurs" (2011: 85). However, there is another version of this idea which becomes more paradoxical, because it implies an interaction of levels within an entity: "A second, and at first sight more demanding, interpretation of the *top-down* in *top-down causation* is that *top-down* causation occurs only when an entity has a causal impact on its *own* parts. We need to alter our example only slightly to show that much the same considerations apply in this case as in the first interpretation. If our scientist was to conduct her experiment on herself, perhaps by placing a drop of some chemical on her skin and observing/measuring the chemical reaction that ensued, we would have just such a case. The scientist's power to co-cause the chemical reaction remains an emergent power of the scientist as a whole, while the molecules that take part in the reaction, including those that form part of the scientist, also co-cause the reaction. Causation is exerted both by the scientist and by the molecules, and the scientist has a downward causal effect on some of the

parts of herself. Events, in other words, may be co-determined by the causal powers of both higher and lower level entities, even when the lower level entities concerned are parts of the higher level entities concerned, and even where the events that result are changes in those same lower level entities and thus also in the higher level entity itself" (2011: 85).

As Hulswith remarks, the paradox of downward causation consists in the fact that it contrasts with "one of the cornerstones of the modern concept of causation (...) that a cause must 'precede' its effect, so that an effect (for instance, a system) can never *cause its cause* (the constitutive parts of the system)" (2005: 262).<sup>14</sup> In the case of the scientist, the paradox arises when we realize that the scientist himself is but a mere consequence of the interactions of the neural networks and molecules that constitute her, but now exerts a certain sort of causality in relationship to them. Thus, as mentioned, 'downward causality' emerged as a non-reductionist model trying to explain interactions in hierarchical systems of many kinds, for example, those presents in biology, where a sort of "reverse-directional cause" seems to operate in some instances.<sup>15</sup>

Downward causation has also been linked to the notion of self-consciousness, perhaps closer to the example of the scientist formerly mentioned. For example, in regards to the relationship between consciousness and downward causation, Douglas Hofstadter asserts: "there is (...) a curious upside-downness to our normal human way of perceiving the world: we are built to perceive "big stuff" rather than "small stuff", even though the domain of the tiny seems to be where the actual motors driving reality reside." (Hofstadter 1999: 173). In a reductionistic way, feelings, desires and everything related to the mind, like volition and action, could be say to be caused by the interaction of

neurons, that is, low level interactions. But it is not so for the “I” or mind. Instead, the mind increasingly perceives itself as the origin of (at least some) feelings, affections and volition, despite the fact that, technically, mind itself is merely the *consequence* of the interaction of its constituent neurons. Thus, the mind fancies itself as the cause of many of the things that happen around it, and in fact becomes this cause in many cases, *even if in the end the mind is just something created by lower level systems*. An inversion of the flow of causality occurs at some point, and the mind, a simple consequence of highly organized matter and thus theoretically determined by it, becomes the self-perceived source of the flow of cause and effect around it, despite remaining at the bottom of the actual ladder of causality in reductionistic accounts.

It is also worth mentioning here that, following a long debate on sciences and philosophy, three versions of ‘downward causation’ have been posited: weak, medium and strong. Strong downward causation implies direct changes and effects from high-level entities towards low level entities; medium downward causation just implies that high-level entities are constraining conditions for the emergent activities of low level entities, while weak downward causation just posits high-level entities as mere attractors or organizing principles for low-level entities (Emmeche, Køppe and Stjernfelt 2000: 18-31). For now, I will ask the reader to have this distinction in mind, but I will make no attempt for now as to pronounce myself for one of such models, leaving that discussion for my conclusions.

Naturally, the idea of downward causation has been used before in the study of social systems considered as hierarchies; a simple example offered by Hulswit is the example of how causality works in a crowd, which presents a

similar paradox of a whole impacting its own parts.<sup>16</sup> Thus, it is no wonder that downward causality has been proposed as a possible model for social ontology, generally by proposing analogous self-causing entities, like Elder-Vass' notion of 'norm circles' (2012). However, in general, those models are sociological rather than anthropological, assuming a 'critical realist' ontology which still falls under the criticisms that I have invoked in the earlier paragraphs of my introduction. In the conclusion to this thesis I will try to propose an anthropological position regarding those models; for now, the reader must keep in mind that in this thesis I am not merely proposing to conceive cosmology as a more or less objectified social entity capable of downward causation in a sociological fashion: I only ask the reader to keep in mind the principle of downward causation as a plausible device which explains how emergent totalities affect their own constituents. Thus, the current philosophical and biological understanding of downward causation is only the starting point for this thesis, but not its destination.

#### **1.4 Overview of this thesis**

The argument that this thesis works in a cumulative way: it needs development to fully arise from my ethnography. Each chapter will touch upon a cosmological and social topic, but the general objective is to develop an overarching notion. The first chapter will be a general introduction to Momostenango. Being mostly contextual and ethnographical, the theoretical conceptions outlined above will not figure prominently in it. Instead, what I will try to introduce in that chapter is the classical anthropological dilemma of cosmological action and social action. In general, cosmological ideas in Momostenango have been either neglected under rationalistic Weberian schemes (cfr. Carmack 1995) or been portrayed as



'holistic' forms of shamanic curing (cfr. Tedlock 1995). In contrast, through my introductory ethnography of a family, the Ramos, I will show something very simple that was not considered in the previous regional literature: that the real reason why people do sacred ceremonies at certain times in the sacred calendar is to overcome the challenges and preoccupations of social life. Thus, cosmologies in Momostenango need to be fully considered as 'cosmologies of the social' themselves, ideas on social life, a notion which is taken from Morten Axel Pedersen's work on Mongolian shamanism in the post-socialist context (2011).

The second chapter will explicitly build the argument of this thesis that I have introduced in the prior section, that is, cosmological action as downward causality. It presents the ethnography of a former K'iche' calendrical priest, Marcelino, a man who converted from *costumbre*, the indigenous religion of Momostenango, to Protestantism. As he explained to me, while he has ceased to perform the rituals of *costumbre*, he hasn't destroyed the sacred altars at which these rituals take place, the reason being that his own soul is *inside* these altars, and thus by destroying them he would effectively destroy himself. Exploring this extraordinary example of 'weird' causality, I will show the way in which Marcelino's cosmology constitutes an example of what Douglas Hofstadter has called a 'tangled hierarchy' ([1979] 1999), and how action in it flips around the expected flow of causality from divinities into men. Also, the mythology associated with Marcelino's ideas will serve as a basis to later discuss the concept of emergence. Likewise, in my theoretical discussion, I will show how Marcelino's conception can serve to 'turn on its head' the Dumontian idea of hierarchy as a relationship of sets encompassing each other ([1966] 1998: 239-246), exploring the potential of Russellian and Gödelian paradoxes (cfr. Hofstadter [1979] 1999:

15-24) in order to expand our current conceptions of cosmology and prepare the introduction of an ‘upside down’ version of downward causation.

Chapter 3 will return to the Ramos family. It will deal with a complex ritual related to temporality and causality. In this ceremony, people narrate rituals that are going to take place in the future to their own ancestors, describing them while burning offerings at sacred altars. The reason why they do this ‘anticipatory’ rituals, is to ensure that the ancestors will compel the spirits of other people (and even objects!) to perform and partake in the rituals to take place in the future. Thus, this ritual is the most important example of a downward cosmological action in my thesis, but is also a rich example of a ‘looping’ paradox in relationship to time, a subject that has captivated researchers of the Classic Maya culture in regard to the notion of ‘like-in-kind’ events (Lounsbury 1976: 215; Martin 2020: 113), but which until now has been lacking any ethnographic substantiation. Of course, these rituals are not metaphysical abstractions: they are ceremonies made to become socially powerful and to strengthen the ties of the community, as my own informants admit: thus, it is perhaps the most important example in this thesis of the way in which cosmological action can indeed change reality.

Chapter 4 will make an incursion into a topic that is greatly conflictive in both anthropology and social life: witchcraft. The main idea of the chapter is to depict witchcraft not as a mystical explanation of social antagonism, but as a special form of downward causation characterized by the usurpation of causality by a malicious agent. In particular, this chapter will engage with Martin Holbraad’s recent re-reading of Pritchard’s account of sorcery in regards to the contrast between a *how* logic, and a *why* logic (cfr. 2020), trying to explain how

this contrast can also be seen also as the contrast between normal, 'upward', everyday causation, and a cosmologically destructive downward causation exerted by sorcerers.

Chapter 5 will take us into the dimension of local politics by presenting the career of Miguel Ángel, a political activist which was at some point one of the heads of the local resistance against mining companies, showing his rise to political prominence. However, in his own point of view, his political rise was not a mere consequence of his political actions: in Miguel Ángel's account, his life is the transition from being a "captive in the underworld" to becoming a man of power and a defender of the K'iche' sacred landscape. Thus, what I show here is that, while my description of Miguel Ángel's career is political, his own vision of his career is cosmological first and foremost: the acquisition of a cosmological agency, rather than just a political one.

Chapter 6 will take these ideas to the level of history. In Momostenango there is a strong social memory regarding an actual war that took place between El Salvador and Guatemala in 1906, the "war of *totoposte*". The Momostecos were heavily involved in this war, and it is generally considered in town that it is them who were responsible of winning it, since in them a Momosteco battalion killed the president of El Salvador, Tomás Regalado. However, the people in town don't say that *they* won the war: instead, they say that *their sacred altars did*. This final chapter will serve as a closure, taking cosmological action into the level of the collective, that is, history understood as collective cosmological action.

Finally, in my conclusion I will answer the main questions of my thesis. In order to do this, I will try to 'flip upside down' the idea of downward causation presented in this introduction through a strategy of 'recursive analysis', that is,

“to transform the categories he [the anthropologist] takes for granted in the very act of bringing them to bear on the [ethnographic] differences of which he seeks to make sense” (Holbraad 2012: 45). Similarly, inspired by Roy Wagner’s ideas on ‘convention’ and ‘invention’ ([1975] 2016), I will try to advance an anthropological inversion to our current sociological understanding of downward causality, in order to achieve a proper anthropological version of the idea, that is, one informed by the point of view of the other rather than our own. Having explained the background and the main aim of this thesis, without further ado, I will start with my ethnographic account.

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## Notes

1 Among them, Knut Rio and Annelin Eriksen, Stephan Feuchtwang, Bruce Kapferer, Morten Axel Pedersen and Marshall Sahlins, to name a few of which are of relevance to this thesis. Particularly, Stephan Feuchtwang’s depiction of how Chinese cosmology portrays that which is outside or external to itself as something that has always formed part of its order (cfr. 2014: 131-132) is especially close to the ideas that I will defend in this thesis. However, I will address their ideas later, as topics similar to those that these authors have worked with arise during my ethnographic account.

2 “κόσμος, ὁ: order (...) IV. Philos.: world-order, universe (Liddel and Scott 1996: 983).

3 As a surprise to some readers, this overview will be regional rather than local, that is, it will integrate both Mexico (Chiapas) and Guatemala. Besides the

historical links between both regions and the study of indigenous cosmologies in them, I will show later on how the Chiapas material is of an unsuspected importance to the understanding of the more ethnological aspect of this thesis, which deals with a town in Guatemala.

4 I am aware of the criticism that Abramson and Holbraad level against this term (cfr. 2014: 3-10), but it is necessary to use it here, for the regional anthropological and ethnological tradition is centred on it.

5 While the *cargo* system in the town that is the subject of this thesis, Momostenango, has a total separation between the religious and the political hierarchy (cfr. Cook 2000: 39) which renders the classic model unviable, I mention the subject because of its importance in understanding how the classic structural-functionalist synthesis, which characterized the Chiapas-Guatemala regional anthropology, was constituted.

6 For a critical reassessment of the *indigenista* project in Mexico, see Lewis 2018.

7 Later in his life, in the context of the continued crisis of the Guatemalan state amid continuous military dictatorships, Noval became a militant revolutionary within the Guatemala Workers Party (Partido Revolucionario del Trabajo, PGT).

8 The monograph lists 93 fieldworkers (1969: 617-618), some of which, like Frank Cancian, and Benjamin and Lore Colby, went on to write works now considered classics regarding the Chiapas-Guatemala region (for example, Cancian 1976; Colby and Colby 1981). See Vogt 1978 for a detail bibliographical assessment of the first decade of production of the project, and Vogt 1994 for a history of the project.

9 Regarding influential north American anthropologists working in the town in which I did my fieldwork, Momostenango, Pérez de Lara considers Robert

Carmack, as part of this “occupation” anthropology (cfr. 1993: 19-20); however, his point of view will be treated more in-depth in the first chapter of this thesis, along with those of his disciples, Barbara Tedlock (1982) and Garrett Cook (2000), I will deal with their particular outlooks in the next chapter.

10 The classical work on the topic is that of Frank Cancian (1976), himself a student of Vogt, as mentioned earlier.

11 The student-edited pamphlet, later turned into a book, *De eso que llaman antropología mexicana* (“That which is called Mexican Anthropology”) by Warman, Nolasco, Bonfil, Olivera and Valencia (1969) is generally regarded to be the starting point of the polemic, and it is a milestone in Mexican anthropology; see Medina and Mora 1983 for a complete overview of its development.

12 Literally, “cosmos-view” in Spanish.

13 See Holbraad and Pedersen 2017 for a general exposition of the ideas of the ontological turn, and Heywood 2018 for a somewhat critical assessment.

14 Recently, Meno Hulswith himself (2006), Carl Craver and William Bechtel (2007), and Geoffrey M. Hodgson (2011), have called into question the usage of the term ‘causation’ in regards to the idea of ‘downward causation’, since, as Craver and Bechtel remark, “the idea of causation would have to stretch to the breaking point to accommodate interlevel causes” (2007: 573). Hodgson proposes the term “reconstitutive downward effects” as a substitution. Their criticism and alternatives have not been accepted as a replacement for the concept yet; for example, Elder Vass in general considers that “there is no reason why we should follow Craver, Bechtel and Hodgson in thinking of this as merely an effect that is inferior in some way to any other kind of causation” (Elder Vass 2011: 86). I retain through this thesis the term “causation” because, as I will make

clear throughout this thesis, the kind of downward effects this thesis deals with are characterized as causal for my informants.

15 Donal T. Campbell exemplifies the notion of downward causation in regards to hierarchically organised biological systems by recalling the example of the evolution of the jaw of a worker termite or ant: “The hinge surfaces and the muscle attachments agree with Archimedes’ laws of levers, that is, with macromechanics. They are optimally designed to apply the maximum force at a useful distance from the hinge (...) This is a kind of conformity to physics, but a different kind than is involved in the molecular, atomic, strong and weak coupling processes underlying the formation of the particular proteins of the muscle and shell of which the system is constructed. The laws of levers are one part of the complex selective system operating at the level of whole organisms. Selection at that level has optimised viability, and has thus optimised the form of parts of organisms, for the worker termite and ant and for their solitary ancestors. We need the laws of levers, and organism level selection (...) to explain the particular distribution of proteins found in the jaw and *hence* the DNA templates guiding their production (...) Even the *hence* of the previous sentence implies a reverse-directional ‘cause’ in that, by natural selection, it is protein efficacy that determines which DNA templates are present, even though the immediate micro determination is from DNA to protein.” (1964: 181). In summary: low level interactions occur “first”, and yet, at some point they become increasingly determined by the upper level which was originally just a causal consequence of them. Thus, causality is flipped around: what in all accounts was determined, becomes determinant. The notion is further exemplified in a stronger way by the example of soldier ants or termites. In their case, the process has gone so far, that

these ants cannot feed themselves: they need to be fed by workers. Thus, the point is that the original system of selection which determined and brought about the social organization of ants, is now being determined by its own consequence, to the point of creating a creature that cannot even feed itself: biological causality seems to be effectively “reversed” in this example.

16 A crowd seems to be a simple aggregate of people, who willingly associate themselves, interact and do things together. However, after some time, people are increasingly determined by the crowd itself, an entity that doesn't seem to “exist” in some level, which in fact is nothing but the people acting within it, and yet, it exerts a growing influence on its members: “As the number of people 'swells to' a crowd, people seem to be governed increasingly by the behaviour of the crowd. Even physical properties, such as speed or even the heart rate of the people involved, are determined far more by the behaviour of the crowd than by those of individuals.” (Hulswit, 2005: 264). Thus, a complex phenomenon occurs: who is acting, the crowd or the individual? The important thing to have in mind is that this idea is *not* about common sense conceptions of “peer pressure” or the like. Of course, the idea is paradoxical, for people are just acting in the way that is expected, and then they suddenly find themselves being determined by a higher-level causality which was brought about by them and yet, it *is* them.



## CHAPTER 1.

### “The Law of Us, the Indigenous”: Cosmology and the Social in

#### Momostenango

*“Porque esta es la ley de nosotros, los indígenas: no de una familia, sino de todas”*

“For this is the law of us, the indigenous: not of a family, but of all of them”

**Marcelino de León, Momosteco merchant**

This chapter has two objectives that are closely related. The first is to introduce both my field site and the prior literature about it to the reader, especially in regards to the topic of the relationship between cosmology and social life. The second objective is, of course, to start my own ethnographical account. However, beyond its introductory character, this chapter hopes to underpin a theoretical argument that will be of importance to this thesis.

As the reader remembers, I have recalled Abramson and Holbraad’s argument on how classical anthropological theories, at least those dealing with cosmologies, could be regarded as being anthropological “cosmologies of the social” themselves, although of a reductive, subordinating character (2014: 7). I have also introduced the reader to the regional anthropological production, which is more or less representative of such approaches; however, in the very local context of Momostenango, my field site, an interesting rift in classical theory emerges, with which this chapter will also deal. The most important ethnographers that worked in Momostenango, Robert Carmack and Barbara Tedlock, represent extreme ends within classical theories: the first described the

town only in sociological, Weberian terms (cfr. Carmack 1995: xxvi), excluding the cosmological from his account, while the second portrayed the ‘indigenous’ cosmology of Momostenango as one of shamanic curing, without any deep preoccupation regarding the social (cfr. Tedlock 2005a).

In this chapter, I will explain how my own ethnographic experience clearly showed me something different: from the beginning, it was very apparent to me that the engagements of people with cosmology was never detached from their own lives, conceived in a social way. In fact, as the similarity of my own ethnographic material with those produced by the classical ethnologists of the Chiapas-Guatemala region suggests, it would be easy to go back to the prior structural-functionalist explanations: one can construe a “structural-functionalist Momosteco cosmology” that would not be dissimilar to those studied in Chiapas by ethnographers like Holland (1964) and Vogt (1969).<sup>1</sup> In order to avoid the pitfall of classical reductionism, this chapter will simply suggest to consider these cosmological ideas not as reflections of social functions, but as actually intending to bring about “cosmologically determined” social actions. However, before arriving to these questions, I will introduce the town in a general way, as well as the main ethnographers that worked on it, in order to start later with the account of my own ethnographic experience.

### **1. Momostenango and contemporary Guatemala: an overview**

Momostenango<sup>2</sup>, head of the municipality of the same name, is located in the Totonicapán department in the western highlands of Guatemala (Figure 1). According to the 2018 census of the National Institute of Statistics of Guatemala

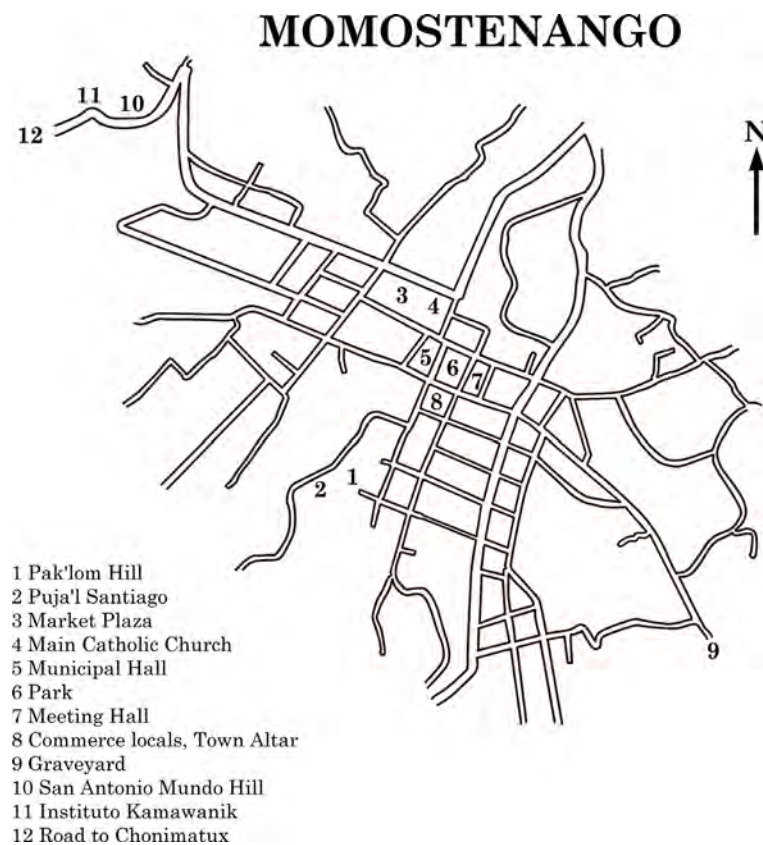
(Instituto Nacional de Estadística), the municipality has a total population of 105,617, of which 103,245 people (97.7%) self-identify as indigenous and speak the K'iche' language of the Eastern Maya language family; 90,016 persons or 85% of the population of the municipality live in rural areas (Centro Latinoamericano y Caribeño de Demografía 2019). Most of the population (81.7%) lives in poverty, and extreme poverty is prevalent in up to 30.17% (UN 2006). The greater part of the economic activity is commerce (43.24%), followed by agriculture, hunt and fishing (26.85%), manufactures of textiles and goods (13.4%) and the service sector (7.53%). Subsistence agriculture (maize, beans, avocado, fruits) is prevalent as a complement to income; also, remittances from migrants to the USA are a vital economic support for the community (SEGEPLAN 2010: 52).



1. Momostenango within Guatemala.

The town's urban center comprises four main wards (*barrios*): Patzité, Santa Ana, Santa Catarina and Santa Isabel, extending along the river Palá. Besides these, the

municipality includes a number of villages or *aldeas*<sup>3</sup>, as well as smaller hamlets (*caseríos*)<sup>4</sup>. In general, the urban center of Momostenango is a commercial hub for the whole region, especially thanks to its concurred markets; the industry of woolen ponchos and blankets<sup>5</sup>, formerly the most important in the town, has recently declined. Despite this, the last decades have brought a noticeable expansion in constructions, beginning with renewals on its municipal building, main market, and schools (Carmack 1995: 250); more recent developments comprise soccer stadium and touristic amenities like cafés, pizza parlours, restaurants and some small hotels; in recent years it has become somewhat of a touristic destination, albeit still overshadowed by its neighbors Quetzaltenango and Chichicastenango (Figure 2).



2. Map of Momostenango's town centre and some places of interest to my ethnography

Of course, besides this broad description of Momostenango, some words on the context of contemporary Guatemala are also needed. In a way, it is inevitable to define Guatemalan society, even today, as a post-war society (cfr. Little 2009: 2), a society deeply marked by the extraordinary violence that characterized the conflict between the military and different insurgent groups (URNG, EGP, ORPA, FAR) from 1966 to 1996, which was especially acute during the presidency of the general Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983), who committed crimes which amount to acts of genocide against Maya groups like the Q'anjobal, the Chuj and the Ixil (cfr. Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico 1999: 416). Even if Momostenango was considered to be in the "green zone" of the military conflict and spared from most forms of selective and generalized violence, in virtue of having a limited involvement in the politics of insurgency and counterinsurgency (Carmack 2005: 367), it is inevitable to see the sequels of this conflict in all levels of daily life throughout the country and in different communities (cfr. Burrell 2005, Carlsen 1997, Stolen 2007). As Benson and Fischer have argued (2006), it is not the violence of insurgency and counterinsurgency in the style of the Cold-War (such as that exposed in the articles included in Carmack 1988b) what afflicts Guatemala anymore, but instances of something that may be termed neoliberal violence: "deepening socioeconomic inequality enforced by the action of criminal forces under the state or corporations, concessions of Indigenous natural resources to transnationals, the violent repression of protests against cuts and readjustments enforced by the IMF, in sum, the neo-liberalization of violence (...) like other places in which spiked levels of violence and crime have accompanied economic privatization and the erosion of state functions" (Benson and Fischer 2006: 161). This context of post-war violence and uncertainty is naturally

coupled with disastrous economic conditions for the majority of the population, but especially for indigenous peoples: “While the most favorably situated Mayas are prospering, the majority face some of the worst economic conditions in the hemisphere. Chronic underemployment has been worsened by falling coffee and sugar prices on the world market. Income gaps between the poor and the wealthy are among the worst on the globe. Refugee repatriation, the demobilization of army and guerrilla forces, and a drop in tourism revenue because of a poor global economy and fear of terrorism contribute to Guatemala’s dire political and social conditions” (Little 2009: 2-3).

This context of post-war violence, depauperation and insecurity has brought many long-term problems in Guatemalan social and political life. Corruption is perhaps the foremost. Post-war Guatemala is characterized by the existence of vast networks of corruption propped by illegal groups that seem to have their origins in the context of the armed conflict (The Washington Office on Latin America 2015: 4). These networks have infiltrated Guatemalan institutions through diverse strategies (bribery, violence and intimidation), protecting interests of particular agents while deteriorating institutions and governance: “Over the years, these networks have co-opted nearly all spaces of state power to use the institutions for their own interests and foment and cover up their illicit activities. They use their connections with political figures and influential individuals, as well as corruption, intimidation, and violence to protect their lucrative, illegal enterprises and ensure impunity for their aims” (The Washington Office on Latin America 2015: 4). In a response to these conditions, The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) was created in 2006, which oversaw great successes in dismantling some of these

networks; however, as of late, CICIG was unilaterally dissolved by the military backed former president, Jimmy Morales (cfr. BBC News 2019). Thus, throughout the latest decades, Guatemala has been characterized by chronic instability and lack of governance. As of now, the current president of Guatemala, Alejandro Giamattei, faces fierce protests against his rule, amid worsening conditions due to the COVID-19 global pandemic (Naveda 2020).

Having introduced Momostenango and the contemporary context of Guatemala, a brief outline of the political institutions of the town and its ritual practices is needed. However, instead of introducing them by themselves, I will present them along with the work of the main scholars who have described them: Robert Carmack, Barbara Tedlock and Garrett Cook, in order to characterize the aforementioned theoretical rift that this chapter will engage with.

## **2. Patrilineages, power and political structures in Momostenango**

Momostenango has been the subject of intense ethnographic research during the past century, partly motivated by its reputation of “traditionalism” (cfr. Taube 2009: 8), which is mostly associated to the set of practices called *costumbre*, which have been characterized in prior literature as an ensemble of “ancient principles” (Carmack 1998a: 334) or as a “syncretized Maya-Catholic religion” (Cook 2000: 267). Important pioneering ethnological accounts of Momostenango include those of Leonhard Schültze-Jena, who visited the town and used some of the data he gathered during his stay on in his monograph on K’iche’ religion and cosmology, which was mostly based on his work in neighboring Chichicastenango (1933). Antonio Gobaud Carrera, mentioned as one of the

founders of Guatemalan *Indigenismo* in my introduction, also dedicated a brief article to the main indigenous religious festival of the town, Wajxaqib' Batz' (1937). However, perhaps the most important work dealing with the institutions of the town, past and present, is that of Robert Carmack, who did a year of fieldwork in the town beginning in 1966 and continued to be engaged with the community through several later trips, his work being focused on the political and legal life of the community (cfr. 1995: xv). The main products of this fieldwork were a series of seminal articles on the town's history (1979), a thorough ethnohistorical monograph (1995), and an article which outlines the "traditional" aspects of social life in Momostenango (1998).<sup>6</sup> In general, Carmack defined his approach as "historical anthropology", for it was both informed by fieldwork and archive research (1998: 324), but, as mentioned earlier, his perspective was grounded more in Weberian sociology than in anthropology proper.

Following the lines of these works, and adding some information of my own, first I will briefly introduce what Carmack considered as the fundamental units of social life in the town, the patriclans and lineages known as *alaxik* ("those who are born together"). The *alaxik* or Momosteco patrilineages are corporate descent groups that reckon descent in the agnatic line and keep records of their genealogies and their branches (*xeteil*) for several generations (Carmack 1995: 31). Each patriclan is named in behalf of its founding ancestor: Vicente, Ixcoy, Ajanel, Poroj, Pelico are some examples. The members of a patrilineage, both living and deceased, are called *komon*, a term which usually is used to refer to large gatherings of people, and to communities (Henne Pontious 1980: 18); hence, *komon* Vicente, *komon* Ixcoy, etc. Exogamy among patrilineages is strict.



The authority of the affairs of the patrilineage is usually placed on a head or "chief" called *chuchqajaw rech alaxik*<sup>7</sup> who has been recognized as having "a sacred (...) association with the ancestors and the earth" (Carmack 1998a: 35). The head of the patrilineage is traditionally chosen by the divination ritual, carried out according to the *cholq'ij* or traditional K'iche' calendar. He must become initiated as a calendric specialist (*ajq'ij* or "he of the day"), and as such it is his duty to make offerings, prayers at special altars associated with his clan and to perform divination. Due to his expertise as both a ritual specialist and a leader for his clan, a *chuchqajaw* can exert ritual functions in behalf of others and be regarded as a general counsellor for the affairs of his community, becoming a sort of moral authority, a role which is reflected in his other name, *k'amal b'e* or "guide of the path". Carmack remarks that there is no formal, definite hierarchy political among the *chuchqajawib'* (1998: 336), however, as Tedlock explains, ritually they could be seen as forming a well-defined hierarchy.<sup>8</sup> Thanks to their prestige and local power, patriclan heads in Momostenango often exert political functions: they tend to become elected as members of the local governments (*auxiliaturas*) of their respective hamlets and, after serving as such, they are recognized as *pasados* or *principales*, members of the councils that will elect new functionaries in the future. Thus, Carmack suggests that power in the town starts at the level of the patrilineage, but also clarifies that there is no direct correlation between ritual and political power, which is correct (cfr. 1995: 310).<sup>9</sup>

The political organization of Momostenango has changed since Carmack described it on his classical monograph (cfr. 1995: 310), which reflects the conditions prevalent prior to the Peace Accords of 1996. Nowadays, according to my informants, political power can be divided in three kinds, those belonging to

the communal, municipal and the newly-created 'ancestral authorities' (*autoridades ancestrales*). For now, I will present the first two, which will be relevant to the first chapters of my ethnography, leaving the explanation of the ancestral authorities movement for chapter 5.

## **2.1. Communal Authorities**

Communal authorities are the local, traditional authorities of each hamlet. They are elected to serve for a year by a gathering of past holders (*pasados*) of the mayor (*alcalde*) appointment. At the gathering, which usually takes place at the end of October in a Kiej day of the K'iche' calendar<sup>10</sup>, two *alcaldes* are elected, each serving 15 days, one of them is considered the main *alcalde* and the other is the vice-*alcalde*. The *pasados* also nominate people to fill the rest of the posts of the administration: *regidores* or assistants; secretaries who assist the *regidores* and keep notes of every meeting (*minuta*); a treasurer (*tesorero*) or bookkeeper; and many assistants to the *secretarios* in specific appointments, like forest keepers, bailiffs and officials in charge of services like water, roads, education and the like.

People of the community who are nominated are expected not to refuse to serve during the year, and they don't receive any kind of financial remuneration for their services, but accepting an appointment is an honour which also confers the privilege of becoming a *pasado*, having thus a voice in the election of future authorities. Communal authorities usually participate in the ritual life of their hamlets, and a *k'amal b'e* or calendric priest performs ceremonies in behalf of them. The local *alcaldes* also meet with the municipal or town *alcalde* once a month, and are represented at the town centre or

Municipalidad by local development committees, called COCODE. Besides this, communal authorities have sought a more meaningful form of representation by working with the ancestral authorities movement and by forming an independent Council of Communal Authorities.

## **2.2. Municipal Authorities**

Municipal authorities are political authorities that are elected each 4 years in a democratic manner, through the nation-wide party system. Once elected, the *alcalde* or mayor selects the members of his “corporation”, seven town councillors (*concejales*) and two *síndicos* or city managers. They meet each month with the eighteen communal alcaldes, the four ward alcaldes, and the local committees known as COCODE (Councils of Communal Development) and COMUDE (Councils of Municipal Development).

In the past, as Carmack described it (1995), there was a dual system, with a Ladino dominated Municipal Mayorship or *alcaldía* and an unrecognized Indigenous *alcaldía*.<sup>11</sup> However, the Indigenous *alcaldía* described by Carmack ceased to formally exist after the 1996 Peace Accords; furthermore, the “Ladino municipal government vs indigenous communitarian government” dynamics described by Carmack as the main basis of social conflict in the contemporary period (1995: 329-374) doesn’t exist anymore; thus, given the recent and definitive fading away of the “Ladino bloc” described by Carmack (1995: 300-304), such ethnic dynamics are superseded.<sup>12</sup> Instead, nowadays a more plural municipal government engages (in theory, at least) in a constant dialogue with communitarian authorities, while also dealing with the external, state level. Candidates to the Municipal government are usually indigenous, they speak

K'iche' and have Momosteco roots, even though they also keep important ties with the outer Ladino world of party politics in order to succeed. The former alcalde, Boris Quiñones, while somewhat unpopular (he lost the most recent elections in 2020), would make speeches in K'iche', held a traditional *vara* or staff and liked to remind everyone about his *costumbrismo*, as I myself attested during his political rallies. This, however, doesn't mean that the Municipal government are considered to really represent indigenous interests, as we will see especially in chapter 5.

The organizational chart of the municipal government is updated each year, but it basically contemplates that a municipal council is above the mayor, who in turn coordinates 24 offices concerned with local services and administration (cfr. *Municipalidad de Momostenango 2018*). However, while nominally gone, the system of indigenous *alcaldía* is somewhat still extant in Momostenango, and the remains of the old dual system are visible in the fact that there is a contradiction between the official organization flowchart and the existence of the so-called *corporación municipal* ("municipal corporation"), an inner circle appointed by the town major which is composed of seven counsellors and two "town managers" or *síndicos*. The *síndico segundo* or second town manager is actually the former indigenous *alcalde*, and he coordinates and supervises traditional *alcaldes*. This organization has its own official calendrical priest, the *chuchqajaw rech tinamit*, a lifelong appointment with which we will deal in the next chapter. The *síndico segundo* must be a *costumbrista* too, as he supervises the *cofradías* and guards the keys to the municipal indigenous altar. Thus, in Momostenango the municipal government retains not only political but ritual features of the former indigenous *alcaldía*.

Returning to the topic of the anthropological understanding of these structures, it must be said that, despite its seminal importance to the ethnohistorical study of Momostenango, Carmack's account remained, as he himself makes clear, wholly within the coordinates of Weberian sociology (1995: xiv-xviii), therefore, there is no detailed description of any native idea of political power in it, and he makes no attempt to link local cosmologies and calendrical practices to political institutions, even in the structural-functionalist outlook that was popular when he started his study. Carmack tried to offset this omission in an important article about the "traditional" aspects of the life of the town (cfr. 1998) but in the article he treated both subjects as essentially separate, given his assumption of a separation of religious hierarchies and political ones in the town.<sup>13</sup>

Now, it becomes necessary to introduce another piece of background which is well known thanks to the work of prior ethnographers, which were students of Carmack themselves: I am referring to calendrical cosmology and divination, studied by Barbara Tedlock (1992), and to Catholic *cofradías*,<sup>14</sup> studied by Garret Cook (2000). I will proceed to briefly present both topics, which will appear in my ethnography, while paying attention to the theoretical assumptions that guided the understanding of cosmology in the mentioned works.

### **3. Calendrical divination and *cofradías***

If Robert Carmack can be said to be the most important author who dealt with Momostenango's history and socio-political institutions, Barbara Tedlock can be considered the classic on Momosteco calendrical practices and cosmology.

Tedlock resided in the town during 1975-1976, and had subsequent sporadic stays before the worst period of the civil war started in 1982, which forced her to leave town, only being able to return many years later. Her main concern was the study of calendrical divination in the town, which was the subject of her PhD thesis (1978), which became the basis of her classical monograph on the subject (1992). Being initiated as a calendrical diviner herself by the Xiloj patrilineage, Tedlock's account is the basis of all posterior treatments on the subject. Since the topic of K'iche' calendrical divination has been treated extensively many occasions, both in Momostenango and other towns (Bunzel 1952: 286-292; Zapil Xivir 2007; Graupner 2012; Craveri 2013; Estrada Peña 2014; McGraw 2016; Akker 2018: 38), I will not deal with its specifics, but a short introduction is always necessary.

The *cholq'ij* ('count of days') is a calendric cycle formed by the combination of 13 numerical coefficients and 20 day-signs, totalling 260 days.<sup>15</sup> This ritual count of days, of deep Mesoamerican roots and of continuous usage in the K'iche' area until today<sup>16</sup>, has no clear correlation to astronomical phenomena<sup>17</sup>, being of a ritual nature instead, and is thus mainly used for ritual and divinatory purposes. Practitioners of indigenous calendric rituals in Momostenango are called *ajq'ij* ('he of the day'); they are both calendric diviners and day keepers (Tedlock 1992: 47) and perform divinatory rituals according to the *cholq'ij*, using this calendar to time their ritual activities. Divination is usually based on the so-called 'speaking of the blood' (*kacha' ukik'el*, literally 'his blood speaks'), which is the capacity of the diviner to receive 'messages' from the *Santo Mundo*, the cosmological dimension where the earth gods or *dioses mundo* live, through a vibration or tingling felt on his own body. This trembling is called

'lightning' or *koyopa*. The use of this gift can be deliberate or not: usually, a diviner feels the *koyopa* spontaneously in many daily situations, without premeditation, effectively gaining insight on certain situations according to a set of meanings based on the part of his body where the 'trembling' was felt.<sup>18</sup>

The 'gift of the blood' can be used to perform divination at any time, but the proper divination ritual, called *ch'ob'onik* ('understanding') needs the possession of a ritual bundle (*botz'om*), also called *vara*, which consists in a cloth that contains a mixture of the red seeds of the *tzite'* tree (*Erythrina Berteroana*) and some quartz crystals which represent the calendrical hierarchy of K'iche' cosmology. During this ritual, diviners empty the content of their sacred bundles on a table. Then, the diviner takes a random number of seeds and counts them starting from the date of the ritual, assigning a day-sign within the *cholq'ij* to each seed. The diviner groups the seeds in clusters of four, and stops at any time the *koyopa* or 'lightning' brings a message regarding the situation. Specific details regarding the final of clusters are important for the final verdict (Figure 3).<sup>19</sup>



3. Rudy Ramos, one of my informants, performing *ch'ob'onik* with his divining bundle (unless otherwise noticed, all photographs are by the author).

Tedlock characterized K'iche' divination as overcoming Victor's Turner famous division between "revelation" and "divination" (1992: 137; cfr. Turner 1975), as well as Marxist and Hegelian schemes (Tedlock 1992: 196, 206), to propose the idea of a "dualistic holism" (1992: 201). Later on, she developed the idea of K'iche' divinatory rituals as a form of "shamanic healing" (2005a: 15), and as a result of her initiation, went on to promote these rituals at different workshops in the United States (cfr. 2005b), describing them as being based on a "holistic life force" (cfr. Donovan 2005). Thus, Tedlock and Carmack, former master and student, ended up at opposite theoretical ends within the topic of Momostenango. However, in a perhaps parallel fashion to Carmack's oblivion of indigenous cosmology in his account of power and social institutions in the town, Tedlock's main concern was cosmology and divination conceived as related to forms of shamanism and healing, essentially separate from power and social life; thus, except for very superficial summaries (cfr. Tedlock and Tedlock 2005: 13-14), Tedlock never dealt with the role of *chuchqajaw* as social leaders, nor ever contemplated a deeper relationship between cosmology and social power.

This background section would be incomplete without mentioning the seminal work of Garrett Cook, a disciple of Robert Carmack too, who prepared a comparative account of K'iche' cosmology (1978) and later wrote a monograph on *cofradía* cults in Momostenango from a decisively symbolic perspective, highlighting continuities with Classic Maya conceptions (2000). Some of his information will be presented more in depth in this chapter and in chapter 3, dealing with the cult of Santiago in Momostenango. For now, I will briefly mention some methodological aspects regarding the fieldwork that substantiates this thesis and will begin the account of my ethnographic experience which, in



the conclusion of this chapter, will be shown to be related to the theoretical divide between a sociological and a holistic understanding.

### **3. Methodology**

This thesis is based on 16 months of fieldwork in Momostenango, at first being accommodated with a rural family, the Ramos, and then living by my own in the town centre while frequently visiting hamlets and cantons to partake of daily life and conduct participant observation, perform occasional ethnographic interviews or record key rituals. My proficiency in K'iche' being somewhat limited, I carried most of my daily interactions in Spanish, but I always insisted in having recorded versions of key statements in K'iche', which were later translated and analysed.

In general, the most important interlocutors of this thesis are the Ramos themselves, whose daily lives and ritual activities will be the subject of chapters 1 and 3; Abraham Ajiataz, the translator of most of K'iche' materials in this thesis, and his friend Marcelino de León, both protestant, whose relationship with *costumbre* is the focus of chapter 2; Miguel Ángel Pelicó, an activist whose political career will be the subject of chapter 5; and Miguel Vicente, the current main calendrical priest of the town or *chuchqajaw rech tinamit*, the keeper of the main altar of the town which features prominently in chapter 6. Besides these key informants, important insights for this thesis are owed to many people and passing acquaintances in town, as chapter 4, which is mostly anonymised, will make especially clear.

While I have mentioned the context of hardship and lack of hope in Guatemala, the truth is that Momostenango has always been a paradoxical case

of both resilience and rebellion. Life in Momostenango is characterized by a strong ritual life and a pride in tradition, but also by a merchant culture of indigenous entrepreneurship, factors which somewhat make up for the disastrous situation of the Guatemalan state itself. Thus, as I will make clear, my ethnographic experience was not that of engaging people overwhelmed and defeated by these conditions, but that of meeting people who actively faced them through social and ritual action, and which in many times had an extraordinary success against the forces of state and economic violence, as the case of Miguel Angel in chapter 5 will make clear. Thus, in the general spirit of this thesis, what I want to convey is not an account of a cosmology or a social context making people, but of people 'making' cosmology and social life. Having made this clear, I will proceed to begin with my ethnography.

### **3. Virgilio**

It is always difficult to select a starting point for an ethnography. The usual rhetorical device of describing one's own arrival to a town doesn't always feel of relevance: rarely does someone stumble with the true subject of his study just 'fresh of the boat' or, in the case of Momostenango, fresh of the famed 'chicken bus'<sup>20</sup> that one must inevitably take to arrive to the town. Initially, I had the intention of doing an ethnography about calendrics, cosmology and power in the town; thus, the difficulty of choosing the best way to approach to the topic was (apparently) solved by the fact that, as mentioned earlier, the whole social life of the town rests on the shoulders of its social institution par excellence: the *alaxik* or patriclans, and particularly on its leaders, the *chuchqajaw rech alaxik* or patrilineage heads, who are also the main religious specialists of the town and

keeper of its ritual practices. Thus, at first, I figured out that seeking rapport with one of them would be the best approach.

Shortly after my arrival to the town in late July 2017, which took place during the celebrations made in honour of the patron saint of the town, Santiago, I was introduced to Virgilio Ramos Ajtún, a man of notorious energy and vigour of almost 60 and head of a *costumbrista* K'iche' household, thanks to the offices of a common friend of both, the anthropologist Canek Estrada Peña.<sup>21</sup> After a brief interview with Virgilio, his wife Susana and his eldest son, Rudy, who is also a calendrical diviner and the most likely to succeed Virgilio as head of the patrilineage, the attention of all of us was directed towards the celebration that was taking place that week: the patronal *feria*, and its different religious processions. Indeed, being a devout catholic, Virgilio is always involved in the patronal *feria* and in the worship of Santiago in one way or another. As one of the sponsors of the sodality group or *cofradía*, he dons his best suit in the day of the procession, and follows Santiago all day, while his family enjoys the *feria* (Figure 4). Thus, my first days in the field consisted mainly on following Virgilio around, watching him converse with other *pasados* and members of the *cofradía*, or in accompanying his family to witness the participation of their grandchildren in the school festival associated with the *feria*. Rudy also had the kindness of taking me to the main altars in Momostenango while explaining me more details regarding *costumbre*. From the first days of my stay a sense of indebtedness arose: Virgilio had, for example, helped me to find accommodation at the town centre, and presented me to some of his friends that were *principales*, making sure that nothing bad would happen to me as a recent arrival to town.



4. Left: Virgilio Ramos Ajtún, head of the Ramos family, poses with the patron saint of the family, San Antonio Mundo, inside his home. Right: Susana, Virgilio's wife, at the feria of Santiago.

Almost at the end of the week of the *feria*, something happened that confirmed to me that this idea of being protected or 'recommended' (*recomendado*) by Virgilio was not only a matter of mere hospitality. After a long day accompanying Virgilio and watching the *feria*, night was falling. I took a moment to contemplate Santiago, carried by the *cofrades*, getting lost in the distance in his way to the Calvario Church at the graveyard of Momostenango, preceded by women carrying incense burners and followed in its trail by musicians, as well as by the sponsors of the *cofradía*, with Virgilio. Suddenly, a man pulled my arm. He introduced himself as Casimiro, a friend of Virgilio. He had heard of my interest in K'iche' "customs" and "traditions", the words I would say to excuse introducing

myself with the meaningless word 'anthropologist'. He told me: "Do you want to see the *quemadero?*", referring to the altars where people would burn offerings of incense to the *dioses mundo*, the divinities of the earth. I didn't refuse. He took me to the nearby Paqlom hill, the main ceremonial centre of the town. Night had fallen by then, and the artificial lights of the street were still off, so our only source of light at the moment were the offerings that an old woman was burning at the moment.

Casimiro pointed at one of the many altars at the place, and he said "here I burn offerings" (*yo aquí quemo*) the usual expression in the town to say that one is a *chuchqajaw* himself. However, he added a little confidence, telling me: "I haven't performed as much *costumbre* as Virgilio has. The difference between me and him, is that I can burn offerings here, but he can burn offerings in many other places. He can make offerings in behalf of others, in behalf of you, for example. He can intercede for you before the earth, just as Santiago intercede in behalf of us before heaven. He can make you successful, he can carry you, he has a gift (*tiene don*). For he is before the *Santo Mundo* (the earth) what Santiago is before heaven. I know about your studies in England. Know that you will owe everything to him. And, even if you want to, you will never repay him". Of course, the parallel that Casimiro made was clear. Santiago, the saint of the town, is an intercessor in behalf of the whole town of Momostenango before the powers of Heaven or *Dios Cielo*. However, as a lineage head, Virgilio was somehow an intercessor in behalf of his family and clients before the *Santo Mundo* or "Holy Earth", a space inhabited by the *dioses mundo* or earth divinities, and the ancestors (*nantat* or "mother-fathers").<sup>22</sup> According to Casimiro, those people that Virgilio support, as well as the altars at which he has the privilege of performing rituals, are called *ekomal*,

his “burden”; thus, an unbreakable link between ritual and social obligations exist. He was not only responsible for the wellbeing of his own family, but also of his clients, and keeping this wellbeing is the foremost obligation of a *chuchqajaw*, as well as the foremost source of risk for their profession.

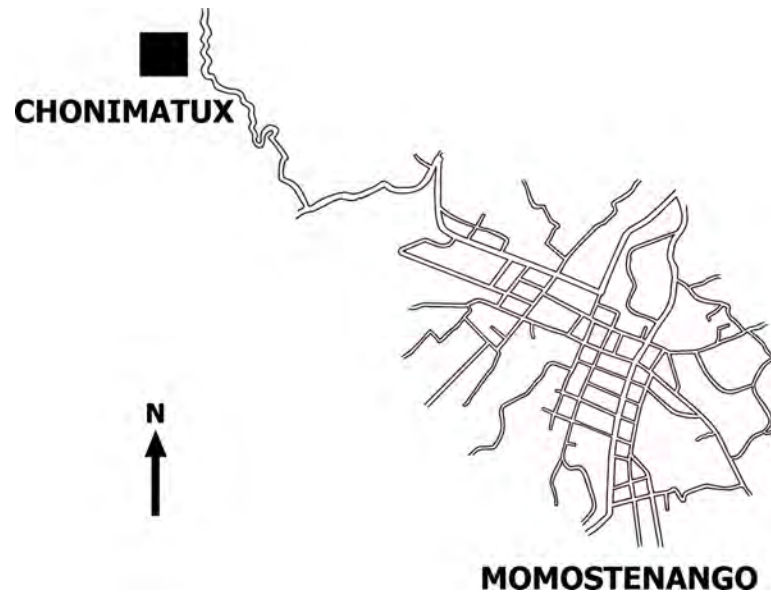
Besides this clear proof that performing offerings was not really a matter of curing people from ‘shamanic’ illnesses but also, and more crucially, a matter of sustaining their social efforts, from the very first moment I arrived in the town, I would come to be considered as something that Virgilio had to care about in a sense, although he never really told me that directly. Nevertheless, that which Casimiro hinted at with the words *él te carga*, “he carries you”, was something very real in our personal relationship. Virgilio always showed a strong preoccupation with my person, even going so far as to help me find a place to rent in the town-centre and presenting me to many people, something indispensable if one wants to wander the dangerous roads of the rural cantons of the town, especially at night. Thus, my presence was not that of a neutral observer or a person who just could ‘hang out’ before the family life of Virgilio. I had to be placed into a certain position before both the family and the ever-looming ancestors and earth gods. For example, when Virgilio and other *chuchqajawib’* did ceremonies for others in my presence, they would always introduce me before the unseen powers they were addressing, be them dead ancestors, or the *Santo Mundo* divinities, by offering them the same personal details I gave them when I presented myself: “This person before us is Alonso, he studies in Britain, at UCL”, they would say, not without asking for protection for me and a blessing in the completion of my PhD. Asked about this, they would say that their ancestors were to be informed of my presence to proceed with any ceremony.

Eventually, Virgilio would come to develop an interest in the very existence of my research: he considered it something that he had also produced or protected, which of course was the truth. However, at the beginning, I didn't understand how exactly the idea of protection worked. It was only later, while working with Virgilio and others, that I understood a little more.

### **3. The Ramos Family**

Virgilio Ramos Ajtún and his family, members of a branch or line (*xeteil*) of the Ramos patrilineage, live in *caserío* Chonimatux, a small hamlet relatively close to the town centre which belongs to Barrio Santa Ana, one of the four main wards of Momostenango (Figure 5). According to Virgilio, most of the members of the patrilineages in the vicinity<sup>23</sup> have ceased to actively perform *costumbre*, either because of religious conversions to Evangelic Protestantism or simply because of the death without succession of former *chuchqajawib'*, leaving him as one of the last two or three active *ajq'ij* or divining priests in the area. Chonimatux has a school, an *auxiliatura* or local administration building which are very near each other, as well as a Catholic church (Figure 6). Owing to recent conversions, there are now some Evangelic temples which, in contrast to the bigger catholic temple, are little more than small houses in the lands of some people. The Catholic patron saint of the community is Santiago. In fact, Virgilio is the *ajq'ij* or shaman-priest of the local *alcaldía*, and he burns offerings in behalf of the *corporación* or government of the local *alcalde*. He is also a *pasado*, for he was once the local *alcalde*, which makes him a member of the council of *principales* who elect the new *alcalde* each year. Moreover, his capacity to perform ceremonies in behalf of the community and in behalf of other families besides his own (ceremonies like

betrothals, weddings, funerals and protective rituals) make him in the eyes of other families a *k'amal b'e* ('road guide'), a leader for the community in both the spiritual and political sense. Thus, he is well considered as an important voice at the local level, often performing negotiations between different patrilineages.



5. Chonimatux's location in Momostenango



6. Left: A view of Chonimatux, with the Catholic church at the centre. Right: the road leading to the Ramos' lands.

Virgilio and his family live near a long road that crosses a dirt soccer field where the local young men, including his sons and grandsons, celebrate sporadic tournaments. He is married to Susana Argueta Xiloj, mother of three children, all



now married: Rudy, Neri and Joel (Figure 7). The Ramos brothers have multiple children too, and family life is usually very busy since also Virgilio's and Susana's sisters sporadically join in in family meetings, as do their nephews and the cousins of them. However, the Ramos Ajtún family live a somewhat distanced life from other members of the Ramos patrilineage itself: while Virgilio is recognized as a reliable ritual specialist among *costumbristas* in the vicinity, some relatives of his patrilineage don't practice *costumbre* anymore, and thus are estranged from him. Thus, his patrilineage is split, and Virgilio's current main personal preoccupation is trying to rebuild a more united family by keeping a closer relationship between him and his sons than that which he and his brothers had with his father. As he told me, for him it was important that his family was in harmony, free from gossip, especially since he, as a *k'amal b'e*, was to be an example for the community about the prestige of *costumbre*: thus, any of his failings would imply a further loss of prestige for *costumbre* itself.



7. Family pictures of the Ramos Family. On the right side, in the child-sized pictures, are the portraits of the family's current generation: on top, Virgilio, his

wife Susana, and their 4 sons, of which the first is already deceased; the rest are Rudy, Neri and Joel, and some of the grandchildren.

Virgilio's household lies at the base of a big incline that begins on the right side of the road, when arriving from Momostenango. Maize fields are placed on the slope, and some fruit trees are planted in an orchard near the house. The main household is composed by a patio with two main buildings (Figure 8). Neri and Joel live in the lands of the patrilineage, but they have different houses in the vicinity which were built for them when they married. The household also has a loom for weaving ponchos, a stone basin for washing clothes and a steam bath (*tuj*). In the heart of the maize fields, the ancestral altar made of potsherds and stone, the *awas*, is placed. The meaning of this ritual structure, which is considered by Virgilio and others to be the essence and main "content" (*la esencia y el contenido*) of his own family life, will be described later.



8. Virgilio's home.

The economic activities of the family are varied and, as I will show later, they are the main concern of the ceremonies that Virgilio and Rudy carry on behalf of the family. Besides the central place of maize agriculture, the cultivation of avocado and peaches, and the raising of poultry and pigs, Virgilio is a weaver, selling wool blankets or *ponchos* woven in the traditional *momosteco* style (Figure 9), an

industry which the town is famous for, but which has fallen into a sharp decline in recent years, after experiencing somewhat of a boom decades ago.<sup>24</sup> At the time, Joel worked for a lawyer's firm, and Neri and his wife had a small pharmacy near the road to the church square at the town centre. Later during my fieldwork, Rudy would also obtain a job at Cooperativa Buenabaj, a local credit union for Momosteco families. The Ramos' family life is busy during the week, since everyone has something to do in town; the children would go to school, Neri and his wife would tend their store, Joel would work at the town centre, Rudy would perform his day job, while Virgilio would sell blankets to merchants, attend his businesses in the community and perform rituals. Some of the sisters of Susana sell flowers and fruit at the market too. During the weekend, all would relax, and their favourite recreation is going to the thermal baths in the mountains.



9. Left: Virgilio works his land. Right: Virgilio poses with a finished wool blanket with a *tinamit* or “town” pattern (notice the little townspeople and a couple of quetzals in the centre).

Truth be told, the life of Virgilio and his family was not awfully dramatic in any sense, despite the obvious economic hardships that Guatemala as a whole experiences today.<sup>25</sup> Most of my visits took place in a relaxed atmosphere, or perhaps felt as interruptions on the busy flow of the Ramos' lives, in which I took part: helping at the sowing and planting of maize, clearing the terrain for the construction of a new house, going to the end-of-year dancing soir e at the school, or enjoying a bath in the hot-springs of the mountains. Of course, setbacks and problems were not absent: for example, violent winds were prevalent in the year of my arrival, ruining crops for many; the leaves of some of the maize crops at the Ramos' land got infected and the affected plants withered; the market of wool blankets is undergoing a perhaps terminal crisis, and thus Virgilio's loom was not as active as in the old days, just to name a few. Setting store in the town centre is also not easy nor cheap, and sales were sometimes slow for Neri's wife pharmacy business. A new home for Joel was in construction at the time, at which I helped a bit, when the brothers shovelled and cleared the terrain; of course, the construction was expensive too. Likewise, the economic pressures of Virgilio's participation in the local *auxiliatura*, which required unpaid work (*patan*) from him and his sons to expand and consolidate public services in Chonimatux (like running water), were also felt, as well as those deriving from Virgilio's participation in the Catholic *cofrad a* of Santiago which, as I will expose in chapter 3, are actually rather high.

One day, Virgilio showed me his main project: to build another Catholic church in Chonimatux or nearby, to counter the rising influence of Protestantism. Indeed, besides supporting his family, the main preoccupation of Virgilio was to make *costumbre* stronger, and to do this, he wanted to counter the recent decline

of Catholicism, which has lost terrain to Evangelical churches. Indeed, besides being a prominent *k'amal b'e*, Virgilio is also strongly Catholic, even going as far as being member of Acción Católica, a group known for its history of conflict with *costumbre* (cfr. Tedlock 1992: 40-43; Carmack 1995: 233-236); in the present, although the Catholic church has never lost its intentions to purge local Catholicism from indigenous elements, its power has greatly diminished before both Protestantism and Mormonism. Thus, some people like Virgilio strongly support Catholicism since, as he explained to me, "Catholicism doesn't forbid *costumbre* anymore", while Mormons and Protestants persecute *costumbre*, identifying it with 'idolatry', as I myself found in the speech of recent converts. As a part of Virgilio's involvement in Acción Católica, he is affiliated to a cooperative, *Cooperativa Salcajá*, a financial cooperative society founded by members of Acción Católica to develop projects for their affiliated families. Within the cooperative, Virgilio's main purpose was to raise money to build the Catholic temple. The problem is that, at the time, the project required an enormous sum of money to be completed, so saving enough to begin its realization was Virgilio's main long-term preoccupation.

While things went on with normalcy during my stay, the truth is that all the activities and plans described in the earlier paragraphs implied a considerable investment of money, time and work. The risk of failure at some of them was considerable, too. As head of the patrilineage, Virgilio's responsibility was to ensure that all these activities were successful, and of course, the success of these activities was the actual motivation of the rituals carried on by him and his son Rudy in behalf of the whole family. As mentioned, these rituals took place at the *awas rech alaxik*, the ancestral altars of the patrilineage, scattered across

his lands and fields; now that we somehow outlined the daily life of the Ramos family and its preoccupations, a closer look at the cosmology associated to their altars is necessary to understand in which sense this cosmology is not only symbolic or esoteric, but social.

#### **4. The patrilineage altars (*awas rech alaxik*) and the Ramos family**

As many authors have already remarked (Carmack 1998a: 342; Tedlock 1992: 77-81; Cook 2000: 98-99; Zamora Corona 2020), most of K'iche' religious ceremonies are carried in both private and public ancestral altars called *awas*, a word which means 'taboo'. Informally, they are also called *porob'al* (burning places) or *quemaderos*, in Spanish. K'iche' patrilineages have different such altars in their lands, at least three of them: one called *winel*, for agriculture; one called *warab'al ja*, where the spirits of the patrilineage are enshrined; and one altar for material abundance, called *meb'il*, which sometimes takes the form of a stone with the shape of an animal (Tedlock 1992: 77). Agricultural ceremonies, like the blessing of seeds, are carried in the *winel*, while the *warab'al ja* is reserved for ceremonies regarding the patrilineage, such as the presentation of new children or wives to the ancestors, for the altar is the "sleeping place" of the souls of the ancestors (Figure 10). These ceremonies involve the cleaning of ritual spaces which are covered with pine needles, and the burning of offerings of native incense, candles, wood and foodstuff, while prayers directed to the ancestors are recited.



10. To the left: *winel* type of altar. To the right: abandoned *warab'al ja* altar.  
Bottom: *meb'il* family stone shaped like a rabbit.

As *costumbristas*, the Ramos family also have these altars, although not in the complete, complex array that was noted by Tedlock or Carmack among the Xiloj clan.<sup>26</sup> Their *winel* is a big structure made out of stone and broken fragments of ceramic and clay (*xot*), which lies in the middle of one of their maize fields. They also have a smaller *warab'al ja* shrine near a river, and another altar called *mesa* (“table”) The *mesa* is considered to be the core (*matriz*) of the other altars, the point where the other altars converge; it is considered to be of a higher standing than the others, and particularly strong and dangerous. The unity of all these altars is called *awas rech alaxik*, or “taboo of the patrilineage”. The functions attributed to each type of them by the Ramos are a bit different from the classic scheme reported by Carmack and Tedlock: the *winel* is considered by them to be



both the agricultural and family altar, the *warab'alja* is only for the protection of travellers, while the *meb'il*, unlike the others, are manifold: it is a portable stone with the shape of a rabbit, together with all the precious stones found by the family in the mountains, which are considered to hold the presence of beneficent mountain spirits, and after a consecration ceremony (called *saturación*), become amulets of good fortune for the increase of money and human life. They can be placed at the inside of the *winel* to be kept safe (Figure 11).<sup>27</sup>



11. Left: the *winel* in the middle of the Ramos' maize field; right: Rudy extracting the *meb'il* precious stones from the *awas winel*.

I was offered many explanations about these structures, for example, after helping Virgilio and his sons clear the foundations of a new house. I was offered a more detailed explanation a month after the sowing of maize in the Ramos' *milpa* or cornfield. The young maize stalks need to be reinforced by making a small pile of earth with the hoe, so the stalks won't be bend by strong winds and storms, a work that is called *calzado*. The whole family takes part in this work, as well as in the sowing and eventual harvesting; the day favoured in this agricultural work is Q'anil, the day sacred to the *milpa*, and this day is used to perform ceremonies at the *winel* altar, which has agricultural connotations.



Commenting on the meaning of these structures, Virgilio offered me at first a vague explanation.

*Winel* is the heart of our family. We are offered there since we are born, and when my grandson was born the altar was thanked for the arrival of another member of the family. Each family must have one, and that is what we call *awas* (...) This altar is called the *awas q'anil*, and here we ask corn, water, we make ceremonies when women are pregnant, and also when a baby is born.

Then, Virgilio expanded on the meaning of the whole array of altars, insisting that the mesa is especially dangerous (*delicado*), and that they must be always fed with offerings so the family is “up to date” with their ritual obligations (*estar al día*). He said that offerings must be made in them with a proper ritual procedure, including abstinence from sexual contact the night before a ceremony is made. The *awas* also has a guardian spirit, a *nawal*, which sometimes takes the form of a snake and other wild animals. The offerings are made so the *nawal* of the altar won't ‘bite’ people when neglected:

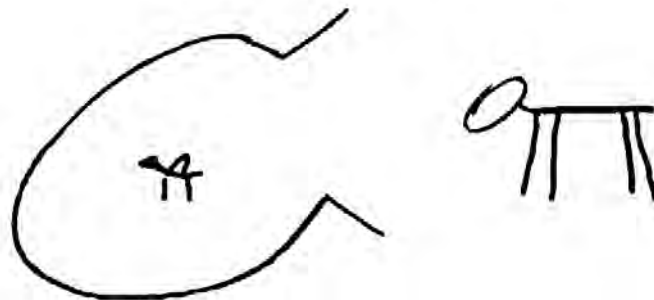
It is guarded by a snake, in K'iche' we call it *nawal*, in Spanish it is *santoral* (...) the altar, when it is not cared for, bites (*kationik*), if you don't know how to make an offering, it kills, it kills you (...) My father placed my name at the *winel*, since he was a follower of the way of the ancient ones, he placed it. When Ulises [his grandson] was born, we gave notice here, for this is the place where the snake rises, and the snake enters in the corral,

the coyote enters, the wildcat, they eat the animals, but if we give the offerings, we are protected...

The imagery used by Virgilio in talking about the *nawal* or spirit of the altar “attacking” animals in a little animal pen or corral was at first obscure to me: it seemed only like a vague metaphor of punishment; it was also unclear whether he was referring to his domestic animals or his children being punished by these spirits. Other researchers came across similar images, like Garrett Cook, whose informants told him that the altars were made so wild animals wouldn’t come to the lands of people and attack their livestock, in a literal fashion (Cook 2000: 99). But, later, as a part of my fieldwork, I obtained a detailed explanation, at first not from Virgilio and Rudy, but by another friend of mine called Marcelino, who was a *chuchqajaw* during most of his life. I will deal with Marcelino’s personal account in the next chapter, but his basic outline was confirmed by Rudy and many others later, and I present it in advance because it is necessary to understand the whole picture of K’iche’ cosmology.

The real reason people burn offerings in the altars is because their own souls (*k’ux*) are inside of the altars. However, these souls have animal forms, called *chikop*, a word that implies the generic idea of an animal but also specifically that of a little bird or chicken. This soul lives at a small enclosure, placed in the *Santo Mundo* or “Holy Earth”, called *corral*, and is protected by the ancestors from all harm, by keeping the door of the corral shut and protected. However, if one doesn’t do offerings at the altars, the door of the corral is opened, and people are attacked by the hostile underworld forces outside (Figure 12). It is said thus that the altars “bark” and “bite”, for they embody the animal souls

(*nawal*) of earth-gods and ancestors (cfr. Zamora 2019, 2020). Thus, economical failures, as well as illnesses and even death, all are a result of the attacks of the hostile *nawal* or animal spirits of earth gods and ancestors. The shrines are thus like the *corrales*, the containers of people's souls, and of the souls of families themselves: "the shrines are divided by communities or surnames (*alaxik*), for example, all the Ajiataz people are there, and if you were Ajanel, all the Ajanel are there", Marcelino explained once, and he added: "all families are like that, there is no family that is not recommended (to them) because this is the law of us the indigenous people, not just of a family, but all of them" (*esta es la ley de nosotros los indígenas, no sólo de una familia, sino de todas*).



12. A coyote spirit (*awajmundo*) attacking a *chikop* or 'bird soul' of a person inside its enclosure or *corral* (drawing by Abraham Ajiataz).

Indeed, this cosmology is not only conceived as a contingent statement, but as a law (*q'atb'altzij* in K'iche'), the law which governs indigenous life as such, as my own informants told me.<sup>28</sup> The animals that Virgilio said that "rise" from the altar, are in fact underworld forces that, hostile for the family out of their possible neglect of the ancestors, can attack them. Rudy too confirmed me this idea. When asked whether the altars "rise" (*se levantan*) and "bark and bite" (*ladran y muerden*), Rudy would tell me:

Yes, the *awas* rises. It is sometimes a person, sometimes an animal. Sometimes it announces when you are failing [in your ritual obligations toward] it. It arrives, it turns into a snake. I was working on a “case” this week, because during the night a family arrive to have dinner, the family head was sitting in the kitchen, his wife was bringing some firewood and the kids went to bed, and out of nowhere a snake was coiling at the kitchen. There was nothing there before, the man was watching the door. In the blink of an eye, a snake arrived. It was coiling. This was because the altar came and warned them: “you are failing, defend yourselves, feed me” (*defiéndanse, me están fallando, dénme de comer*). My blood vibrated and told me that it was the *awas*, the *awas* is located on the navel. When you fail, it bites you...

However, while being the source of the hostility of the underworld, the altars are also the sources of all earthly success. As Rudy explained me:

Let’s say one desires a job, one asks for it at the altar of the ancestors, all right, it “opens the doors” for you, and from nowhere you are employed. Now, let’s say I want to marry, and from nowhere, the ancestors grant this to you too. One says: I want children, and they grant children. Everything in life is there, it is registered. When one will die, he goes there with the ancestors. For they say in dreams: this person will die.

On one occasion, for example, Rudy and I were talking about the rituals that must be performed in behalf of a dead person of importance. When a *chuchqajaw* dies, his successor must perform a ceremony on the Ajpu day, the day in the Maya calendar which is dedicated to the dead ancestors. Rudy said: "At the day Ajpu, we ask in behalf of the dead. One must wait for the day 13 Ajpu, the optimal day to be accepted among the ancestors. They are gods, the dead are gods (*Son dioses, los muertos son dioses*). They remain among us and speak through their altars. They punish those who they disapprove of". Marriages are too predetermined by this divine power, too. Rudy told me that, when he was looking for a wife, he dreamed his ancestors as very aged, sitting atop big stones in an underground mountain. There, a female ancestor (*nan*) presented him with his partner.

The ancestors arrived in my dream, during the night they came to tell something to my soul, they came to show a wedding, my hands and feet were to be bound with a woman<sup>29</sup>, I am going to get married, I dreamed how they were sweeping the road, putting white flowers, singing. I arrived to a great female ancestor, she received me, gave me white clothes, gave me a bundle of flowers, she also said: your hands and feet are going to be bound, here it is your woman, here is your wedding, when you marry, this is your partner, she will be with you until you die.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, Virgilio insisted that the fortune of his patrilineage and his capacity to hold agricultural land was granted by the intercession of his ancestors in this altar: "every plot of land that I want to have, I can have it, but only with the permission of the *awas* (altar)"; therefore, part of the danger associated with the

agency of this place was precisely because any expansion on social and economic power must be accompanied by corresponding ceremonies of thanksgiving at these altars. Another informant told me that he would increase the size of the altar depending on his economic and social successes; some others would say that further pieces of stone and clay would be added for each new member of the patrilineage.

Thus, just as social success is attributed to the intercession of the ancestors, which form a sort of supernatural society, social failure is attributed to the attack of the animal spirits of the underworld (*awaj mundo*) and the anger of the ancestors; as Rudy told me:

One would say, why is this happening? It is because of our debt with the ancestors, one makes an offering and the thing stops. If not, after you die, the altar insists, insists so the children are up to date with the offerings. If not, it can take the whole family with it. The *awas* is thus, the *awas* is fearsome, it makes you poor, it puts you into nakedness, into madness, for what won't it do!<sup>31</sup>

All these testimonies confirm the ambivalent nature of the *awas*. While being the foundation of family and social life and the seat of the beneficent power of the ancestors visualized as earth gods, the *awas* is linked by a powerful, deep cosmology to the destructive, primordial forces of the *Mundo*. Virgilio even told me that sometimes the *awajmundo* (jaguars, monkeys, deers) can be seen near the neglected *awas* emanating heat as their *nawal*. In a word, it is “fearsome” (*tremendo*).

Having introduced this cosmology, which I will discuss in more detail in the upcoming chapters, I will now present a concrete example of its presence in a ceremony of protection associated with the *awas* of the Ramos family, to show how all the former economic and daily-life preoccupations I have introduced, and some others that I have not, are engaged in a private family ceremony in which the whole patrilineage participates, and in which I had the privilege to participate.

## **5. San Antonio Mundo**

The ceremony I will describe is the festivity of the patron saint of the family, San Antonio Mundo, called by some people at the town “the saint of the earth” (*el santo del mundo*). A complex cult of native saints exists in Momostenango, which has been extensively treated in a monograph by Garrett Cook (2010). Among them, two are the foremost: Santiago, the patron of the town, and San Antonio Mundo. Santiago of which we will speak more on the next chapter is only in surface the catholic Saint James; likewise, San Antonio Mundo is partly inspired in San Antonio de Padua, the Portuguese saint that has the privilege of carrying baby Jesus in his iconographical representation (Hugh Farmer 2004). As Garrett Cook explains, Santiago was invested as ‘captain’ or warlord of the earth powers by the old *principales*, but San Antonio would be considered as the *Santo del Mundo*, the saint that represents the earth itself, where ancestors and earth divinities live. Owing to the fact that San Antonio de Padua is the patron saint of animals, he was considered the protector of cattle and domestic animals, and thus became San Antonio Mundo (Cook 2000: 64-65). Most curiously, the San Antonio

image adored at Momostenango's main church only consists in the *niño* or baby Jesus part, without saint Anthony himself! (Figure 13)



13. The image of *niño* San Antonio Mundo at Momostenango's main church.

Just like Santiago, San Antonio is brought in local pilgrimages to cattle-raising communities in August. I have witnessed the cult given to the image by the *chuchqajaw rech tinamit*, which performed a ceremony in behalf of the *auxiliatura* of Aldea Santa Ana, his own community. However, I will touch upon this particular topic in chapter 6. For now, I will refer to another cult related to San Antonio Mundo, one which is more private in nature and, to my knowledge, previously unreported.

Besides giving cult to their ancestors at their altars or *awas*, some Momostecan patriclans are in possession of catholic images that are said to have been found by their ancestors at mountains or in the underground. In fact, even



the most powerful images of the town, like Santiago, have similar origin stories. For example, Santiago's image was found by one of the foremost lineages of the town, either the Vicentes or the Herreras, but eventually, as Momostecan lore affirms, the image would magically appear overnight at Momostenangos' town center instead of the old town of *Ojer Tinamit* or Pueblo Viejo, and thus, the image became the patron saint of the community instead of just a particular lineage. In a less public way, the Ramos family has a similar story about how they found their image of San Antonio Mundo. According to Rudy, the grand, grandfather of the family was not from Momostenango, but from El Palmar, where he worked at the cane and coffee plantations of the coast:

My great-grandfather worked at the cane fields, that's what the people before did for a living. One day, at lunch-time, he heard a voice calling him from the earth "come, here I am". He was called many times daily, and sometimes when he passed by a mountain near the river bank, he fell many times with the same stone. Why is this happening? He said. So, he took his hoe, and started digging. Finally, he reached a stone, it seemed like nothing. But the stone guided him to an image, a San Antonio de Padua, and it is here still, it belongs to the family. So, he came, build his house, and everyone placed his candles to honour him, my grandfather, my father, and myself. He is not at our household, but in the original house where he placed it, it is not with us, but we are given permission to pay him cult. He is the *santo ri alaxik*, the family saint, for he has a burning place too.

According to Virgilio, San Antonio protects the family, conserves the *milpa*, and intercedes in behalf of wealth, animals and businesses. The image is housed in the lands of Virgilio's cousin, although he doesn't partake of the cult anymore. It seems that neighbouring families would also have their own images: a patrilineage in the vicinity has an image of the Black Christ of Esquipulas, for example. Furthermore, the saint is not only part of the the origins of the patrilineage: he receives actual cult: the image is used during a divining ceremony that is performed each year at the day of Saint Anthony, a ceremony in which all the members of the family take part. The main objective of this ritual is to obtain an omen through the image, so the family knows what is going to happen during the year; sometimes the omen spells good, sometimes, misfortune. As Rudy told me about a past ceremony:

When his day arrives, we will venerate him. We bring him, we pray to him, and say him: "take care of our animals, our road", we make a circle at the patio with all the family which we venerate, some of my cousins, my uncle. Three of four years before, the saint came and told me "someone of the family is going to die". I was concentrated, and he told me that. I almost didn't feel when he told me, but six months later, my cousin died. And when he died, my relatives arrived to tell me: "you knew it was going to happen, you didn't say which one of us, but you knew he was going to die". And yes, if I told them whom, they would not believe me, but it is a gift from the *Mundo*, it grants an omen. Last year, all went fine, but now we will make another ceremony to see what will come to happen next year. That is the *santoral* of the family.

And indeed, on 13 June 2018, the day of Saint Anthony, the family gathered for a séance session of the same kind. The celebration started with a family dinner with meat, beans, rice, chilli and tamales. After dining and talking about family issues (Virgilio complaining about his many work compromises, the young men of the family discussing soccer, the women discussing the future birth of another kid in the family), Virgilio took the image of San Antonio from its shrine at another neighbouring home (which is not in his lands, but in his brother's lands) and showed it to me. It is a full body image of Saint Anthony of Padua, carrying baby Jesus, cloaked in his Franciscan habit, with an oversized red rosary and a sombrero. The image also has a *meb'il* or precious stone associated to it, a small crystal encased in a rusty metal locket, impossible to open now, gleaming through a piercing in its container (Figure 14).



14. Left: San Antonio de Padua, the patron saint of the Ramos patrilineage. Right: San Antonio is venerated at a seance at one of the family's houses.

The ceremony was not performed at the main household where we had dinner, but in a larger building near the house of Neri, Rudy's brother, a building

sometimes used as a guest-house for the family. The ritual was performed at a very large concrete room, where many wooden stools and benches were placed. San Antonio itself was placed over a cloth on the floor, before a baked clay tile (*xot*) with candles, as well as a broken pot where sugar and incense (*pom*) were placed. Thus, the ritual was not really Catholic, but more akin to the indigenous ceremonies to the ancestors. The ceremony started with Virgilio addressing the image in a long prayer, asking for protection for all the family members as well as their jobs and businesses: the poncho loom, Neri's pharmacy, Rudy's newfound work at the *cooperativa*, the *cofradía* of Santiago, and so on. After this introduction, some speakers were brought, and *marimba* music was played. We all started dancing, moving slowly to the compass of the marimba. Traditionally, the veneration of the saints is always accompanied by marimba music and dancing, as I witnessed in many occasions.

Meanwhile other members of the family were just chatting, laughing and being merry. The artificial lighting was shut, and we were illuminated by the candles. Rudy sat in the middle, before the image of San Antonio, and started a long shamanic chant (Figure 15). The prayer was mostly a very long concatenation of sacred beings: after invoking San Antonio as the "shepherd of the *Santo Mundo*" and the family's ancestors or *komon*, Rudy addressed Santiago as "captain of the *Santo Mundo*", and the souls of the neighbouring patrilineages, the *oxlajuj may* introduced in the previous chapter.



15. Family members watch while Rudy starts to pray before the image.

While repeating names and formulas, Rudy fell into a sort of deep trance in the dark. Finally, at some point, Rudy began to speak in behalf of the image. He murmured a prophecy to his father:

There is danger, at the *awas*, sorrow is coming, but you are only going to witness it, only witness the tears, when it arrives...<sup>32</sup>

Rudy conveyed the information to Virgilio, who immediately started to show concern and deliberate which ceremonies are adequate to avoid this destiny. However, the family was not disheartened, and they kept dancing and being merry, despite Rudy's utterance. After the communication of this vision and the end of the dance in behalf of San Antonio, the members of the family were placed inside a circle of incense made by Virgilio. It is the *korral* where the *nawal* of the patrilineage, their animal co-essences, are placed. When I entered the circle, one of the women of the patrilineage says "Alonso Ramos!" in a joking manner, and

everybody laughs, me included. After that, we all pass our limbs over the fire, and finally are blessed by the image (Figures 16 and 17). Finally, we go to Neri's house, where I fall asleep. In the other room, Virgilio is making calendric counts to himself, trying to devise a day which will be adequate to avoid the bad fortune. He mentions the day Keme or "death" in the Maya calendar. A month later, while we were carrying some timber, Rudy would explain these omens to me. He said that the saint would again prophesize the death of someone. So, perhaps, that is why Virgilio had chosen the day Keme as appropriate to counter the omen. The other omen was a punishment for some failing of the family, but he wouldn't specify which.



16. Rudy passes the image of San Antonio Mundo before the fire, which he then uses to bless the family members.



17. The author is blessed by the image of San Antonio Mundo at the end of the ritual.

As Virgilio would explain, the ceremony for San Antonio is an act to “bring us together and make us a unit as a family before the *Mundo*”. And indeed, certainly the ceremony was an act of bringing together the family, for not only Virgilio, his wife and his sons and grandchildren would participate, but also some of the cousins that were close to the family, and even me, being called now, jokingly, “Alonso Ramos”. However, a deeper significance of the ceremony, associated with K’iche’ cosmology, can also be discerned. As we have seen, the ancestors of the Momosteco families keep guard over the animal co-essence of their descendants, their *nawal*, in the *awas*, ensuring that nothing bad happens to them. This underworld space is called *korral*, and in the ceremony it was represented by the circle of incense in which the family (and I) were placed at the end of the ritual. Punishment by the ancestors is exerted on the *nawal* co-essence of people, so the

act of placing people inside the *korral* is a protection from the prospective punishment of the ancestors. In this, the ceremony is not too different from the protection rituals of the Tzotzil, registered by Vogt, where patients would enter decorated beds symbolic of the *korral* where their *chanul* or companion animal is reintegrated (1969: 442-444). In the case of Virgilio and Rudy, the closing circle of incense was this act of 'closing the door'. In this case, however, the ceremony had not only the purpose of protecting the family, but also to divine into the future: Rudy would explain to me this capacity in a way that is explicitly linked with the cosmology of animal souls.

Indeed, some time after the ceremony, I was talking with Rudy about it, as well as about the concept of *nawal*, which implies an animal soul. Rudy of course would explain the usual conception that is known in the local anthropological literature as *tonalismo*, that is, an animal soul which is linked to the destiny of the person.<sup>33</sup> However, Rudy added something regarding the ceremony. As he would explain, the reason why he as a diviner can peer into the future is that he is able to hear the saint and speak to him through his animal soul or *nawal*. He would say to me, regarding his *nawal*: "I'm an eagle. When I burn my offerings, my eyes heat up inside the *Santo Mundo*, and I can see far away". This heat force is called *q'aq'il* (or *nawal* too) and it is the same force that animals and the altars themselves use to hunt and kill. Thus, San Antonio becomes for him a way to channel into the perspective of the ancestors and underground gods regarding the future of people, and visualize the possible harm that can come to them through the *awas*.

In this thesis, I will leave aside ontological analyses regarding the ideas on nature and culture implicit in these testimonies and rituals, on which I have



elaborated elsewhere.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, due to the introductory nature of this chapter, I will leave a more complex analysis on the idea of cosmology to Chapter 2. Instead, for now I want to concentrate in what the social character of these conceptions entails for both its prior treatment in the regional anthropological literature and the proposal of this thesis.

## **6. Discussion and provisional conclusion**

The aim of this first chapter was to both introduce how the topic of cosmology has been dealt with in prior literature regarding Momostenango, and to begin to suggest a new image of it, based on my fieldwork among the Ramos family. I would like to go back to the first point alluded to in the introduction of this chapter, that is, the theoretical rift between master and student that occurred between Carmack and Tedlock; while of a merely seemingly local importance, this rift is important because it exemplifies rather well the dilemmas of ethnology and anthropological theory.

As we have seen, Carmack dismissed native cosmology in his analysis of social life to such a point that he didn't even deign it worthy of being researched: the only allusion to a native conception on patrilineage power is the election of a patrilineage head was usually left to "the fates" (1995: 337). His work is of a great ethnohistorical relevance, but his program remained Weberian and, as such, ignored the "point of view of the other" which needs to inform anthropology according to Malinowski's famous *dictum* (2005 [1922]: 24). On the other hand, Tedlock considered crucial to actually re-vindicate the depth and power of K'iche' ritual practices, and devoted her life to researching them, not only producing a

monograph that is still well regarded and authoritative (I even spotted some copies during official political events at the town), but even practicing indigenous 'shamanism' herself. While this facet of her work is not generally taken into account in the literature, I think that Tedlock's initiation into calendrical divination implies something deeper than the mere idea of "going native": it stemmed from a real attempt to take indigenous cosmologies and practices seriously within her own theoretical framework, which was holistic. This can be argued from her theoretical portrayal of K'iche' divination, where she characterizes these practices as overcoming the dualism inherent in the dialectic visions of western schemes (structuralism, Marxism, etc.): if 'truth' is non-dualistic in character, of course shamanism is a valid pursuit for an outsider too. However, the price that Tedlock had to pay in order to transform Maya shamanism into something that could be taught to Western New Age spiritual seekers was to turn it, precisely, into something purely "spiritual", devoid of any strong connections with the social; the main contradiction in this being, of course, that a truly holistic approach would need to incorporate the social and the cosmological, since they are not separated for the K'iche' themselves.<sup>35</sup>

Trying to make a counterpoint, in this chapter I have described, contextualizing it within the worries and the daily life of a family, a cosmology that is actually engaged with the social, with people's lives and, as I will show later on, with power. In reality, nobody explains cosmology in Momostenango from a "spiritual" starting point, instead, the concrete realities of a patrilineage, real life issues and real difficulties are invoked as the real departure point for getting involved with rituals and cosmology. Furthermore, in the words of my informants, this cosmology is not a *Weltanschauung*, world-view or speculation,

but a *law*, in the sense of something that *defines social life*: that is its essential character, to be precisely “the law of us, the indigenous”, *la ley de nosotros los indígenas*.

If we were still in the old days of anthropology, this cosmology could be aligned with the ones described by the structural-functionalist anthropologists of the Chiapas school, since the idea of a corral of souls is a common feature to be found in the cosmology among the Maya of Chiapas and in other places.<sup>36</sup> Of course, no one considers himself a follower of old school structural-functionalism now, as Alan Barnard has remarked (2000: 73), however, in a defence of the old school, at least in the local context of Chiapas and Guatemala, the problems that classical theories tried to solve have not been sufficiently addressed by the regional post-functionalist ethnography. For example, recent authors working in Chiapas, such as Pedro Pitarch, have distanced themselves from the program of the classical Chiapas structural-functionalist school by dealing in-depth with cosmological subjects like souls and spirits, showing the affinity of indigenous conceptions with Deleuzian notions like that of ‘fold’ (2013). Structural-functionalism is discarded in his work as already old-fashioned, something that is already known to be false, but, in the end, the problem remains the same: we can reject functionalism and concentrate in the intricacies of Maya soul conceptions, but the old school was actually right in stating that social life is of crucial importance to the presence of cosmology in people’s lives, it is not accessory to it. This is not an assertion of anthropologists, but of informants themselves: Virgilio doesn’t do *costumbre* to explore the Deleuzian complexities on souls; he explicitly says that all his lands and his social standing depend on his relationship with the *Santo Mundo*, to the point that he almost describes his

cosmological ideas in terms of a 'native functionalism' of sorts. Of course the anthropologist can always dismiss this, insist on imposing his own more "sophisticated" complexities, but he would be utterly missing the point: Virgilio and Rudy deal with problems as different as raising money for a local cooperative, keeping a drugstore afloat, avoiding death omens, or performing the *calzado* of a milpa, through a relationship with *El Santo Mundo*.

My proposal cannot be construed here in its totality, but the important thing to realize is that this relationship between cosmology and society as it appears in the testimonies and actions of my informants is a real problem that needs to be considered seriously, instead of just dealing with this topic through a reductionistic explanation, or outright ignoring it. As the reader has found during this chapter, people indeed express "native functionalist" statements all the time, of the type "I do this ceremony in order to solve this social problem", however, what I suggest is that we are not conceptualizing correctly the entanglement of the social and the cosmological in these affirmations. People don't do rituals in order to solve ideal, cosmological situations ("holistic" approaches), nor merely in order to justify social actions (functionalist, sociological approaches), instead *people do rituals in order to act socially in a cosmological fashion*. In fact, as we have seen in this chapter, these rituals are sometimes even more paradoxical. Usually, in the classic functionalist logic, we suppose that people only use cosmology in order to get powerful or solve a problem. But what Rudy was doing in the divination ritual, for example, was not trying to solve any problem, but trying to ascertain if his upcoming problems were to be considered as cosmological problems, something that would be

horrifying in that logic, for who would want cosmic problems apart from normal ones!

Therefore, it becomes necessary that we assert that the cosmologies of Rudy, Virgilio or Marcelino are indeed “cosmologies of the social”. Of course, the foremost example of this approach is Morten Axel Pedersen’s depiction of current shamanistic practices in Mongolia not as a result of post-socialism, but as a theory of post-socialist conditions itself, a “cosmology of post-socialism” (2011). However, for now, these cosmologies still remain a bit “flat” in my account, as mere depictions or sketches, even as mere representations: they are theories worthy of study and consideration, and they have a social content, but how do they actually work? I will start answering this question in full in my next chapter.

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## Notes

1 See Zamora Corona 2019 for an account of these shared cosmological features from a more ethnological perspective.

2 The name of the town comes from the Nawatl language of Central Mexico, and it was given to it, according to the prevailing theory, by the Conquistador allies, the Tlaxcaltec, during the XVIth century; *mōmōstli* means a shrine or altar, while *tenānko* means “wall” or “fortress”, which would make the compound word mean “fortress of shrines”, perhaps owing to the famed prominence of altars and places of worship in the region. The name could also be pre-Hispanic, given the contacts between the Aztec empire and the K’iche’. The original K’iche’ name of the town is *Chwa Tz’aq* (“before the monument/shrine”).

3 Such as Los Cipreses, Pitzal, San Antonio Pasajoc, San Vicente Buenabaj, Santa Ana, Tumayac and Xequemeyá.

4 Like Canquixajá, Chojonacruz, Chonimatux, Choxacol, Chuiabaj, Jutacaj, Nimtztuj, Pancá, Pologua, Pueblo Viejo, Rachoquel, San José Sigüila and Xeabaj.

5 See Balbino Camposeco and Ortiz Domingo 1988 for a detailed account of the *poncho* industry during the final years of its apogee.

6 Interestingly, Carmack's memory is alive in the town, especially with some of the older Ladino families in the town centre, owing to the fact that he lived there for years.

7 The word is generally glossed as "mother-fathers", since *chuch* can be translated as grandmother and *qajaw* as grandfather (Carmack 1998a: 341). However, some of my informants offered the alternative gloss "our most important lord", since *chuch* can also mean the most important part of something and *qajaw* is literally "our lord".

8 In summary, each patrilineage has a head which is also its calendric specialist (*chuchqajaw rech alaxik*), but also certain *chuchqajawib'* can become the official ritual specialists of their local cantons (*chuchqajaw rech kanton* or *chuchqajaw rech aldea*); finally, one among all of these ritual specialists is elected as the official calendric priest for the whole town, the *chuchqajaw rech tinamit*. As Tedlock explains, when a patrilineage priest-shaman moves up to the canton or town level, he retains his duties at the lower levels (1992: 34).

9 As we will see, Carmack's account of the political institutions of the town, synthesized in a diagram (1995: 310), reflects pre-Civil War conditions and is outdated now; however, the new institutions will be introduced when dealing directly with political issues in my ethnography in chapter 5.

10 The day is associated with political power and the cosmological direction of the east, where the sun rises.

11 See Ochoa 2013 for a short overview of the history of indigenous *alcaldías* in Guatemala.

12 Published in 1995, Carmacks' book is strongly based on the pre-Civil war situation. As one member of the most prominent Ladino families of the town confessed to me, "we the true Ladinos are finished" (*los verdaderos Ladinos estamos acabados aquí*). Instead, nowadays the kind of social tensions described by Carmack, crystalized in the embrace or rejection of *costumbrista* practices, is internalized among the indigenous population: Mormons, Protestants or neo-Catholic indigenous confronted with *costumbrista* indigenous, just to name one among many such conflicts.

13 As it will be explained in chapter 5, while Carmack's conception is institutionally true, there is a clear correspondence between the hierarchies of the ritual specialists in town and the hierarchies of the town's ritual structures and its associated cosmology, which has a strong relationship to political hierarchies, even from the perspective of a more old-fashioned ethnology (cfr. Zamora 2019: 128).

14 As defined by Cook, a *cofradía* is a Catholic association or "sodality composed of four or more men occupying ranked positions who are appointed (...) to maintain the cult of a saint for a year." (2000: 266). Unlike in other Maya towns, participating in *cofradía* cults in Momostenango has no formal bearing on holding political power but, as we will see in chapter 3, it is certainly related to political positions (for *alcaldes* seek the blessing of the saints) and gives a particular prestige to those taking part in it.

15 The names of the day-signs that compose the *cholq'ij* are the following: Imox, Iq', Aq'ab'al, K'at, Kan, Kame, Kej, Q'anil, Toj, T'zi', B'atz', E, Aj, I'x, Tz'ikin, Ajmaq, No'j, Tijax, Kawoq and Ajpu. Divinatory and ritual meanings and associations can be consulted in Tedlock 1992: 107-131.

16 See Weeks, Sachse and Prager 2017 for a general account and historical antecedents.

17 See Rice 2007: 31-39 for an overview of the problem and that volume in general for hypotheses regarding the origin of the 260-day calendar.

18 See Tedlock 1992: 141 and Akker 2018: 250-251 for body maps with associated meanings; however, these maps are variable: I myself have produced one of my own which differs from both in some details.

19 Cfr. Tedlock 1992 159-171 for a more detailed description and examples of arrangements. Other, non-native divinatory tools which are used in combination with the 'blood speak' are the Spanish playing card deck (*baraja española*) and a divinatory book called *El Oráculo*, probably a version of the so-called *Napoleon's Oraculum* which got famous during the XIXth century (Anonymous 2010 is an English version); I never got to see it live, but my informants often mentioned a woman who they nicknamed *la orracla (sic)* which was in possession of this volume and used it to read the future.

20 The colourful decorated buses that are the most used vehicle of public transportation in rural Guatemala, usually adapted from retired American school buses (Radin 2011)

21 Estrada Peña is himself an anthropologist working at neighbouring Totonicapán, on which he has published several articles (2010, 2013, 2014, 2015).



22 Later, I would realize that Casimiro's self-deprecating words in his praise of his friend was a case of false modesty. He is too the *chuchqajaw* of a neighbouring clan, so naturally he also makes offerings in behalf of others and is well respected as a *k'amal b'e*, and holds the same kind of power he described through the example of his friend.

23 According to Virgilio, some of the prevalent *alaxik* in Chonimatux are Ramos, Chun, Ab'ac, Martínez, Ajka, Díaz, Zárate, Pelicó, Ixkoy, De León, Argueta, Xiloj and Cuyuch', with Chun, Ramos and Martínez being the more numerous.

24 For a detailed account of the traditional fabrication of ponchos, see Balbino Camposeco and Ortíz Domingo: 1998.

25 According to the United Nations Development Programme, more than half of the population of the country lives in poverty; up to a 79% of the poor in the country are indigenous people (2009: vii)

26 The Xiloj are one of the most powerful patrilineages in Momostenango, and one of its members; Andrés Xiloj Peruch assisted both Barbara and Dennis Tedlock as an informant. Another member of the same patrilineage, Gabriel Xiloj, held the title of *chuchqajaw rech tinamit* during the period after the civil war, before José Itzep. A map of the ancestral lands of the Xiloj and their altars can be seen on Carmack 1995: 336.

27 In my first publication on the subject (cfr. Zamora 2019), I followed the information of the Ramos. In the next one (2020), however, I followed the more traditional scheme where the *warab'al ja* is ancestral, the *winel* agricultural and the *meb'il* is financial, for there are calendrical reasons to support this interpretation as the original scheme. In truth, however, many variants are found in the ethnographic literature (cfr. Cook 2000: 99 for another interpretation).

28 As we will see later, this corral cosmology of predating *naguales* and ambiguously protecting ancestors is actually very similar to those described by the anthropologists of the Chiapas school that I have mentioned, but a detailed comparison is beyond the scope of my argument here. See Zamora Corona 2019: 127-128 for a more in-depth comparison.

29 The expression “my feet and hands” (*waq’an, nuq’ab’*), which means the whole person, is a case of *difrasismo*, a parallel construction in indigenous rhetoric (Garibay 1953: 67). The equivalent in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztec, was *momatzin, in mocxitzin* (your hands, your feet), with the same meaning (Horcasitas 2004: 55)

30 *Xu'l ri nantat pa ri nu waram, chaq'ab' xel kib'ij chirech ri uwach ri nu q'ij, xelki k'ulwachij, jun k'ulinaq'il, katuniik waq'an, nuq'ab' ruk' jun uxooq, kink'ulikm xinwachik'aj, kikipako ri uparinub'e, xkiya ri saq kotz'i'j, xko b'an ri b'ix. Xinonaik ruk' jun nimaqanan, xinu k'ulaj, xyoo' ri watz'iyaaq saq xuyoo' jun molok k'ot'zi'j pa ri nuq'ab', xuju xu b'ij: chi' katunuik raqan aq'ab', chi wa' k'olik ri awixoqil, chi' wa' ri kulanem, chi wa' ri katk'ulaik, are wa' ri kawach'ilaj, kat rach'ilaj, ka' pa ra' kamikalna.*

31 *Así es el awas, el awas es tremendo, lo hace pobre a uno, lo desnuda a uno, lo enloquece a uno ¡cuántas cosa no hace el awas!*

32 *K'o ri k'ax, pa ri awas xakajetow ulooq k'ax. Xa kiwilo, xa kiwil wa' ri oqej, chi' ri kixopanik...*

33 See Lamrani 2008 and Monaghan 1998 for a general account on *tonalismo* and *nagualismo*.

34 According to my proposal, this would imply more of a hierarchical ontological arrangement where humans are seen as domestic animals for the ancestors, and nature is the material culture of divinities (cfr. Zamora Corona 2020).

35 This attitude still permeates the occasional foreigners that I met in Momostenango, who, following New Age authors, dismissed the cosmology of spirits and the links of K'iche' cosmology as not worthy of being considered "spiritual": for example, when I tried to explain that ancestors actually grant jobs or money to the people, some spiritual seekers dismissed this as "unspiritual".

36 See, for example, Millán 2019 for a general reflection on the idea in Mesoamericanist ethnology.

## CHAPTER 2.

### On Hierarchies beyond Dumont: Entanglement and Downward Causality in K'iche' Cosmology

#### 2.1 Introduction

In the last chapter I have briefly referred to Marcelino, the calendrical priest turned Protestant that first introduced me to what I would like to call the 'deep cosmology' of Momostenango, that is, a set of cosmological ideas previously unreported in the area which resembles more or less the cosmological notions explained to Evon Vogt, William Holland and other ethnologists working with the Tzeltal and Tzotzil in Chiapas (Vogt 1969, Holland 1964, Figuerola Pujol 2010). Marcelino's case is fascinating, not only because of his surprising cosmological account, but because of the way which the presence of this cosmology in his life endured, even after his conversion. In this chapter, concentrating on the concrete experiences of Marcelino and his ideas about them, I want to explore in depth the main idea of this thesis, that of cosmological downward causation, in relationship to the structure of K'iche' cosmology, as well as introducing the idea of 'tangled hierarchies', which will be later shown to be partly related to it.

The argument of this chapter can be anticipated thus: while Marcelino converted to Protestantism, thus not "believing" in *costumbre* anymore, he asserts that his animal souls (*nawal, chikop*)<sup>1</sup> still reside in the sacred altars of his ancestors; furthermore, he says that he cannot destroy these altars, something that other Protestants urge him to do. The reason is that, since his animal souls resides there, if he destroyed these structures, he would perish or at the very least cause his definite social downfall through this. This doubling of

Marcelino's identity into a cosmological other, his *nawal*, which at the same time lives inside a physical altar near his home, is what allows for the cosmology he describes to be not only a mere representation, but a hierarchy that is not merely vertical, or simply encompassing, as in Dumon's classical treatment of hierarchy ([1988] 1970), but 'tangled' (cfr. Hofstadter [1979] 1999: 10). Thus, this chapter will elaborate with precision what do we mean by a tangled cosmological hierarchy, and how downward causality is possible in it, trying to start to 'turn on its head' our usual understanding of the concept.

#### **2.4. Abraham and Marcelino**

One of the most important interlocutors of this ethnography is Abraham Ajiataz Cael, a schoolteacher in his late fifties who works at Instituto Kamawanik (Figure 18), an educational project that was originally funded by the Guatemala Friendship School Foundation (cfr. 2010), providing the funds for the construction of a school which has since fell into a state of progressive disrepair. I originally sought Abraham in order to further my knowledge of K'iche' and to hire him as an assistant to work with in the translation of indigenous texts; in time, he became more of a friend and colleague than a teacher. We would spend many hours at the ruined classroom where he still teaches to poor students, talking about his life and the culture and traditions of Momostenango. Born in a *costumbrista* family, Abraham eventually left the traditional religion and converted to evangelical Protestantism. In his youth he pursued an education in pedagogy and psychology, and his skills as a teacher of both Spanish and K'iche' have proven quite useful for him, for he has managed to befriend many of the outsiders that come to Momostenango for humanitarian purposes. Nonetheless,

despite the income from his business and the support of two sons who have emigrated to the United States, he is usually in financial distress, especially regarding the difficult issue of keeping afloat the school. At the present, he certainly didn't partake of *costumbre*, but thanks to his interest in language and his own life experiences, he had a peculiar relationship with the *costumbrista* aspect of Momostenango itself: he felt proud of its traditions and culture, but at the same time, broke off with them in a personal and religious level.



18. Abraham (center) at his school (photograph used with permission of Abraham Ajiataz).

As collaborators in the translation and analyses of many hours of recordings, my relationship with Abraham was not that of a researcher with an informant, but also that of two researchers on Momostenango. Indeed, Abraham obviously has a great knowledge on Momostenango's traditions but, as he explained, his parents were not Momostecos, but rather newcomers to the town: Abraham's father was a butcher from Chiquimula who made his living by selling meat at the

market. In the context of Momosteco tradition, this means that his family didn't have the ancestral altars described in chapter 1, nor they were members of a traditional patrilineage. His family just kept the altars already found in a property he acquired, making offerings in them according to *costumbre*. The members of the family would pay a calendrical priest or *chuchqajaw* from another clan to make offerings in their behalf, as some people do. Thus, while Abraham and his family certainly practiced *costumbre* before his conversion, he admits he didn't know much about it, but he believed<sup>2</sup> in it, and even more, he told me that, for him, the altars were indeed powerful, for he and many others had witnessed their power many times. As he told me, quoting the old saying: *no hay que creer ni dejar de creer* ("one should not believe nor disbelieve"), meaning with it that the power was real, but he didn't participate in the ancestral cult anymore.

At some point during my fieldwork, I became convinced that the ancestral altars were the key to understanding Momostenango and its cosmology, but I was totally unsure of what they actually *were*. The ideas reported by Tedlock (1992: 77-81), Carmack (1998: 342) and Cook (2000: 98-100), while valuable, were vague, always describing their functions but not their significance in-depth. The initial explanations of Virgilio and Rudy remained similarly vague: they explained to me what the altars are used for, but not what they *are*. However, the presence of these structures is so prominent, that not far from the school where Abraham teaches, a small hill is located, a hill filled with ancestral altars, that was so near us that we could see it from the school's balcony. I once asked Abraham about it, but he admitted he didn't know much either. We went there once or twice after working on some recordings, and Abraham explained to me some of his childhood experiences regarding it, for his home is very near to the hill (Figure

19). Being relatively close to the urban centre, the hill is now encroached by several buildings. The owner of the place had it walled it off. At the top of the hill lies a small cluster of ancestral altars, which some call “San Antonio Mundo” in honour of the native saint, although some people call it “the place of the 68 *nawales*” or “68 spirits”. Diviners and calendrical priests would burn offerings there in behalf of their clients; that is why, in a more informal way, these altars are called *porob’al*, “burning places”, or *quemaderos* in Spanish. Abraham didn’t know much about the place, but when he was a child, his father told him that “a snake lived there” (a supernatural one, a *nawal* spirit), and the animal could be seen around the place sometimes, coiling around the many altars on the ground. When asked about who or what this snake was, he only replied: “the snake is the owner of the shrine” (*la serpiente es el dueño del quemadero*).







19. Abraham at the *San Antonio Mundo* hill and some of its altars.

At that point, my enquiries seemed hopeless or at least not producing anything new, but Abraham told me that he had a friend, another Protestant, Marcelino de León, a man which had for most of his life been an *ajq'ij* or calendric priest, and he was very sure that Marcelino knew much more about these altars and their significance. Marcelino had ceased to burn offerings in his old age, first becoming a Protestant and then leaving active Protestantism because of his personal differences with religious leaders. As is the case with many other family heads at the town, Marcelino usually works his fields, located in a rural hamlet in the outskirts, but also engages in commercial activities in the town centre, selling many kind of wares at a street stall in the market in front of the main plaza and its neighbouring streets, depending on the day. One day, Abraham promised to ask Marcelino about the significance of these altars the next day at the market, and come back to me with a reply.

The explanation offered by Marcelino to Abraham was something beyond what any previous ethnographer of Momostenango had been offered regarding them, and I believe that probably the fact that it was an indigenous person directly asking another, instead of a non-indigenous person conducting an interview or doing participant observation, was key to him being more frank and open about it, especially since, as I have explained, no one offered me a similar explanation in all of my previous months of hard fieldwork in the town, even if everyone later admitted the information to be true. I have introduced the key ideas of this explanation in the former chapter, but now it is time to deal with them in detail and presenting the concrete context of Marcelino.

Marcelino explained to Abraham that many decades ago, when he was just a child and he began being trained as a *k'amal b'e* or ritual specialist by his father, he explained to him the real reason why people burn offerings in the sacred altars. The reason is that his soul and those of his family are inside of the altars. "All families are there, even you", Marcelino told Abraham. These souls are "recommended" before the ancestors and the earth divinities, the *dioses mundo*, and thus are protected by them. However, what happens if one doesn't make offerings in them? Marcelino's father told him that his soul is like a little animal (*chikop*), perhaps a bird or chicken, which lives inside the altar, which represents a corral or animal pen (the word in K'iche' is *korral*, the same word used by Virgilio, a loanword from the Spanish), which is placed in the underworld, the *Santo Mundo*, the place where ancestors and earth divinities live. When people don't make offerings to their ancestors and the earth divinities, the door of this corral gets opened, and wild animals (*awajmundo* or 'animals of the underworld') enter and start scratching, biting and finally devouring this little bird-soul. The

act of making an offering is seen as some sort of “closing the door”, so the wild aspect of the gods, their *nawal*, won’t enter and devour people: “If a family is not ‘recommended’ in the *awas* (...) they are like chickens whose enclosure doesn’t have a door, there is no protection... The shrines are divided by communities or surnames (*alaxik*), for example, all the Ajiataz people are there, and if you were Ajanel, all the Ajanel are there”, Marcelino told Abraham. This placing of people and their “names” (*b’iaj*) inside the *awas* is compared to some sort of writing (*tzib’am* or *nomina*), for it is said that the ancestors have “lists” in the underworld, so everyone protected is there, and people who are not protected are “erased” (*esaj*) from the list; thus, it is said that an altar is the “owner of the names” of people (*rajawal ri b’iaj*). As explained in chapter 1, Marcelino characterizes this idea as *the law of Momostenango*; some people like Virgilio would like to say, about the altars, that this idea is “their content, their essence” (*su contenido, su esencia*). This ‘content’ is not to be disclosed easily to non-indigenous strangers: that is why the altars are called *awas*, ‘taboo’.

Marcelino would further explain to my friend that it is not only the *dioses mundo* or hostile earth divinities who menace and devour the souls of people when they are “outside” the altars, but even the ancestors themselves, who are said to become “hungry” when neglected. Thus, if ancestors become hungry, their altars turn into beasts of prey again, they become alive and “bark and bite” (*kationik*) people.

“For the ancestors have left your name in this altar, and you are not sustaining it, you don’t feed them, so they become hungry and fight, that is why you have accidents, failures, illnesses, the snakes arrive, the

jaguars, the wild animals, you know why? Because you are recommended to the ancestors and, if you don't sustain them, they bark, they bite, the ancestors bark and bite. If you don't feed these altars, the altars bark and bite. That is why you will have illnesses, you will have failures and death, until you feed them, their food are the offerings, the copal, the candles, that is why you make an offering or pay a *chuchqajaw* to do it (...) these altars listen to us and they also speak to us, and they are listening everything we are saying now".<sup>3</sup>

Marcelino finally told Abraham that, despite the fact that he doesn't burn offerings any longer, he is convinced that his soul still resides within his altar, for his father "placed it there" when he was born. This ritual cannot be undone; thus, he attributed the bad happenings of his life to the fact that he did not present offerings at the altar any more. When Marcelino decided to leave *costumbre* and become a Protestant, he complained to his father thus: "Why did you put my name there?" And his father replied: "I did it to protect you". Thus, "placing the name" of a person is both an act of protection and an act that makes people vulnerable to the wrath of the *dioses mundo*, for it is an act that places your soul in the ancestral underworld, so to speak. During his conversion, the Protestant missionaries told Marcelino that his ancestors were not earth gods (*dioses mundo*), nor 'lords of the face of the world' (*e rajawal ri uwachulew*), but demons. They urged him to throw away the altars, to destroy them. But despite the urges of the Protestants, he was impotent to do it. He knew a neighbouring couple that did: one day, they took the plates and stones and destroyed them, smashed them into pieces. The vengeance of the ancestors was swift. The couple used to travel

to the coast to do business. One day, both fell into the river, and they died. The people of the vicinity agreed: their deaths were the work of the ancestors. This is what is known as *kekationik ri awas, kekationik ri nantat*, “the altar, the ancestors bark and bite”.<sup>4</sup>

Later I arranged to personally meet Marcelino and he would confirm to me the details of his narrative, while showing Abraham and me the lands of his patrilineage and the different altars still there, all abandoned: his *winel*, his *meb’il*, his *warab’alja* and also the *mesa*, a stronger grouping of three altars which serves as a ‘condensation’ of all the altars of the nearby patrilineages (as a *costumbrista* told me, the *mesa* is “la matriz”, the “womb” or matrix of the other altars). During that occasion, Marcelino explicitly told me that his spirit was inside his *warab’alja* by pointing at it and telling me “I am placed here” (*yo estoy aquí metido*). He told me that when you become member of a patrilineage (either by birth or by marriage) your spirit or essence must be placed inside by being presented to the ancestors. For example, when a woman marries a man, her name must be placed inside the ancestral altar of his man’s family. If she, for example, tried to escape or bring dishonour, “she would only find death, for she cannot ever leave. She is here from now on. She will be found, whenever she is, and will be undone”. He used myself as an example: “If I place you here, you are not leaving back to Mexico any more. Not anymore. You stay here”. (“*Si yo lo pongo a usted aquí, usted ya no se va para mexicano. Ya no, ya no, ya no, ya no. Aquí se queda*”). After this, Marcelino told me that, during the nights, the *nawal* of the altar rises like an animal, goes out, bringing illness and death, for it hungers for offerings:

Marcelino: “And if I don’t give it sustenance, food, then the neighbours will die, it will sting the other, any failure will happen, because there won’t be food anymore, *kationik*”

Abraham: It bites, they (*the costumbristas*) say “it bites”. Now, if you don’t give it sustain, food, it bites...

Marcelino: If one doesn’t “work” it, doesn’t offer candles... The *awas* will eat you (*el awas se lo va a comer*)”.

Thus, feeding the altars is the duty of the calendrical priest, on behalf of his family and of the community. He reads the omens that the earth gods send to people either through divination or through the “lightning” in his blood, and perform the adequate ceremonies. But Marcelino wouldn’t do it anymore.

One day, Marcelino took us on a visit to the great mountain shrine called Pipil Ab’aj (Figure 20).<sup>5</sup> He gave many interesting explanations regarding the functions of the place back when he performed rituals on it; however, one of the most interesting testimonies when we were in our way for the pickup to take us back home. Once there, Marcelino started talking about the *awajmundo*, the “animals of the earth gods”. Once, his father saw them, in a small cave near a shrine called Campana Mundo, “the bell of the underworld”, called like that because the supernatural sound of a bell would be heard nearby at night.<sup>6</sup> His father was at that occasion with a friend, and both of them entered a small cave. Once inside, they found a pair of coyotes, who spoke to them and told them that he had incurred in a great ritual offense by seeing them, for they were none other than earth gods. Later, they duly paid with offerings to the “lords of the shrines”

(*rajawal ri porob'al*) that they had seen in their animal form, an act that is also taboo (*awas*):

(...) Our ancestors tell how that is a place of great significance, too. For a pair of coyotes were born out of the stones, my father saw it, when he arrived one evening, oh god, he was reprimanded by them, they took a "fine" from him, and he who guided him had to pay, too. "Why do you show him these things?" they said, and then they gave their "fine" (*multa*), their present, they were saved, yes, but the animals didn't like it, the earth-god animals.<sup>7</sup>

During the conversation, Marcelino explained that ritual precautions (also called *awas*) exist precisely because of the wild, vengeful character of the ancestors and the *e rajawal* "lords". For example, sexual abstinence before offering at a shrine is obligatory because if a calendric priest were to touch his wife before coming to an altar, he would be placing his own spiritual flesh inside his offerings: "It is as if I place myself inside the incense" (*vengo a ponerme yo mismo en el copal*), he told me. Therefore, he would be slowly consumed by the gods, and so, he would become ill, have bad luck, fall in a river, and so on. The prohibition only extends to the day before doing "the working" (*el trabajo*), after that, you can do "whatever you want" (*después, lo que quieras*), as he told Abraham and me while laughing.

As an example of the consequences of breaking a ritual taboo, Marcelino told me about his fathers' undoing. He recalled that his father was a calendrical priest, but at one point he "failed". He told me that, when doing workings in an



altar, you must “open and close them”, in specific days of the Maya calendar. Thus, first one must “open the door” to communicate with the earth gods and ancestors and ask for favours. During that time, you and the people in whose behalf you make offerings must take some ritual precautions, including sexual abstinence. If not, you will be seen by the earth gods as food. Then, after the blessings are received, the altar is to be “closed” through another ritual (he would not disclose the precise days, which strangers are to ignore). The problem is that his father ‘forgot’ to perform the ceremony of closure. The *awajmundo* spirits began attacking people, since people didn’t “take care of themselves”, that is, they fell into ritual impurity. Bad lucked ensued, and people regarded his father as an untrusty calendric priest. That was his social undoing, which prompted Marcelino’s conversion.



20. Marcelino at Pipil Ab'aj mountain shrine.



A final comment regarding Marcelino's conception of his own conversion is needed. As Marcelino told me and Abraham when we visited his land, being "inside" the altar of the *Santo Mundo* is something that cannot be undone. Thus, he had to deal with the *nawales* for the rest of his life. He would pray, fast and do other spiritual Protestant practices to resist their power. But, despite his grim outlook, he had a secret hope, that he confided to us on the day he showed us the altars of his lands. His grandson, who was looking at us while we were walking through the milpa, was never "placed" inside the altar, for he was born after his conversion, after he ceased doing offerings. Thus, he was to be "free" of the "indigenous law". His conviction on the future freedom of his child kept him going, despite his personal disagreements with the leaders of the church, whom both Abraham and Marcelino characterized as excessively competitive and domineering.

Now that I have presented Marcelino's conversion experience and his deep account of the indigenous cosmology of Momostenango, it is time to develop a more detailed analysis of it, and discuss its implications for the idea on cosmology that this thesis proposes.

## **2.5. Hierarchical entanglement and downward causation in cosmology**

The case of Marcelino is rather complex and fascinating, and this complexity begs for a detailed analysis. Before introducing the analytical categories, let's return to the scene described before: that of Marcelino explaining how he is inside the altar, even after his conversion. When Marcelino says: *yo estoy aquí metido* (I'm inside here) pointing at his altar, he is asserting a paradox, for I can see him

standing before me, and yet, he says that his soul, which is ‘inside him’, is also contained within another thing that is external to both of us, the altar. This altar is also the outer form, the container of the dwelling of his ancestors in the Santo Mundo, where Marcelino is ultimately contained too. However, the paradox is that *he can even manipulate this container of himself while being outside of it at the same time*. The proof of this is that, as Marcelino acknowledges, if he destroyed the altar, *he would eventually destroy himself*, just like the couple that fell to the river: exposed to the wilderness of the desolate cosmos, his *nawal* would be devoured. Thus, he is both inside and outside the altar. This image delineates a loop of sorts, for Marcelino is both inside and outside the very cosmological vessel he is portraying before me: he is contained in it, and yet he is outside of it, pointing at it. The resulting image is that of a paradox of self-inclusion: the altar contains Marcelino and the world around him (in the changed animal form of *nawales* inside corrals), but at the same time, the world where both Marcelino and I are standing contains the altar. This paradoxical arrangement or interconnection of levels could be characterized as being a ‘tangled hierarchy’.

The notion of ‘tangled hierarchies’ was formulated in the work of Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* ([1979] 1999) and expanded by the author in later works (2007). According to Hofstadter’s basic definition, a tangled hierarchy is “a system in which a strange loop appears” ([1979] 1999: 10). But what is a strange loop? “The strange loop phenomenon occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started” (1999: 10). This idea is difficult to explain in abstract, because it breaks

with everyday logic. Hofstadter's classic work explains the occurrences and the functioning of 'strange loops' in all kind of seemingly unrelated phenomena, from Bach's canons, to M. C. Escher's prints, to Gödel's theorems, to biological and computer viruses. A concrete, visual and relatively simple introductory example from the same work will serve as an introductory device.

A first visualization of the idea of the strange loop is offered by Hofstadter through the famous M. C. Escher print, *Waterfall* (1961). In it, an artificial, endlessly looping waterfall contraption seems to naturally fall to a narrow waterway below. Then, the water seems to flow horizontally through the waterway in a zig-zag: it is only after a point that we realize that the zig-zag was actually going up, and then, suddenly, the waterway ends and we are at the starting point again, despite this contradicting all the laws of physics (Figure 21).



21. M. C. Escher's *Waterfall*.

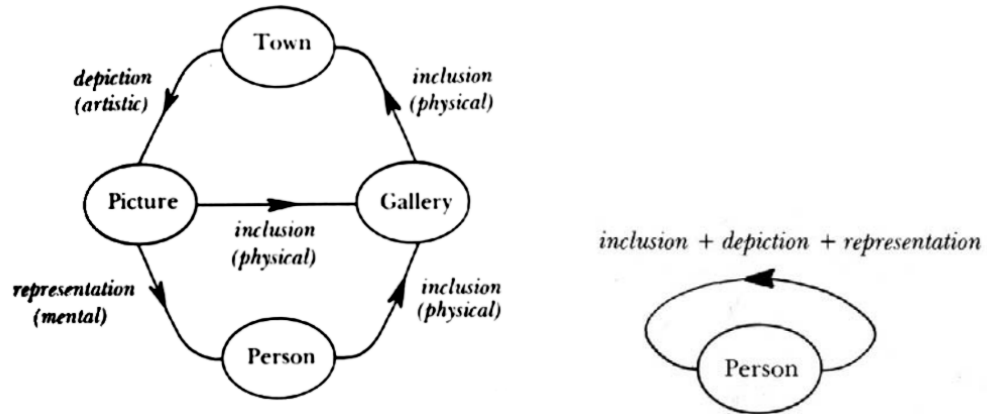
In our world, this 'waterfall' is impossible. It is through an optical illusion that takes advantage of our visual expectations that this image creates a self-looping hierarchy: water from the lower level seems to keep flowing normally, until at some point, the water has returned to the higher level where it comes from. This is a tangled hierarchy.

Before characterizing this idea in more depth and relate it to other anthropological notions, perhaps another artistic depiction of this paradox can help the reader visualise this idea in a way that more closely resembles that presented by Marcelino. It is presented by Douglas Hofstadter in his analysis of the lithograph "Print Gallery", by M. C. Escher (Figure 21). In Hofstadter's words: "What we see is a picture gallery where a young man is standing, looking at a picture of a ship in the harbour of a small town, perhaps a Maltese town, to guess from the architecture, with its little turrets, occasional cupolas, and flat stone roofs, upon one of which sits a boy, relaxing in the heat, while two floors below him a woman -perhaps his mother-gazes out of the window from the apartment which sits directly above a picture gallery where a young man is standing, looking at a picture of a ship in the harbour of a small town, perhaps a Maltese town... What? We are back on the same level as we began, though all logic dictates we cannot be" (Hofstadter 1999: 715). In a way, we could take Escher's image (Figure 22) as a visual counterpart of the statement *yo estoy aquí metido*.



22. "Print Gallery" by M. C. Escher.

The visual paradox achieved by Escher's lithograph is determined by the different kinds of ways that the picture expresses the idea of 'inside': "The gallery is physically in the town ("inclusion"), the town is artistically in the picture ("depiction"), the picture is mentally in the person ("representation")" (Hofstadter 1999: 715). The paradox is that we can see the young man "inside" of himself, by jumping from one level to another. The loop can be collapsed in only two steps, as Hofstadter shows (Figure 23). Finally, as Hofstadter asserts, crucial to this effect is the central "blemish" or blank space where the signature of the artist stands, for without it the self-inclusive mechanism would be impossible. This "incompleteness", though, is never perceived by the young man, trapped inside the world of the picture: it arises to the mind of the other observer, who lies outside the picture.



23. Douglas Hofstadter's diagram of Escher's print (Hofstadter 1999: 715), and a simplified version of the loop (1999: 716).

Returning to our example, however, there are certain differences, for Escher's print relies, naturally, on representational means, and the difference with my example is crucial in this point. Hofstadter's analysis is representational, for the picture itself is so. However, in our case, inclusion is not "physical" nor representational only, but ontological. If we compare the man looking at the picture in the litograph and Marcelino looking at his altar, while the man in the gallery is only 'depicted' in the image that he sees, in Marcelino's point of view, *he is truly there*.<sup>8</sup> This is the reason why changing something in one level implies changing its self-contained image in another; what is external is somehow presented as being internal<sup>9</sup>, the social is presented as cosmological and the cosmological as eminently social, and so on. Again, this entanglement of hierarchies is what has been called by Douglas Hofstadter a "strange loop":

What I mean by "strange loop" is (...) not a physical circuit but an abstract loop in which, in the series of stages that constitute the cycling-around,

there is a shift from one level of abstraction (or structure) to another, which feels like an upwards movement in an hierarchy, and yet somehow the successive "upward" shifts turn out to give rise to a closed cycle. That is, despite one's sense of departing ever further from one's origin, one winds up, to one's shock, exactly where one had started out. In short, a strange loop is a paradoxical level-crossing feedback loop. (Hofstadter 2007: 101-102)

The reader must bear in mind that it is precisely the self-containment of an element of an (apparently) "higher" level of a hierarchy (the *Santo Mundo* or *Uwach Ulew*) within an element in a "lower" level of the hierarchy (our own world) which allows a "level-crossing feedback loop" to occur in K'iche' cosmology and ritual. But I will return to a more detailed discussion on the idea of hierarchy later.

The second crucial thing to understand is how an action such as destroying a sacred altar (and dying as a consequence of it) is an example of downward causality. Again, the crucial aspect is the looping of hierarchies *in action*. I am inside my part of the cosmos, acting as normal, but then I interact with some element which is actually a container of that part of the cosmos which contains me, and then my action suddenly emanates not from the expected level of causality that I usually work in, but from the cosmological level itself. This is a perfect example of an entity "having a causal impact on its *own* parts" (Elder-Vass 2011: 85), or inflicting "changes or effects on entities or processes on a lower level" (Emmeche, Køppe and Stjernfelt 2000: 19), but the paradox, again, is that this is not (only) because the supposedly abstract, second order entity

("cosmology") did it, but because the person did it. This seems to imply something: that the emerging entity is not actually 'cosmology', as a sociological interpretation would imply, but the person itself. This idea can be explained better through a myth which explains the origins of the sacred altars of the Momostecos and their religion, *costumbre*, a myth which was offered to Abraham by a man called Domingo.

Before the altars existed, the world was chaotic, and people had no religion nor rituals. The earth gods became angry because of this, and they started to make fire rain from the sky, in the form of a flammable resin called *q'ol* which burst into flames when in contact with people's homes. Fearsome animals, the *nawales* of gods, devoured and killed people. Snakes made their nests in people's homes, the jaguars lived in the fields, and the monkeys perched atop the roofs, mocking men. Many people escaped, hid underground or in the mountains. They became animals. To end this, the ancestors of the K'iche' build altars out of stone and broken pots, they took take the same flammable resin that rained from the sky, and offered it to gods. Thus, as if by magic, the rain of fire stopped: the real, cosmological fire in the sky became the controlled fire of the rituals, while the *nawales* of the gods started living inside the sacred stones (cfr. Zamora Corona 2020: 333). This transformation of the cosmological fire of the gods into the orderly fire of rituals is crucial: they are "the same thing", but 'turned upside down' in its purpose by men. Thus, the truth is that the altars were not a creation of the gods, but a creation of humans in order to control and constrain the power of the gods. For the K'iche', thus, it is humans who emerged out of the world of the gods, not gods who emerged out of the heads of humans: humans became humans when they overcame the wrath of the gods through rituals.



As mentioned before, the sort of level-crossing causality effects that the cosmological feedback loop allows can be seen as “upside-down reasoning”, situations where causality simply seems to be “flipped around”; instead of naturally flowing from the upper level of the hierarchy to the other (as it happens most of the time even in K’iche’ cosmology), in some occasions things flow ‘upside down’, forming a loop, just like the loop that the element ‘fire’ undergoes in the myth. In the concrete example of my ethnography, the destruction of a sacred altar and the destruction of the person who does it is such an effect: I destroy the altar, then I get destroyed, a rather negative effect, yes, but working nonetheless within a similar logic of tangled entities and crossing of levels.

In the preceding paragraphs, I have tried to explain the general principle that this thesis will follow in order to understand cosmology and cosmological action: downward causation as related to the emergence of humans against a cosmological background. However, truth to be told, its contextualization has remained too grounded in the fields of visual arts, biology, sciences, and mythology. Now that I have introduced more aspects of the core concept of this thesis, a further examination is needed to ascertain its relationship and differences with prior anthropological theories regarding cosmology and hierarchy.

## **2.6 Beyond Dumont: entangling the ‘hierarchical principle’**

It is inevitable, if we talk about hierarchies in anthropology, to refer to Louis Dumont’s theory on the ‘hierarchical principle’, developed in his book *Homo Hieraticus* ([1988] 1970). I won’t refer to these theories to validate Dumont’s positions nor to use his taxonomies which, as Michael Houseman has recently

said, are still regarded as marginal in social anthropology (2015: 267), but to better contextualize and evaluate what my proposal shares with such an important precedent.

Dumont's theory on hierarchy was formulated as a corollary to his study of the caste society in India. Leaving its historical complexities aside, what Dumont had in mind regarding hierarchy was not really a simple ordered sequence of beings or ranks, but an idea related to "encompassment". As he himself says: "I believe that hierarchy is not, essentially, a chain of superimposed commands, nor even a chain of beings of decreasing dignity, nor yet a taxonomic tree, but a relation that can succinctly be called the encompassing of the contrary". Leaving aside Dumont's concrete typologies, the important thing is that a hierarchical relationship is conceived by him as that of a set and its subsets, or whole and parts, not necessarily as that of raw, linear subordination: "This hierarchical relation is, very generally, that between a whole (or a set) and an element of this whole (or set): the element belongs to the set and is in this sense consubstantial or identical with it; at the same time, the element is distinct to the set or stands in opposition to it. This is what I mean by the expression 'the encompassing of the contrary.'" (Dumont [1988] 1970: 240).

Recently, Michael Houseman has called for a re-evaluation of Dumont's theory, which has been largely abandoned by anthropologists. While the original theory was conceived as a "foundation for a general model of ideological systems", and thus it participated from the tendencies criticized in my introduction, Houseman reconsiders an aspect of Dumont's theory that I consider valuable too: the attention he brought to 'wholes' and 'parts'. This is where the theory had potential: "More and more, in fields as diverse as analytical

philosophy, physics, psychology, biology, or cybernetics, do we find a growing concern with the mechanics of paradox, part-whole relationships, encompassment, an interplay of levels, holistic integration, and so forth. From this point of view, the hierarchical principle partakes in a general movement that seeks to elaborate complex models.” (Houseman 2015: 267).

It is necessary to leave a deeper engagement between Dumont’s model and my proposal to my conclusions. However, it is important to state the following. Dumont already realized that hierarchy had to do with sets and encompassment, and indeed Houseman’s indication towards the study of whole-set paradoxes is a more than valuable indication towards the direction of future engagements. Precisely, what this thesis seeks to do is to fully exploit the paradox inherent in the Dumont’s theory of hierarchy conceived as a sort of theory of sets. Some words need to be added on this, so the reader has the whole idea before her/his eyes.

As it is already known, the idea of a set of all sets, (which could be said the mathematical equivalent of a ‘cosmology’, if we conceive cosmology as a hierarchy of sets), can lead to the well-known Russell’s paradox, that is, the possibility of sets containing themselves as members (Hosftadter 1999: 20). As it is also well-known, Russell and Whitehead tried to banish this paradox from their mathematical system of propositions, *Principia Mathematica*. However, then came along Gödel. It is impossible in a thesis like this to make a detailed presentation of Gödel’s theorems in a thesis like this, but what I beg for the reader is to try to visualize the following description as following a similar logic to that which I have described regarding tangled hierarchies and things somehow ‘causing themselves’ through downward causality.

In his theorems, Gödel created an “undecidable statement” within the system of *Principia Mathematica* through the use of a special notation that was “a mapping whereby the long linear arrangements of strings of symbols in any formal system are mirrored precisely by mathematical relationships among certain (usually astronomically large) whole numbers”. (Hofstadter 1999: 5). Thus, by “using his mapping between elaborate patterns of meaningless symbols (...) and huge numbers, Gödel showed how a statement about any mathematical formal system (such as the assertion that *Principia Mathematica* is contradiction-free) can be translated into a mathematical statement *inside number theory* (my emphasis). In other words, any meta-mathematical statement can be imported into mathematics” (Hofstadter 1999: 5). So, this mapping was effectively capable of expressing both comments regarding formal arithmetic and truthful statements within formal arithmetic simply as numbers, that is, *it gave elements within the system the possibility to make statements about themselves, as if they were formal propositions*. This permitted Gödel to create (or code) the so-called G-sentence within the system, which can be described as containing a comment on formal arithmetic masked as a statement about natural numbers. When interpreted, the G sentence asserts its own unprovability, being more or less the mathematical equivalent to the Epimenides paradox, “this statement is a lie”, while being at the same time a true statement within the system.

What is important for me now is not the idea of undecidability or incompleteness (which is the content of the proof, what is being asserted about the system), but the *form* of the proof. “The Gödel sequence or G-sentence is constructed in such a way that it asserts that when a sequence of steps is used to construct a sentence within Formal Arithmetic, this sentence is unprovable,

while, at the same time, being the very result of this sequence of steps (Smith 2007: 135).” This is what fascinated Hofstadter (and many others): “Merely from knowing the formula's meaning, one can infer its truth or falsity without any effort to derive it in the old-fashioned way, which requires one to trudge methodically "upwards" from the axioms. This is not just peculiar; it is astonishing. Normally, one cannot merely look at what a mathematical conjecture says and simply appeal to the content of that statement on its own to deduce whether the statement is true or false”. (pp. 169-170).

What I am saying not is that cosmological assertions are exact logical mirrors of Gödel's proof nor that they are about ‘incompleteness’ nor that they are versions of the paradox of the liar<sup>10</sup>, but that they work in a similar way. As we have seen, the cosmology of Momostenango is not a rigid cosmological hierarchy like that of Dumont, that is, a place where neat cosmological categories encompass each other and all kinds of ‘loops’ have been ironed out. Instead, it is self-contained in some of its parts, and thus features places, such as sacred altars, where “meta-actions” can be performed and “meta-statements” can be made. The problem is that when anthropologists arrive and find these kind of statements, they seem illogical, they seem “upside-down” assertions on life because we have a somewhat ‘Russellian’ idea of cosmology, a totality that is neatly organized in levels and doesn't contain dreaded sets that contain themselves, creating weird loops. Thus, most of the time we are utterly incapable of understanding how cosmology operates in a non-Western world.

Of course, the reader may ask: if K'iche' hierarchies are actually ‘tangled’... how does ‘downward causation’ work here? What is the “higher” and what is the “lower” level? My answer to that question must wait for the conclusions, but for

now the reader must bear in mind this: in a way, both perspectives are true. People both assert that their life was changed by the cosmological actions of the gods and, as we will see in the next chapter, people actually “compel” the gods to perform these actions sometimes, thus exerting a sort of causation too. As mentioned, I will try to “tie up” all the loose ends of this argument at the end of this thesis, giving them an order, but this will necessarily have to wait for my conclusions. Now, after having explained more deeply the basic theoretical tenets of this thesis, it is possible to present the rest of my chapters, which will be analyses made with this pattern in mind. For now, let’s go to chapter 3, where these amazing loops enter a new dimension, that of time.

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1 While there is a difference between both kinds of souls, the *nawal* being an active animal representing the agency and power of someone in the Santo Mundo, and the *chikop* just being a little chicken ready to be predated by angry gods (cfr. Zamora 2019), in this chapter I will use *nawal* indistinctively to talk about both, not only because my informants did so some of the time (in fact, the word *chikop* just means an animal in general), but because the term *nawal* in general encompasses all the ‘other selves’ of men, gods and even sacred altars, and is more akin to the generalized Mesoamerican complex of ‘co-essential’ beings (cfr. Monaghan 1998).

2 While representational statements like those implied by the word *belief* are certainly disputed now in their usefulness or pertinence, especially by the ontological turn (cfr. Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: 17), I mention it here not as analytical category, but as that which my informant stated.

3 “Porque los antepasados han dejado tu nombre en este altar, y tú no lo estás manteniendo, no los alimentas, entonces tienen hambre y pelean, por eso tienes accidentes, fracasos, enfermedades, llegan las serpientes, los tigres, los animales salvajes, ¿sabes por qué? Porque estás recomendado a los antepasados y si ahora no los mantienes, entonces ladran, te muerden los antepasados. Si no les das comida a estos tres, los altares ladran y te muerden. Por eso tienes enfermedad, tendrás fracaso y hasta muerte, hasta que les des comida, su comida son las ofrendas, el copal y la candela, por eso haces ofrenda o le pagas al chuchqajaw para hacerla (...) escuchan y te hablan esos altares, y en este momento escuchan todo lo que te estoy diciendo.”

4 Garrett Cook already reported how the destruction of ancestral altars lead to “death or ruination” for families (1980: 11), although without specifying more.

5 In Momosteco cosmology, it is the sacred mountain of the north (Tedlock 1992: 112).

6 I have been unable to find another reference to this altar or its location. It could probably be Campana Ab’aj, located in the mountains to the west of Totonicapan.

<sup>7</sup> *Xoqoje’ kikir’ij qanan, qatat como wa’ k’o ucholaj wa’, xali’n in laltaq utiw cha’ k’o modo kalin xe ri joyam, xe kila ri’ ri nutat, chi’ k’u ri xu’l xb’e q’ij, ¡ay dios! mano xe’ yajik, xqaj ri nu tat pamulta. Jasa ri upatan ka’ k’utu chuwach, te k’uri’ xkiya ri kimulta, kipresente, te’k’uri’ xeto’tajik, ri awaj mojota che, ri awajamundo... je’.*

8 For example, Abraham *believes* in the power of the *costumbre* cosmology (a representational statement), but he was never *inside* of it (*inclusion*), or at least he never knew he was. Marcelino is however, *inside*, but this inclusion is not physical nor representational (it is not a belief), but *ontological*.

9 This idea is also inspired by Stefan Feuchtgang's account of Chinese cosmology (1992) and its practices of centering (2014).

10 Mainly, the difference would be that, through his number, Gödel 'coded' a "malicious" sort of statement, an equivalent of the paradox of Epimenides, thus forcing the system to assert its 'incompleteness'. Cosmological statements are not exactly like that: they are just paradoxical in the way explained above, that is, they are indeed statements within the system that seem to be about the system. In general, the idea of incompleteness has been abused in many postmodern arguments (cfr. Franzén 2017); this thesis doesn't mainly rely on yet another postmodern misinterpretation of the idea of incompleteness, but on the relationship between downward causation and hierarchical entanglement, which was already contemplated by Hofstadter (163-176).



## CHAPTER 3.

### A Recollection of Things Future: Time Magic in K'iche' Rituals

#### 3.1 Introduction

The last chapter has been mostly theoretical, because it was crucial to underpin the main argument of this thesis in explicit way. Now that this more theoretical aspect has been (mostly) dealt with, it is possible to turn my attention towards a more detailed ethnography, although without leaving theoretical developments aside. This chapter will present the reader with a classic subject in anthropology: the search for prestige and power through social and ritual practices. I will therefore come back to the Ramos' family, and describe my participation in one of the most important rituals that Virgilio and his family take part into: a local *feria* or celebration in honour of the itinerating image of Santiago, the patron saint of their community, Chonimatux, performed by the members of the local *cofradía* of Santiago. This celebration, which implies a considerable expenditure in terms of money and time, is performed, as Rudy and Virgilio themselves admitted to me, to consolidate the preeminent position of the *costumbristas* in Chonimatux.

However, while this ritual can be analysed in terms of relationships of contact and participation of the power of Santiago, a warrior saint, a deeper practice takes place *before* the ritual. Effectively, the *feria* of Santiago is not only rehearsed and prepared by Virgilio, Rudy and the members of the *cofradía* in a physical manner. Instead, another series of rituals are performed beforehand, in which the events of the *feria* are made to happen before the eyes of the ancestors through ritual chants. The paradox of self-inclusion and downward causation

that these rituals imply is thus not only related to spatial levels, as the paradoxes that I have presented in the former chapters: it has to do with time.

To introduce the context necessary to understand both rituals, I will first offer a general overview on *cofradía* cults in Momostenango, notably studied by Garrett Cook in an authoritative monograph (2000). After this introduction, I will enter directly into my ethnographic account. Finally, I will present the theoretical analysis, which will deal with a complex topic: that of the anthropology of time mainly as elaborated by Alfred Gell (1992), showing how this ritual is a case of complex temporal entanglement that defies our current understanding on the topic, which is mainly based on the idea of temporal series, suggesting that where we perhaps need to actually resort to an idea closer to that of J. M. E. McTaggart, the original proposer of time series in philosophy (1908, 1925).

### **3.2. The cult of *patrón* Santiago in Momostenango**

In the first chapter I have explained that both Santiago and San Antonio Mundo are Catholic saints only in the surface: they are more properly understood as indigenous saints. San Antonio Mundo has been introduced as the saint of the 'holy earth' and the protector of the souls of humans in the *Mundo*, a saint that is mainly concerned with family life and harmony, as Garret Cook himself had observed (2000: 74-75). In contrast, Santiago is a saint of the political sphere, a saint that embodies social and political power (Cfr Cook 2000: 97-98). The veneration of Santiago in Latin America was inherited from the *conquistadores* themselves, who considered him to be their protector during the Conquest. He was later adopted by many indigenous communities, where he replaced meteorological and warrior gods, effectively changing from a *conquistador* saint

to an indigenous saint (Capponi 2006). In Momostenango, Santiago has undergone further transformations: instead of donning his traditional medieval armour, his image (*wachib'al*) is dressed like a Guatemalan military cadet of the XIX century, wielding a sabre, covered in sumptuous ponchos and cloths, and porting an elaborate feather crest (Figure 24). His own decapitated head, product of his martyrdom, is displayed before him. He is paired with San Felipe, who is said to be his 'secretary', because it seems that Santiago doesn't speak Spanish, only K'iche' (Cook 2000: 95).



24. The image of Santiago at Momostenango's main church.

The Momosteco Santiago is somewhat of an 'earth god' or *mundo* himself, or more precisely, a 'sky god'. He is called *nima ch'umil*, "the great star", referring to Venus (Cook 2000: 28). Indeed, Rudy would invoke him by calling him "captain of the holy earth" (*capitán del santo mundo*), for he is said to lead the army of the clouds and the stars.<sup>1</sup> Just as the fierce Venus gods of old Mesoamerica, who could "spear" the spirit essences of crops, water, warriors and rulers when rising at certain calendrical dates (Nowotny 1976: 52; Milbrath 1999: 174-177), the Momosteco Santiago can "trample" the spirit essence of crops and the rain with his horse, bring droughts during the year, or instigate political instability and quarrels in the hearts of men. According to Virgilio and Rudy, each year the leader of the towns' *cofradía* receives a dream, indicating the augury for the town, which is manifest by the main colour of Santiagos' clothings during his parade at the *feria patronal*: red clothes can mean political quarrels and deaths, black means rains, blue means lack of rains, multicoloured clothes, peace.<sup>2</sup>

The difference between the *costumbrista* Santiago and the Catholic Santiago is not ignored by the Catholic church either (Figure 24). Despite Santiago being kept in a chapel next to the altar of the main church of Momostenango, mainline Catholics in the town (like the few remaining Ladinos and some members of Acción Católica) reject his cult and actually hold a parade for the "proper" image of James the Great or Santiago Apóstol excluding all indigenous elements from its iconography. This parade occurs the day after the one of the Momosteco Santiago (Figure 25). I witnessed one of these parades, where loud speakers would explain in K'iche' the "proper" biblical history of James the Great. However, these efforts are to no avail. Rudy, clarified to me that their Santiago is *Santiago de los Caballeros* (the *conquistador* saint), not Santiago

*Apóstol* (James the disciple of Jesus). Thus, he asserts “Santiago is not in the Bible”, a clever assertion, for thus this *conquistador* saint is both traditional and Catholic, as well as indigenous: to suppress him, he would have to be suppressed in Spain too.



25. Contrasted devotions. On the left, the *costumbrista* Santiago, patron of the town, is paraded through the streets during the Feria Patronal. On the right, a non-native Saint James, with a traditional European iconography, on his parade by Acción Católica the day after.

I have mentioned that Santiago is a political saint and, effectively, he is highly regarded by *costumbrista* politicians, including the former town mayor who (as I witnessed) liked to remind everyone (especially Protestants and Mormons) of the supremacy of Santiago during his speeches in K'iche', as it happened during the investiture of local *alcaldes* at January 1st. Santiago is considered by some to be none other than the *nawal* of Momostenango, and the relative stability and continued religious privileges of the town are attributed to him: some Neo-Maya practitioners in town told me that Santiago's calendric *nawal* was Kiej, the calendric day associated with political power. Virgilio, more of a *costumbrista*, explicitly told me that “the protection of the communities lies under *apóstol*

Santiago, who protects the whole town”; thus, Santiago is also the protector of local *alcaldes* at Chonimatux, Virgilio’s community.

Santiago has a native altar of his own at Puja’l Santiago, near the base of the Pak’lom Hill in downtown Momostenango, a place where his horse is said to have struck and made a small water spring appear, which means that Santiago is not only revered at the Catholic church itself, but also at K’iche’ shrines (*awas*). Furthermore, Santiago is deeply connected to the town’s history, for his image is associated to two of the founding lineages of the town, the Herreras and the Vicentes; in fact, the Vicentes claim to have found Santiago inside of a mountain, a claim that is repeated by local patrilineages like the Ramos regarding their particular patron saints, like San Antonio Mundo. Thus, these images come from the *mundo* itself and they are manifestations of the earth. Images of the saints are called *wachib’al* in Momostenango (Cook 2000: 272). They are to be considered dangerous and “delicate” (*delicado*) since they are to be regarded as possessors of agency. For example, Rudy would tell me that the *wachib’al* of Santiago is capable of trampling people spiritually with his horse and even kill them, so it is not allowed that people fall asleep before him during the vigil nor are placed right in front of him during the local feria, as I myself witnessed, for when I positioned myself in front of the saint, one of the *cofrades* prodded my ribs, in a delicate way of course, to indicate me that this was forbidden. When Rudy was working with the *cofradía*, he would sometimes have dreams regarding Santiago’s *wachib’al* coming to life.<sup>3</sup>

In regards to the festivity that I will describe in this chapter, as mentioned above, Garrett Cook (2000) has already elaborated on the cult of travelling saints, or the pilgrimages of some Momosteco images, namely Santiago and Niño San

Antonio Mundo, to faraway rural hamlets where they receive cult by local *cofradías*, eventually reaching the home communities of two important patrilineages who claim traditional ownership of them. Each year, in November, the image (*wachib'al*) of Santiago visits San Vicente Buenabaj, where the Vicente lineage, which claims prehispanic nobility ancestry, lives, as well as the canton known as Pueblo Viejo (*Ojer Tinamit*), where the Herrera lineage lives. As Cook remarks, this travelling cycle serves to claim and reconstitute the original founding relationships of the town, while reaffirming the authority of the town centre or *cabecera* over local lineages (2000: 64-65). However, before reaching their destination, these images spend some time in local hamlets and cantons, where their presence is also used to reaffirm the power of local authorities, blessing local icons as well as their devotees, including members of local *alcaldías*.

In the case of Chonimatux, Virgilio and other *pasados* from the locality are members of the “22 November 2008 Caserío Chonimatux Barrio Santa Ana Society” or “Santiaguito Society”, for short, a society founded by the late Martín Ramírez Herrera. The date in the name of the society alludes to its founding, which is also the day of Santiago, celebrated each year. Virgilio is not a current member of the society, but nonetheless continues to perform religious functions and administrative functions for them, partly to still hold some influence on the local affairs, partly to lead Rudy into further political and religious appointments and, of course, to retain religious contact with the *nawal* or spiritual essence of Santiago. At Chonimatux, an *ermita* or shrine is improvised each year at the house of a local family to do a vigil with candles (*velación*) and lay flowers in honour of the saint during the evening of November 21<sup>st</sup>, while the actual receiving of the

image happens at the next day in the plaza near the *auxiliatura*, where a *convite* or dance of merriment is performed.

Regarding the political importance of this ceremony, Virgilio told me that, since he is the calendric priest of Chonimatux, he burns offerings for the local *alcaldes* through the year: “They trust me, so that I would represent them (with the ancestors and the *mundo*), I burn offerings for them. I had already served (as an *alcalde*). But this depends on the *alcalde*, I make offerings for those who have faith in the ceremonial ritual. Santiago protects the incoming *alcalde*. The protection of the communities depends on Santiago, that’s why we venerate him, we take his icon to his altar, and we present the offerings. Because he goes in his pilgrimage to another community, but we use that occasion to obtain our own blessings too”. Thus, all kind of intentions do encounter in Santiago’s devotion: devotees that want blessing for themselves and their families, politicians that want to be protected by the saint, and calendrical priests like Virgilio who consolidate their role by celebrating these rituals.

### **3.3. Rituals of anticipation**

In preparation for the *feria*, Virgilio, Rudy and other men from the group would perform a ceremony each month during nine months at Puja’l Santiago. Each ceremony represents one of the years already elapsed since the ritual compromise began, up to a maximum of nine. I accompanied Rudy to one of such ceremonies, which he officiated alone and which was celebrated at August 13, 2017, an 11 Ajmaq date in the K’iche’ calendar, which is propitious to saints. This timing was important too, for the celebration of Santiago at November 21/22



would start on an Ajmaq day too: thus, a temporal connection regarding both dates in their relationship to the sacred calendar was certainly important.

Now, truth to be told, when I witnessed the ceremony I had not a precise idea of what was going on before me. My knowledge of K'iche' was bookish and limited at the time, and I had not sought help to work on the translations of the material that I had recorded until then. I could only assert that the ceremony was related to the petition of money and protection for the upcoming celebration, understanding some isolated words in K'iche' and of course in Spanish. However, later, when working on the texts, something different came up. The ceremony was not only a petition for the success of the upcoming ritual or to obtain the money necessary to perform it. Instead, in the ritual, Rudy addressed the dead founder of the Santiaguito Society, as well as his ancestors and Santiago, and invited them to the ceremony, describing all that would come to happen in a chronologically precise fashion, exhorting them to move the souls (*nawal*) of the people and even the objects involved, so the ceremony would be perfect. But let's return to the description.

Rudy began by burning offerings and recited a long prayer, in the style of many other K'iche' ceremonies I would witness during my stay at Momostenango (Figure 26). After greeting the personified day lord 11 Ajmaq at the start of his prayer, he mentioned that the ritual was a *maltyoxib'al*, a thanksgiving ceremony, in behalf of all the members of the *Sociedad Santiaguito*, especially naming the main appointees of it, that is, the secretary (*secretario*), the treasurer (*tesorero*) and the president (*presidente*), as well as the members of the *vasalla*, the local dance company. Rudy then mentioned that he had made a compromise to dance at the feast of Santiago during nine years, and implored both for financial means

to do this performance and for success in it, for the members of the group have had to raise 30,000 *quetzales* (ca. £2970 GBP) throughout the year. Thus, he would implore his *meb'il* altar or “heart of money” (*k'ux ri pwak*) in behalf of his own capital, and also in behalf of the businesses of the members of the society at the town and even in Guatemala City, while mentioning many places in the sacred K'iche' geography too.



26. Rudy and his companions burning offerings at Puja'l Santiago.

After this preliminary invocation, Rudy greeted the dead ancestors, both in their spiritual essence (*tew kaqiq'* ‘cold and wind’) and in their earthly remains (*alaq much'ulik b'aq, alaq much'ulik ulew* ‘heaps of bones and dust’). He then counted 13 *may*, the calendrical period of 20 years, which also means the ranks of all the former dead of the community and the ideal 13 divisions of the land.<sup>4</sup> He then presented his offering to the already deceased founder of the Santiaguito Society, Benjamin Martínez Herrera, as well as the other deceased members of the group (*komon sociedad*) and the dead *alcaldes* of the locality, regarding them as intercessors with the ancestors and the earth gods, asking them to ensure that

there would be no problems during the celebration. He then began describing the *upcoming* ceremony. First, he then asked the ancestors to “raise and bring” (*che' yekak'uloq, che' k'ama'uloq*) the spirits (*nawal*) of people involved: the absent members of the *sociedad* and the prospective guests, even naming some of them in person, so they would attend the celebration, their spirits being moved by their ancestors. Then, he would invoke the calendrical spirit of the two days at which the celebration would take place (6 Ajmaq and 7 No'j), and start informing Santiago and Felipe on the details and chronology of the event. I present only an English paraphrasis of this lengthy prayer:

21st November, evening: dancing with Santiagos' icon, vigil with candles at the house of Vicente Abac, celebration and music afterwards. Rudy invites the saint and the ancestors to “sit with us since you shall have here your food, your money, your place, your wine, your table, your chair”.

22 November, 5am: Burning of offerings and presentation of his icon at sunrise, at the indigenous altar (*awas*) of Ventana Mundo

22 November, 7am: Eucharist at the main church of Momostenango in presence of both saints.

22 November, 11am: Welcome of the image of Santiago and Felipe at Cho Cruz, Chonimatux: “we are waiting you with pine needles, with flowers, with incense, with fireworks, with marimba and music”.

While describing the ritual, Rudy asked the ancestors not only to bring people “from the four directions” to the celebration, but also compelled the spirit or *nawal* of the things that were going to be used in the celebration: he compelled the icon (*wachib’al*) of Santiago to dance, the money to keep flowing, the musical instruments to gather and seduce the people, the fireworks to be properly set, and even compelled the *nawal* of the alcohol so it wouldn’t cloud people’s judgements too much, but give them joy and a good time. He finished his prayer with a general petition to God, the ancestors and the saints:

“We ask for you who are in cold, in wind, in clouds and mist, Santiago and San Felipe, that they [the people] will be glad to join us. Before the visage of the ancestors, we ask that our petition and our prayer shine, that they gleam, that our words and our conversation be fragrant, that they reach the cold and the wind.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, through Rudy’s preparatory prayer we can see the true powers working behind the backstage of Rudy’s and Virgilio’s future performance. As an *ajq’ij*, Rudy would mobilize in his prayer the whole of the natural and supernatural beings involved in the prospective ritual to ensure that everything would be done down to the latest detail, in a chronologically appropriate fashion. Thus, in a way, this he created a copy of the other ritual, but in the ancestral dimension of the *Santo Mundo*. But a deeper analysis of this self-inclusive process will be made at the ending of this chapter. Now, I will present the ethnographic description of the second ritual.

### 3.4. The celebration

Mid-November is one of the busiest times of the year for Virgilio and Rudy, for as founding members of the *Sociedad* they not only have to perform ritually as *chuchqajawib'* in the feast of Santiago: they and the other members of the society also have to ensure that the whole community is entertained with two days of concerts, feasting, dancing and socializing. In these events, both political and religious motivations are intermixed. Before the vigil (*velación*), and as is customary with many saint images in Momostenango, Virgilio would direct a small dance with Santiago's icon with the members of the Sociedad. He danced to the compass of *marimba* music while censuring Santiago's image (Figure 26). Afterwards, he and his people placed the icon of Santiago on his altar, and celebrated a small catholic mass with Rudy. In this ceremony, they incensed Santiago's icon and blessed many people by placing a ritual bundle of flowers (*b'otz'oj kotzij*) over their heads. This bundle is in fact a symbol of political and religious power among the K'iche', for both the local *alcalde* and the *chuchqajaw rech tinamit* have their own. Finally, he placed the *alcaldes' vara* or baton, another vital insignia of authority, before Santiago, and suffimigated both the *vara* and the outgoing *alcaldes* of the canton (Figures 27 and 28).



27. Virgilio dances to the music of marimba and suffumigates the local icon of Santiago.



28. Virgilio suffumigates Santiago's icon, blesses the outgoing alcaldes with the flower bundle, and performs a suffumigation before them.

The resulting image was one of deep overlap of the religious and civil functions: Virgilio, a local *chuchqajaw* but also a political power broker, censing both the local icon of Santiago and the local authorities, as well as the insignia of their rank. Virgilio would spend the evening discussing the organization of the *sociedad Santiaguito* and issues of the local *auxiliatura* with former *pasados*, as well as ensuring that the celebration was carried on properly. However, equally as important as the ritual aspect was the festive aspect. While the devotees of Santiago stayed in a room that had been improvised as a small parish, most of the people stayed for the loud concert that would follow during the night, performed by “Ronald y sus bravos” a *cumbia* band which would perform Mexican music while people were drinking “Gallo” and “Ice” beer, as well as eating *tayuyo* (tamales with bean sauce) and *pepian* (beef in red chilli and tomato sauce accompanied by white rice) offered by the members of the society (Figure 29).



29. “Ronald y sus Bravos” perform a concert at Chunimatux.



After a night of dancing and drinking, the family and I went back to their home, since at 4am everyone had to be awake again to prepare for the ceremonies of the following day. On the road home, Rudy started to jokingly quarrel with his brothers. He jokingly boasted that, by being an *ajq'ij* and future *chuchqajaw*, and by participating in the communal activities, he would get access to political authority, and “even the keys to the soccer field”, so they would better not upset him or they won't be able to play in the future. Later, both him and Virgilio belittled those local families who didn't participate in the *feria* saying that “sooner or later, there will be authority over them”. Rudy talked to me a bit about his role as a dancer for Santiago at next day's *convite*, and then he departed to his own home with his wife. We walked home, and I stayed at a guest-room at Neri's house.

The next morning, before the *feria*, Rudy and Virgilio woke me up at 4am. It was time to perform *costumbre* in behalf of the local icon of Santiago, before the image of Santiago arrives at the *caserío*. We took the path from Chonimatux to an altar near the main road to the town-centre, *Ventana Mundo*, “the window of the underworld”, from which the town can be seen, but especially the cemetery. We walked in the dark, while other companions of Virgilio's group joined us, discussing affairs concerning the worship of the *Santo Mundo*, counting the days for the next ritual offering. Meanwhile, Virgilio explained to me that it is not necessary to be a *k'amal b'e* to obtain an appointment at the *auxiliatura*, but it makes it easier, for religious service is also a service to the community and certainly, as I could corroborate it during the ceremony, political authorities are helped by religious ones.



We arrived before sunrise, and the rest of the members of the group were waiting. Virgilio placed Santiago's icon next to the altar, while the rest of us prepared the offerings of small pellets of incense, candles and big offerings of *q'ol* or pellets of pine resin, placing them over pine needles, while the altar was being adorned by flowers. A cacophony of prayers followed, which each member of the group making petitions of their own, explaining their needs. Finally, after an hour or so, the sun rose, and the icon of Santiago was held before the fire and the rising sun (Figure 30). Rudy said later that the ceremony was carried to "draw Santiagos' spirituality" or *nawal* to the icon at the rising sun, since Santiagos' *nawal* is considered to be "hot" and powerful too.





30. At sunrise, Virgilio and other members of his group bless the local Santiago icon at the *Ventana Mundo* altar.

Afterwards, as in the plan laid at the preparatory ritual, at 7 am Virgilio and Rudy went to the church, to bring the icon near the actual image of Santiago during the morning eucharist. Finally, at 11am, the local *feria* took place. The dancers began the performance with marimba music at the *convite*, the invitation ceremony to

draw the attention of the people towards the arrival of the image. Santiagos' image arrived then to the main road at the *caserío*, where it received the respects of the rest of the members of the *cofradía*. The very same icon that Virgilio had blessed the prior night and in the morning with the visit to *Ventana Mundo* was then placed before the images of Santiago and Felipe, both on their palanquins, and act which is somewhat of a circulation of forces (Figure 31): by being blessed before the *wachib'al* or image of Santiago, the local Santiago icon was strengthened; however, it is also true that Santiago's image himself was in a way being strengthened by the contact with a duplication of itself which has also received cult, something on which we will touch later on. Finally, the image of Santiago followed its way, while the local *convite* or amusement parade and dance continued, with merriment, food and music which last well into the night.<sup>6</sup>



31. The local icon of Santiago and Felipe is placed before the church image of Santiago during the *feria* (photograph courtesy of Sociedad Santiaguito).

During the *convite*, a company of dancers, the *vasalla*<sup>7</sup>, perform both to amuse the people and to please Santiago, while dancing to both modern music and marimba (*q'ojom*, a generic word for percussion instruments which can also designate a drum). As mentioned, disguises associated with the foreign world are preferred. That year, Rudy used a military American costume with the mask of a gorilla (Figure 32). In the town centre, during the feria patronal (at another date), images of *gringas* and *güeras* would also dance in the *convite* of Santiago, so the local cult is a repetition of the main cult.



32. Left: *convite* in Momostenango, 1963 (Sandoval 2006); right: Rudy and his dance partner with their disguises during the *convite* of 2017. (photograph courtesy of Sociedad Santiaguito).

In contrast to prior assessments who consider Catholic, native and political ritual performances as separate due to their origin or their apparent functions, the deep interconnectedness of all these activities is evident not only for us, but for Virgilio, Rudy and other participants.<sup>8</sup> The vigil and the *convite* are certainly



connected to political life, for it was used to bless the outgoing authorities and reaffirm their links with the *alcaldía*. The *convite* is also connected to the particular affairs of the *Sociedad Santiaguito*, which centres its activities in the cult of Santiago as a local *cofradía*; finally, it is related to the affairs of local families, for the *convite* is a way to both strengthen local ties and ascertain a degree of control over those groups that are reluctant to participate in the local festivities. As such, the series of preparatory rituals clearly present them as part of one and the same thing.

Now, I have presented these rituals and celebrations in terms that are more or less 'detached', explaining why, how and when the celebration was performed. However, from an ethnographic point of view, what was particularly poignant to me was that moment of joking where Rudy passed from the usual humble and petitioning self that he would always show when engaging with ancestors and elders, to that of a certain assertiveness and power. As quoted, he said "sooner or later there shall be authority over them" (*tarde o temprano, habrá autoridad sobre ellos*), referring to those reluctant to partake from the celebration. To me, the possibility that Rudy started making those kind of assertions was the real outcome of the ritual, its manifestation as a construction of his place in the religious and political life of the community. However, I don't want to understand this assertion in the terms of a crude functionalism, that is, by saying that power itself is the actual reason and content of the ritual, for it is not so, as Virgilio literally admitted (the celebration is just a factor, among many others, to be considered eligible for an appointment, for example). Instead, I want to understand this assertion as something *contextually constructed*, framed by the complexity that precedes it.

From now on, I will concentrate in a detailed analysis of the temporal relationship of both rituals, through the lenses of the anthropology of time, the main question being this: we have talked about “circular” or “cyclical” time in regards to non-Western cosmologies, in a rather unsatisfactory way, as Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen have already pointed (2017: 17). How to overcome this unsatisfactory state of our representation of time in non-Western cosmologies? What I suggest is that situations of apparent ‘cyclicity’ arise out of our misunderstanding of how time and causality can be seen in non-Western worlds.

### **3.6. The anthropology of time and temporal paradoxes in Maya cosmologies**

Now it is time to analyse both rituals and their relationship. The most important fact is that, through the preparatory ritual, Rudy is trying to influence the outcome of the second ritual. This is very clear: as I mentioned, during the ritual he started telling the spirits of the ancestors and gods to ‘move’ and compel the spirits of people and even inanimate objects, so that the second ritual would be successful. As to why he did this, a few ethnographic observations can help us understand further. As Rudy explained to me once, it is the ancestors who ensure that things actually occur in this world, however, for the gods, all that will happen in this world has actually *already happened*. For example, Rudy would tell me that births, deaths and life events of people in the patrilineage are decreed by the ancestors, thus it is possible for him to know when they are going to happen. In the case of his own marriage, he told me that he dreamed about it beforehand. He dreamed about going into a mountain, and finding a pair of ancestors sat over stones. He told me how the ancestors had already performed the ritual for him,

thus making him already “married” in the *Santo Mundo* before he was married in this world:

The ancestors arrived in my dream, during the night they came to tell something to my soul, they came to show a wedding, my hands and feet were to be bound with a woman. I was going to get married. I dreamed how they (the ancestors) were sweeping the road, putting white flowers and singing. I arrived to a great female ancestor, she received me, gave me white clothes, gave me a bundle of flowers, she also said: your hands and feet are going to be bound, here it is your woman, here is your wedding, when you marry, this is your partner, she will be with you until you die.<sup>9</sup>

Clarifying the dream in Spanish, he explained to me that the flower bundle in his dream was his own wife, which according to the ancestors would come from the direction of the calendrical mountain of the north, Pipil, and also me that the ancestors told him in his dream *ya te casaste*, “you are already married”, referring to the future as something already past.

Similar paradoxes are to be found in other examples of Maya ethnography. For example, Esther Ermitte recalls the story of Bricio, a man in the Tzeltal town of Pinola. He was hesitant to partake in the local traditional government since he has illiterate; however, a shamans told him that *he already knew how to write* in the world of the ancestors or *me'iltatil*.<sup>10</sup> This encouraged him to learn to read and write, and he eventually he became part of the local government, self-fulfilling the assertions of the shamans (cfr. Hermitte 1970: 70-73). Thus, both assertions, that of Rudy's ancestors and that of the Tzotzil shamans, are similar:

“you are already married” and “you already know how to write”. Indeed, both are things that already happened in the world of the ancestors, and then they become real in our world. This implies the idea that things that will happen in our future are already past in the perspective of the gods or in the world of “spirits”.

Thus, here we have both the presence of downward causation (ancestors compelling humans and things to perform something) and the paradox of the loop: the ancestors set the future because humans compelled them to do so in the first place, through the rituals. The world of the ancestors seems to contain the temporal world of humans in a sort of transitive relationship (our actions and temporal perceptions proceed from it), and in a relationship of hierarchy (they determine what happens here) but, at the same time, the actions of men can constrain or direct the actions of the world of gods. Furthermore, it is possible to assert that the ritual tries to transform our future into the ‘past’ of the world of the gods, transform something mutable into something decided. Thus, this is not really a question of ‘cyclical time’, but of inclusion of our time into another dimension which is not completely temporal in our sense of the word. This leads to the crucial theoretical question: what is this ‘time’ where our time is contained? Perhaps here it will be useful to take a glance on how anthropology has dealt with the question of time.

The question of time has a rich and complex theoretical genealogy in social anthropology. The problem traces its origins to Durkheim’s first sociological formulations (1912; see Katovich 1987), but it made its appearance in social anthropology proper with Malinowski’s remarks on time-reckoning in the Trobriands (1927), and then developed through classic examples such as Evans-Pritchard’s fascinating insights on the relationship of ecology, social



structure and time among the Nuer (1939, 1940), Leach's conception of 'alternating' time (1950, 1961), Lévi-Strauss' famous notion of ritual as 'an instrument for the destruction of time' (1962) and Geertz's account on Balinese calendrics (1966, 1973) which introduced the question of a qualitative aspect of time, just to name the most relevant examples from classic anthropology.

The most well-known and relatively recent synthesis of the problem (and a classic in its own right) is of course Gell's *The Anthropology of Time* (1992), which concentrates on the notion of times series, which Gell retook from the idealist J. M. E. McTaggart (1908, 1927). The time series are the two simplest forms in which the concept of time can be reasonably posited for analysis: the A-series, or time conceived as being formed by the contrast between 'past', 'present' and 'future', and the B-series, which emphasized the contrast between 'before' and 'after' (Gell 1992: 151). Gell declares himself a supporter of 'the moderate version of the B-series position'; nonetheless, throughout his work he considers the validity of both series in anthropological analysis and contrasts their features and the different regimes created by them in economics, time-mapping, social structure and praxeology. Finally, Marilyn Strathern has evoked the idea of fractal time along the lines of Cantor's dust (cfr. [1991] 2004: 3), a notion that has been retaken and further developed in recent times (cfr. Dobroski 2019). But for now, let's cast aside the idea of self-similarity, which is tempting to use but not completely equal to our argument, and return to Gell's theory.

In his anthropological theory of time, Gell only focused on the contrast between A-series and B-series time conceptions. None of these seem completely adequate to describe our conundrum. However, the original objective of J. M. E. McTaggart, the creator of the concept of time series, was to show the 'unreality'

of time, or how both A and B-series were inconsistent. For McTaggart, the B-series of “before” and “after” was free of contradiction, but it was not a true temporal series, because it does not imply change, only the ordering of events in “earlier” and “later” (cfr. McTaggart 1927: 12). The A-series, that of past, present and future, does imply change and with it temporality, but it does imply a contradiction, for past, present and future are “incompatible determinations” (McTaggart 1927: 20) that must be predicated of every event within time at some point, and furthermore, can only be predicated in function of each other (past being *after* present and future, present being *after* past but *before* future, future being *after* both), thus generating a “vicious” regress (cfr. McTaggart 1927: 22), because we are using temporal categories to explain time itself. Thus, in McTaggart’s view, both A-series and B-series are “unreal”.<sup>11</sup> To surmount this difficulty, he proposed the idea of a C-series, a non-temporal order, and the illusion of time arising from our misperceptions, either the A-series or the B-series (McTaggart 1927: 30).

McTaggart changed his ideas on the nature of the C-Series during the development of his philosophy, but some basic aspects of it remained. One of such points is that he considered the C-Series to be a non-temporal, unchangeable order of events:

There is a series—a series of the permanent relations to one another of those realities which in time are events—and it is the combination of this series with the A determinations which gives time. But this other series—let us call it the C series—is not temporal, for it involves no change, but only an order. Events have an order. They are, let us say, in the order M, N, O,

P. And they are therefore not in the order M, O, N, P, or O, N, M, P, or in any other possible order. But that they have this order no more implies that there is any change than the order of the letters of the alphabet, or of the Peers on the Parliament Roll, implies any change. And thus, those realities which appear to us as events might form such a series without being entitled to the name of events, since that name is only given to realities which are in a time series. It is only when change and time come in that the relations of this C series become relations of earlier and later (McTaggart 1908: 462).

Thus, the C-Series is a sort of fixed series, like the letters of the alphabet. One popular view is that a C-series is “an expression synonymous with ‘B-series’ when the latter is shorn of its temporal connotations” (Shorter 1986: 226), that is, stripped from the idea of “before” and “after”. What does supply the notion of order in this series is that the C-Series is an “inclusion series” (McDaniel 2020), in which terms are conceived as being ‘included in’ or ‘inclusive of’. Finally, McTaggart speculated about a final point to the C-series, “the term which is the whole of the series, the term which includes all the others, and is included in none of the others.” (McTaggart 1927: 365). McTaggart believed that this ‘whole’ of time belonged to the future, the final truth of time, the stage where all temporal perceptions are contained in a truthful way, which he called “the futurity of the whole” (cfr. McTaggart: 365). This is, in a way, a world without a future, only with past, a world of “truth”. But let’s leave McTaggart’s ideas at this point.

My core argument is the following. I believe the ‘ancestral’ or ‘cosmological’ time of my example is, of course, not a ‘circular time’, nor anything

that we can call time, but instead to be somewhat of a C-Series. This “C-Series” world is perceived by us as determining our future, but from its own perspective, we are in the “past”, or to be more precise, since this world doesn’t have a future we can understand and therefore it is not truly temporal, we are *included* in it: in this world “you already know” how to write, the ritual is already done, or you are “already married”, all events that in our world belong to the future.<sup>12</sup> However, the crucial difference, in regards to McTaggart, is that in this non-Western case this final order is not only inclusive of but also somewhat included in our own temporality, in the form of sacred places which contain the access to the cosmological *Santo Mundo*, thus giving rise to all sorts of paradoxes, like being able to see the future (which is the past of the ancestors) and perform rituals such as the one presented in this chapter.

Thus, going back to the ritual, what Rudy does in the preparatory rituals is to compel the ancestors to make sure the rituals happen in that temporal dimension in which our actions are already understood and decided. He describes the rituals before the eyes of the ancestor-gods, so the correct execution of the ritual is already done, and then their appearance in our world under the desired guise literally becomes *a mere matter of time*. The result is a sort of equivalence between his agency and that of his *cofradía* with that of the ancestors and gods: who has obtained the money for the ritual? The *cofradía* and him. Who has paid for the music and the beer? The *cofradía* and him. Who has expanded and consolidated the social relationships that make the ritual possible? Them. But at the same time, for them *it was not them who did it*: it was the ancestors and the gods, *who already did it*. The objective is that through the ritual they made sure that it was not them doing things, but the gods, and that things

appeared as something “already done” in the truthful non-temporal dimension of the gods, which we call the “C-series world”.

However, the point of the ritual is only not to perform the action, nor to make the gods do it, but to constrain the action in a certain way, so that its outcome is favourable and has a desired form. I would argue that this is like magic in Kiriwina as described by Malinowski, whose objective was not to create things, but to make them efficient and good (cfr. Malinowski 2002 [1922]: 125).<sup>13</sup> However, instead of having a more spatial origin, as the Kiriwinian magic, which comes from the underground dimension or Tudava where the Baloma spirits live and which is brought back to our world by the agency of the enchanted breath of the magician, (cfr. Mosko 2014), for the Maya, magic comes from time, or more precisely, from a ‘strange loop of time’: magic is the feeling that our actions are not flowing from our temporal own level, but as something that unfolds from a dimension where time is perceived as past, and that we perceive as being future.

In conclusion, here we don’t have only a reversal of causality in regards to space, as in the example of the destruction of the sacred altars, *but a sort of reversion of how causality flows in regards to time*. In our world, time regularly flows from the past into the future, thus making the past fixed and the future variable; however, the objective of the ritual is to make of *our* future something *fixed* and inevitable, and the past of the gods, the true past, which is our future, something that we can influence. Thus, the true aim of the ritual is, so to speak, to make time in our world flow from the future, rather than from the past. Usually, causation in the K’iche’ universe goes from the ancestors to men, but here, men compel the ancestors to make themselves act. The result is a loop in time. The order of the ancestors is non-temporal in relation to ours, because *there is no*

*change in it*: it is already decided. It exists in a way that we cannot understand as temporal: it has no real “future” in it, only “past”. It is a C-Series, in the vein of McTaggart: a “whole” that contains what we call time *as a truthful non-temporal order*, instead of an illusory order of mutable perceptions. However, since both this non-temporal world and our time are in a relationship of hierarchical entanglement, it is sometimes possible to know this world, and furthermore to try to place our future events as something belonging to this order, in the precise way we want it. Thus, the actual aim of the ritual is to bring “time” into the world of “eternity”, rather than eternity into the world of time. Hence arises the “illusion” of cyclical time, which is not cyclical at all: it is a ‘strange loop’, an entanglement of time between our world and the world of the gods, an active “eternal return” of sorts.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the many complexities of this chapter, the central argument can be summarized in this way. My proposal is that, just as in non-Western worlds social action becomes cosmological action through certain conditions that enable ‘downward causation’, there are conditions in which temporal action becomes non-temporal, or proceeding from a dimension of ancestors/gods which cannot really be understood through our notion of time, which is either A-like or B-like in the vein of McTaggart. That is, for the K’iche’ there are some ritual procedures which aim to place events in our world within something that we can perhaps understand as a C-Series of sorts, a series of non-temporal elements which from our perspective arise as being the “futurity of the whole” or the definitive truth of time. This occurs because of the interplay between a world where all the future

is past, that of the gods, and our world, where the future is yet to come. This looping arrangement can be considered as time-magic. The aim of 'time magic' is to introduce temporal actions within non-temporal dimensions, so they become inevitable in our world: its aim is to make eternity something temporal, something that can be caused. Thus, it is something more than just self-similar or self-scaling time, as in Strathern's vision of a fractal time ([1991] 2004): it is an active transformation of temporality, the causation of eternity by men. But for now, let's leave things there, and proceed to the next chapter, which will deal with an equally complicated but perhaps more intriguing topic: witchcraft.

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## Notes

1 A somewhat similar epithet has already been recorded by Garrett Cook, who mentions that Santiago was invested as "captain of the whole world" by the old *principales* (2000: 65). Actually, this epithet refers not to our world (or at least not only), but to the *Santo Mundo* or 'Holy Earth' itself. Although eminently linked to the earth and the underworld realm of the dead, the *Santo Mundo* comprises also the sky, as evidenced by the prayers recorded by Schultze-Jena, where ancestors (who are *mundos* or "earth gods" themselves) are called *rawajal ri kaj, juyub'* "lords of the sky and the mountains" (1933: 19). The German ethnologist also recorded prayers where the god of the earth is said to be able to communicate with the Moon and the stars (cfr. 1933: 53).

2 Carmack had already stressed the importance of the changing of Santiago's robes in his cult (2000: 88-89). I never got the chance to corroborate Virgilio's and Rudy's assertion, but it is true that the colour of Santiago's clothes during his parade changed from one year to the other while I was at the town, one year

donning a black suit, the other a blue one. Rudy's testimony regarding this particular is this: "When he dons black clothes, it will rain all the year through. When it is blue, rain won't fall. Our fortune for the year can be seen there. The *alcalde* of the image, being very devout, is told by the image itself which robes does it want, because Santiago has many changes of clothes, not only one, many, he comes to warn, to tell the clothes he must don, and they go looking for them. His clothes are changed at midnight".

3 "I went there, I was invited to be a part of the ceremony. We slept at the chapel, and the *alcalde* of Santiago or the images *alcalde* wouldn't allow us to sleep before the image, because his horse comes out, it can trample you and you can vigil up dead, one can sleep there, but at the side. I have heard it. One night, I had been keeping guard on him and I saw him rising in my dream, giving water to his horse and coming out, I listened him opening the door, coming back and returning."

4 More on this idealized arrangement of time, space and families will be dealt with in chapter 6.

5 *Xuquje kaqata xeraqan q'ab alaq pari tew, pa ri kaqiq', pa ri sutz', pa ri mayul. Santiago y San Felipe kaki' kot k'u alaq quk' juntira. Chiki wach ri nan, chi ki wach ri tat, ka julke'ntak'ulo, ka k'okontuk'ulo, kachupke'ntak'ulo wa qa ch'awanik, wa qa petition, wa qa oracion, kopanik chila' ka b'ek pa ri tew kaqiq'.*

6 The Guatemalan *convite* has been defined as a comic parade (*desfile bufo*) where participants wear masks and disguises and often dance in order to invite neighbours of a community to participate in local festivities, hence the name *convite*, which means "invitation". They have been celebrated since colonial times to announce festivities during the itinerary of religious processions (García Escobar, 2007; Taube 2013: 102; García Salazar 2012: 117-118,). While



originating in the Ladino milieu, *convites* in indigeous communities would originally incorporate figures from indigenous lore such as monkeys, macaws, deers and jaguars. However, since these figures were incorporated in a more comical role, they were gradually displaced by grotesque figures from popular culture and the American and Mexican entertainment worlds, as Rhonda Taube explains (2013: 96-118). In fact, one of the things one of the women of the patrilineage told me when I told her I was from Mexico was: “Mexico, where the stars live, right?”, for the influence of Mexican entertainment and TV is considerable in Guatemala, as it is in the rest of Latin America. It is claimed that the *convites* in Momostenango date from at least a hundred years ago, and the biggest one is celebrated in honour of the virgin of Concepción and our Lady of Guadalupe, on December 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> (cfr. Sandoval 2006).

7 K’iche’ language is full with loanwords from Spanish; some of them are archaisms. However, I have found no clear precedent or explanation to the word *vasalla*, which is used to refer to a company of dancers who have taken a vote to perform before the saints; it can refer to Santiago’s dancers, like here, or to the performers at traditional dances like *baile de monos* and *gracejos*. The word sounds like *vasallo*, ‘vassal’, but the feminine marker makes it confusing.

8 In her assessment of Momosteco *convites*, Rhonda Taube (2013) perhaps exaggerates the contrast between the “outside” world and Momostenango, and explains the presence of some of these figures as “curiosity” instead of a daily presence, exacerbated in the latest year by TV and smartphones. In my case, the children of the Ramos family would watch cartoons daily, while global connectedness means that movies and characters from popular media (movies, memes, cartoons, anime) are always present. Rudy would not really attribute

much meaning to this choice of images: for him it was the *baile de gringos* (“Gringo dance”), somewhat of a farcical performance to amuse the people and patron Santiago. So, in a way, even if these performances seem to bring a breaking of traditional models (Taube 2013: 154), they are not perceived completely as “novelties”, and are actually quite old.

9 *Xu'l ri nantat pa ri nu waram, chaq'ab' xel kib'ij chirech ri uwach ri nu q'ij, xelki k'ulwachij, jun k'ulinaq'il, katuniik waq'an, nuq'ab' ruk' jun uxoq, kink'ulikm xinwachik'aj, kikipako ri uparinub'e, xkiya ri saq kotz'i'j, xko b'an ri b'ix. Xinonaik ruk' jun nimaqanan, xinu k'ulaj, xyoo' ri watz'iyaaq saq xuyoo' jun molok k'ot'zi'j pa ri nuq'ab', xuju xu b'ij: chi' katunuik raqan aq'ab', chi wa' k'olik ri awixoqil, chi' wa' ri kulanem, chi wa' ri katk'ulaik, are wa' ri kawach'ilaj, kat rach'ilaj, ka' pa ra' kamikalna.*

10 “Shaman: Bricio, you want us to beg you to participate (in the government), but you evade our petitions. But we know that in the other world you are very intelligent...

Bricio: I don't know how I am in the other world...

S: “You don't know how to write?”

B: I don't.

S: “But in the other world, you know. I have seen it in my spirit” (Hermitte 1970: 70).

11 McTaggart's argument has been recently construed as an argument about tenses, not against time, in the vein of analytical philosophy (Mellor 1998), while other recent critics have argued that an A-series is not actually contradictory (Hansson Wahlberg 2013; Ingthorsson 2016); however, the truth is that the

debate between proposers of the A view and the B view continues unabated and unsolved (cfr. Smith 1994, Ingthorson 2016: 1).

12 Of course, in the ritual Rudy speaks in a temporal manner: “we hope that you come with us”, “we hope that this will happen” and so on, but as the examples of the dreams show, what he hopes is not that the ancestors and gods will actually come down from heaven during the ritual, but that the ritual is already “performed” by the time it actually happens in our world, making it inevitable and making it happen in the precise way he wants it to happen.

13 I will develop this argument more in my conclusions.

## **CHAPTER 4.**

### **“If You See Me in Dreams, I can Harm You”: On Witchcraft**

*Due to the sensitive character of the topic of this chapter, all the names of the informants in it have been anonymized.*

#### **4.1. Introduction**

The subject of the present chapter occupies a problematic place within anthropology itself: I am referring to witchcraft, a topic which has been said to be “at the epistemological centre” of the discipline (cfr. Kapferer 2002: 1) and yet, seems to mainly consist of “unanswered questions” and “indeterminacy” (Niehaus 2012: 717). Despite the continued presence of functionalist approaches in the study of the subject, which mainly consider witchcraft as an expression of social anxieties or conflicts (cfr. Valee 2012: 226), in recent years the topic has opened toward approaches that take more seriously the reality of those practices in the lives of informants and their epistemologies about it: thus, as Harry West notes, to the dismay of anthropologists, informants adamantly dismiss the anthropological ideas on sorcery and insist in its reality (2005).<sup>1</sup> The topic becomes even more complex by the fact that witchcraft often stands in a problematic relationship not only with anthropological interpretations of it but also with the ‘native cosmologies’ that supposedly could frame it. As Bruce Kapferer remarks, witchcraft can be considered, cosmology-wise, as a place of invention, and it often proceeds by “breaking apart elements of other cosmological schemes” (2003: 21). Thus, in a theoretically challenging way, witchcraft is not only tremendously conflictive within societies and within anthropology, but even within the main topic of this thesis, cosmology itself.

Of course, it is not my intention to offer any definitive answers to questions as old as the discipline here; it would also be absolutely misleading to ignore or minimize the numerous non-functionalist treatments of the subject. Even the proverbial pages by Evans-Pritchard regarding Azande people unwittingly setting fire to the thatch of their huts, or having their granaries suddenly collapsing, and then ‘explaining’ those particular happenings away through witchcraft (1976: 22), pages which are the departure point for all subsequent anthropological studies of witchcraft, are charged with powerful interpretive possibilities undetected by our usual functionalist readings, as Martin Holbraad has recently shown (2020). Similarly, influential subsequent accounts, such as Favret-Saada’s masterful works on counter sorcery (1980), West’s notion on ‘animated metaphors’ (2007) and Kapferer’s idea on autonomous logics of sorcery that break apart with everyday reason (2003), are of a critical and enduring value and will of course inform my own engagement with the topic. Furthermore, unlike the aforementioned authors, my engagements with witchcraft were fragmentary and unsystematic, so I don’t really pretend that the current understanding of the topic can be truly deepened from my limited engagement. However, despite this setback, in this chapter I will try to propose an original and somewhat experimental approach that is born out of my particular ethnographic experience as well as the general proposal of this thesis.

This chapter is, as mentioned, somewhat experimental in its approach. Instead of introducing the topic as some “irrational” explanation or belonging to “the other”, I will first introduce a very brief ethnographic encounter with the topic, one that was personal, although it cannot be considered as a real case of

witchcraft: instead, it is an engaged analysis of the statement of an informant regarding witchcraft, a statement that precisely seems to embody what Bruce Kapferer has characterized as the raw power of “standing outside reason” inherent in beliefs and practices pertaining to the occult (cfr. 2003: 11). This statement will be the starting point for different engagements with witchcraft. What I will try to argue is that different statements regarding witchcraft can be seen, conceptually, as describing a change in the perceived flow of causality, so instead of we perceiving actions, and misfortune in particular, as flowing from the expected order of things, we see them as flowing from the influence of a malicious agent, the sorcerer, not in a regular fashion, but in a cosmological one. The victim, or the society arounds it, perceive its doom as being caused by a person, rather than as being brought by the random whims of the cosmos. Thus, witchcraft could be defined as a sort of ‘usurpation’ of causality by the sorcerer, but it is curious how this change in the quality of the causal sequence sometimes arises within the person itself, rather than by being in contact with the sorcerer.

#### **4.2. ‘The night shall vanquish the day’: *prolegomena* to sorcery**

I am alone in a road, in the way to meet an informant, just at the beginning of my ethnographic fieldwork. Being immersed in isolated and extended fieldwork for the first time, I wondered, what was going to happen? Would I commit some kind of mistake? Would he turn me away? While thinking about this, I arrived at some crossroads in a mud road in the mountain to meet X, who was leaning on a derelict adobe wall. He was going to show me around the altars of the town. We greeted and started talking about life. At the time, X’s wife was pregnant. In fact, X told me, she was expected to give birth in a few days. The doctors had told him

that most probably it was a girl. But he told me he was convinced it was a boy. He explained to me that he had seen the *nawal* of his son in dreams, as a man, for a *nawal* has not only an animal form, but sometimes a human one too. He told me that he was convinced that his son would be strong, that he would have a strong *nawal*, just like him. He then told me that the ancestors had already told him that his son was going to be his successor: “*Dios Mundo* had decreed that he is a man”. And then he added more about why he knew this:

In dreams I have seen the *nawal* of my son, he is a man. I know it because of the skin of his *nawal*, the *nawal* of a man is dark skinned, the *nawal* of a woman is often clear-skinned. The strength of the *nawal* in relationship with its skin colour is because of the difference between the night and the day. The day is like the sun above, it is weaker, it is clear, he is a *gringo* like you, he cannot stand being seen, that’s why he dazzles us with his rays, because he doesn’t like being seen. The night, the moon, however, is patient, she is an indigenous woman, she bears the burden of being seen, she fascinates (*fascina*). The night is active and patient, strong. The sun is like the *canche* (white man), who is weak, passive: he sees. The dark skin is stronger, for it is like the night, and the night shall vanquish the day in the end. This is the reason why, if you see me in dreams, I can harm you. If I see you in my dreams, you can do nothing to me (*Por eso es que si tú me ves en sueños, yo puedo hacerte daño. Si yo te veo en sueños, tú no me puedes hacer nada a mí*).

While uttered in the context of a non-hostile exchange regarding life, these words were really disturbing for me. Frankly, to me they were almost like an arabesque: one can get lost in their meaning, just dazzled by recalling them once and again. Besides the literal allusion to the idea of dazzlement in X's words, anthropologically this ethnographic moment still exerts on me a dazzle-effect similar to that described by Marilyn Strathern, for it certainly was linked to a sort of 'revelatory sense of occult practices'.<sup>2</sup> These words were a literal subversion of the anthropological gaze and of the role of the anthropologists, that "participant observer" who doesn't really participate that much: like the all-seeing eye of the sun, and yet, weak precisely because his job is to see and not to be seen (an easy job). Identifying himself instead with the moon, which "bears the burden" of being seen, X was in a way reverting the power of my gaze over him into a deeper, more powerful, hidden power, a power of "being seen" while not really being touched nor affected. A more powerful gaze, one that is not that of the anthropological engagement, was alluded, precisely that which is alluded to when informants discard the futility of anthropological explanations and talk about the reality of witchcraft. After these enigmatic words, X and I started talking about many other topics, and at some point (when inquired by me) he started talking about sorcerers (*ajitz*) and sorcery (*itzinel*) in detail:

"There are sorcerers, those who perform evil. They know the calendar. They become animals, their soul exits their bodies and it enters into an animal. People hear steps in the roof, animals screeching, howling, singing and crying outside. The heart of the witch exits his body and he send forth the *win*<sup>3</sup> to do harm, he uses the days of the calendar to pray to the lost



souls (*las almas perdidas*), those who died in violent deaths, those who disappeared, those who float in darkness and the night. “Come with me, come”, they say to the lost dead, they use their spirits to come out in the night. The hanged men, the suicide victims are gods of the sorcerers (*los colgados, los suicidas son los dioses de los brujos*). They invoke them, they use those souls, the lost souls. In the rooms where they make their offerings, they have their instruments, in rooms without windows, in complete darkness, where light won’t enter. They ask for permission with their ritual implements in darkness. Sorcerers are loaners of spirits, those who lend their spirit to another body are witches.”

Of course, X was not a sorcerer or *ajitz* in any sense (we will meet with a real one in this chapter), but in a way, his first words, about the sun and the moon, and the game of gazes between the anthropologists and his informant, could be say to convey something about the ability to do harm beyond natural means, and furthermore, to the relationship between the sorcerer and the victim too. The victim could perhaps see his bewitcher in dreams, but will be impotent to harm him, as if the sorcerer was untouchable or made of thin air. The sorcerer, meanwhile, can see and act without being harmed. If one thinks on the allusion to the sun and the moon, the difference between the “sun” of the anthropologists and the “moon” of the informant is this: the anthropologists can see, but is weak, he cannot stand “being seen” in a different way, and tries to dazzle the look of his interlocutor away; meanwhile, the fascinating “other” is seen, and it is strong and can stand being seen, but the difference is that he dazzles in another, deeper way: not by make us avert our gaze, but by means of *fascinating* our gaze.

Finally, what these words allude to is an asymmetry in causality, a certain hierarchy. The sorcerer can act without being harmed; the victim, in the other hand, cannot causally influence the sorcerer. As we will see later, this can only be achieved through counter-sorcery. Thus, in a way, the initial situation of sorcery is like that: a nefarious influence which acts without being acted upon, an unequal relationship in terms of causality. For now, let's leave this point here, and proceed with X's testimony on witchcraft, conceived in a cosmological manner.

### **4.3. A cosmology of witchcraft**

Once, many months after our initial encounter and when we were already friends, X and I were talking again about witchcraft again. Instead of just talking about cases of bewitching or rituals, he gave me a long explanation regarding what can be portrayed as a cosmology of witchcraft. X told me that his great-grandmother lived near Quetzaltenango, to later arrive at Momostenango. When he was a child, she told him the story of Juan No'j, a very peculiar character of Guatemalan folklore, on which a few words are needed before jumping in to X's testimony. According to local folklore, Juan No'j was a sorcerer or *ajitz* who achieved great wealth and power in life through his dealings with the underworld, but eventually died and, as an afterlife punishment, became the underworld master of the volcano Santa María. It is said that he lives inside the volcano, and has numerous souls that are enslaved to him, people that sold to him through sorcery during his life. He has a beautiful hacienda, but he must always rebuild it because of the constant eruptions and fires inside. It seems that Juan No'j is connected somehow with the cult given to the neighbouring Cerro Quemado ("burned mountain" *k'atinak juyub'*) volcano, now extinguished. No'j<sup>4</sup>

is the *nawal* or calendrical essence of the Cerro Quemado. It seems that the Cerro Quemado volcano contained an ancient place of worship, that was moved to the Santa María volcano when part of the Cerro Quemado was destroyed in an eruption (1818). There is a cave at the foot of the Cerro Quemado volcano where with many altars to Juan No’j, where people make ceremonies to ask him for money or health, but also to make witchcraft workings (Méndez Bauer 2015: 78-80). According to Benson Saler, in the K’iche’ community of El Palmar, Juan No’j was considered a powerful *dios mundo* or earth god and could possess *nawal mesa* ritual specialists in order to give answers to people (cfr. 1960: 143).<sup>5</sup> A similar cult has been documented by Juan Porres in Samayac, the so-called “capital of witchcraft in Guatemala” (Figure 33).



33. Juan No’j (left) along other *dioses mundo* and folk saints at an altar in Samayac (Porres 1992: 60).

Since X's grandmother was from Xela, she knew very well the lore about Juan No'j and his abode in Cerro Quemado, and told him about it in detail:

My grandmother said that when they arrived from the coast, at 5am, they crossed at mornings at the Santa María Volcano in Xela. My grandmother said that she cried then, because of fear. "I couldn't sleep, because of the fear, the people at the volcano crying for help, they were tired, some said "we are burning", other were saying "how heavy are these stones!", other said, "we are tired of holding the volcano", other laughed, the cries of babies, of old people were heard... and the sounds of the animals, the animals of the mountain, the snakes, they were talking: get us out. If any animal calls you like that, don't bring it out, if you do, the animal will become a stone, it will take that form immediately...

The people that cry in the volcano are sold to evil, they got money from the earth, they ask, and the volcano gives money, it gives everything, sometimes the volcano would say "no, I don't want old people anymore [easy victims of witchcraft], I want one of your sons", and people give to him [the volcano god] what he desires, they bring new born babies and sacrifice them, so their souls are there too. All those people end up shovelling the fire, the stones, that's why the volcano won't ever fall. The people that are inside are holding it, the volcano, be sure of that, it will never end. My grandmother said: each roar of the volcano is the arrival of a new soul in it. That's the story that my grandmother told.<sup>6</sup>

X further explained that, just like there is God and his opposite, the devil, the earth as a benefactor or protector has its “contrary” or “enemy” in the figure of Juan No’j and similarly aggressive *dioses mundo*. The ancestors or *nantat* are those who sustain and feed people, and similarly the earth lords or *rajawal ri uwachulew* are invested in sustaining a cosmological order. However, the Mundo has also chaotic forces, personified by the *dueños* or *dioses mundo* of the volcanoes (*xkanul*) and the sea (*palo’*). Sorcerers are servants of the powerful spirits of these places, and make offerings at special altars in the vicinity of volcanoes and the of sea, for both the sea and the volcanoes want people to “carry waves and fire” as slaves. The sorcerer makes offerings (sometimes bloody) to them, and they grant extraordinary gifts to their servants. “There are altars”, an *ajq’ij* once told me, “where you cannot enter without offering a good morsel (*bocado de carne*) for the underworld”. At first, the earth asks for small things: rabbits, quails and turkeys. But then, sacrifices become more expensive: goats, sheep, bulls, and even people.

Those who kill animals are sold to the volcano lord, they do that, in order not to go there themselves, because the volcano says to them: come with me, and they reply, I don’t want to, but I will always feed you, the volcano may say: I want the flesh of a pigeon, it has to be black or white, now I want a sheep, a black one, and they have to search it, pay its price, they may get a bull, here is the bull, in order not to go, they are already sold, but not completely, because they feed. They feed the earth for evil, to get things for themselves, that’s why they put before them the lives of those little animals or people, not their own. Yes, they burn at the altar of the

two handed cross, the Mesa del Santo Mundo (an altar in Momostenango, used for evil). They burn there, but not everyone, just the ones that sold themselves. One can speak directly with the earth there, that is seen...

If you go the sea, there are altars by the sea, if you go there (to burn an offering), the sea will give you something, but you will stay there to shovel the waves when there are sea earthquakes, because there are lots of people chained at the sea. They are already sold. That's the story of how one wants to become someone overnight. The god of the earth, his counterpart is evil. They compete, so to speak: the volcano, the sea, with the earth god, to win more people. They give their lives.

This earth, it is in peace from some years, but only until you have to sacrifice something there, although not necessarily people. Sometimes it is pigeons, sheep, even a bull, in the enchanted places. They are those who are sold to evil. Because the earth gives money. They go to the volcano at Xela or any other, and say: we bring you a person, or a bull, we want money, we give this in payment. The *Mundo* says "It is fine, but when you die, you will come here with me", it says, "the day you die you come to shovel fire and stone." They say: "we will come to help", they do their ceremonies and many things appear to them.<sup>7</sup>

Although the ethnologist Benson Saler (1964: 320), denied the existence of a pact between the or sorcerer and the underworld powers among the K'iche', he was plainly wrong. The most powerful *ajitz* are considered as those who make a pact

with the spirit of a volcano or the sea in order to fulfil their wishes. The sorcerer becomes more powerful and rich with each sacrifice. Eventually, the sorcerer becomes untouchable, since “only the earth itself can kill him, no bullet or machete can kill him”, a boast that some powerful *chuchqajaw* make too. Weak sorcerers fail and become indentured slaves of the underworld powers (workers in the hacienda of Juan No’j, moving shovels of fire or waves): but the strong ones can rise to become *awajmundo* themselves, guardians of the underworld, *nawales* themselves. X recalled to me once the story of a sorcerer who made sacrifices of this kind and eventually was granted lots of money by the Mundo:

There was a man living near here, further down the mountain, he did his ceremony there, and one day a little animal appeared, he followed it and a clay pot appeared. When he arrived to his home with it, he placed his altar in a corner, he performed a ceremony, covered it with a white sheet, and at midnight he heard someone pushing the door, at sunrise, when he saw the pot, it was full of money. He took the money, bought lots of things, built homes, how many things he had, even workers to bring him food. But when he died, at midnight, his family opened his coffin, and they found nothing but animal bones, only deer bones: he had become a deer, he decided to become a guardian of the Mundo, he went to take care of the volcano, lots of people want to hunt animals, but they can’t, because those animals are souls of people, they disappear, they take care of the place.<sup>8</sup>

Animals like the *venado del mundo* (deer of the underworld) are the spirits of powerful sorcerers who serve the volcano or the mountain as *awajmundo* themselves; they are masters of game, and they usually are portrayed as punishing hunters and trespassers to sacred places (*encanto mundo*). Also, the powerful *dueños* at some mountains are the ones who grant sorcerers the gift of using spirits or co-essences in offensive sorcery, which are called *win* (cfr. Zamora Corona 2019: 125). X then told me of a neighbour of his who was a witch and had a *win* spirit. This woman was a *q'eqa mesa* or “black table” ritual specialist. The *q'eqa mesa* feed the altars where the “forgotten ancestors” live, for they are the most powerful, being the most hidden:

One must go at midnight, one must offer good food, for example, a black bull without blemish, a black rooster, the *dioses mundo* are the hungriest, their sacrifices take long time, they sometimes take place at volcanoes. Their days are 2 Ak'ab' (2 Darkness), 1 Iq' (1 Wind). It is the hunger of the underworld. They deal directly with the mountain, unlike the common *chuchqajaw*, therefore their work is strongest, they deal directly with *El Mundo*. That's why their work is more demanding, they ask for more, they are harsh.”

Thus, the duty of these specialists is to feed “the old ancestors, those who are never mentioned, those who hunger, the forgotten” (*los padres antiguos que nadie menciona, aquellos que tienen hambre, los olvidados*).<sup>9</sup> The witch mentioned by X was a black altar priest. When she received the *vara* or divining paraphernalia,



she was told by the priests that she could make offerings at any place, without fear, at any time, even at midnight. He recalls her boldness by making midnight offerings at remote altars which others would not dare to go. He told me that, after her initiation, she invited him to see his altar. On her altar were Juan No'j and a black clad idol in chains. The girl offered him sex, but being a married man, he refused. The girl told him: if you tell my secret, I shall find you with 'the speaking of my blood' and I will kill you. "She was in trance", X told me. This girl would eventually become very rich and emigrate to the USA, never to come back to Momostenango. However, X told me that he saw her *win* or sorcery spirit once. It was a woman with the head of a skeleton dog, clad in a white tunic, waiting him on a road at early morning before dawn. The being greeted him, but he kept walking. It followed him, but eventually he invoked the name of God and the *nawal* of the day, and the spirit dissolved. He told me: "I didn't let her overcome me".<sup>10</sup>

The cosmology depicted by X can be surely considered akin to what Bruce Kapferer has described as being part of the irreducible, disjointed and conflictive character of cosmologies associated to magic and sorcery (2003: 11). This cosmology of powerful and dangerous beings that are owners of the fringe spaces of the cosmological order (volcanoes, seas) is not only characterized by lurid tales of sorcery, but is also conflictive within the very cosmic order it stands on. It represents a promise of an unstable and dangerous power, that is self-undermining, conflictive, and uncertain. While this depiction is certainly representational, it is nonetheless important to understand how sorcery is not merely a set of practices, but it is embedded within a cosmology of its own, which stands apart from other cosmological schemes. Now, I would like to follow up

with a testimony from an actual sorcerer or rather, a “counter-sorcerer”, in order to present the much needed perspective of an actual practitioner of so-called “offensive magic” in my account.

#### **4.4. A sorcerer speaks**

As mentioned before, X was not a sorcerer, despite his extensive knowledge on the topic, which came from both his acquaintance with the lore of Xela and his own experience with other ritual specialists. But I knew a sorcerer, for real. My encounter with him was brief, and he just granted me a single ethnographic interview. But the story is worth telling, especially to present my reader with an actual portrait of a man involved in sorcery and counter-sorcery.

The encounter occurred some months after I started my fieldwork. After a night of conversation and drinking with the foreigners at the clinic in the faraway rural hamlet of Chwinajtajuyub’, I was late to the Chunimatux village, where I promised to impart some English lessons to children at 9 am. After taking a *flete* or old pick up to the town centre, I decided to take a *tuk-tuk*, the sort of three-wheeler auto rickshaw that is very common in rural Guatemala because of its versatility and low-price. Surprisingly, the driver was not a kid or a young man, the most common operators of this kind of vehicle, but an old man with a voice which was both sardonic and frail. As it frequently happens at tuk-tuks, he asked me about my origins and what I was looking for in the village. I explained to the best of my ability that I am trying to understand calendrics, altars and traditions. He then told me: “*yo quemó*” (“I burn”), the usual expression to indicate you are a calendric specialist of some sort. He explained that he had a

large *ekomal*, that is, his 'burden' or the number of altars he sustains or feeds: "I burn in thirty different places", he said, while, making the gesture of porting a tumpline over his forehead, an instrument so commonly used even today to bring merchandise from the villages to the market, but which also, in Momostenango, denotes the telluric deities, the Mam, who themselves bear the mountains and the days of the calendar on their back. He invited me to his home to have a chat about his work as *ajq'ij*, and we agreed to see each other the next day. The name of the man was Y.

Y is a merchant, with little agricultural land. He lives near the paved road in Barrio Santa Ana which eventually leads to Pologua. He doesn't really live in Momostenango much of the time: he always travels to the capital and to the coast, always doing business. He didn't inherit his divining gift to his children, who do activities unrelated to his father's otherworldly craft. Y is an *ajq'ij*, but he doesn't do the same kind of work that others. He is regarded by many to be an *ajitz*, a sorcerer. The day after our first meeting, I enter Y's home and am greeted by his wife at their *patio*. He immediately leads me to his personal altar, such as many other *k'iche' ajq'ijab'* have at their homes; however, the room is much larger than that of the Ramos Ajtún family; an oversized figure of Maximon, seated at his chair, dominates the place with its presence; many duplicate images of the same saint, a Virgen de Guadalupe, the Patron Santiago, San Felipe and oversized holy books, as well as black magic European grimoires, lay at his altar. The man explains me that during 30 years he has been "playing the *tzite*", by which he meant being a diviner or *aj'qij*. His true specialty, though, is counter-witchcraft. He is extremely busy; from time to time, he is interrupted by the calls of clients, which he answers in an old Nokia 3310 or "brick" phone. For example, a man

called him as we started the conversation: he had just crashed in Guatemala City and wanted to know “who did the working on him” to have revenge. He writes his name in an old appointment book, crammed with scribbles and photos of his clients, making sure to perform the necessary divination for the issue in time.

Shortly after this, Y starts talking about his life. He was born in Momostenango, but eventually left for the capital, where he became a merchant; however, the high crime-rate and extorsions there became a huge burden to his business. His fondness for drinking only made things worse. Eventually, in his own words, he “lost everything”. Desperate, he consulted with the *ajq’ijab’*, who told him his sufferings were the result of an unanswered call from the Mundo, since he had the gift of the blood, a gift “not for himself, but for others”. He explains that the “speaking of the blood” guides his acts; in fact, the reason he accepted to talk to me was that “the blood told him I had a true interest” in his craft. However, he himself was not initiated within his own patrilineage or at a group of *ajq’ijab’* related to it: he had to go to the coast, the proverbial place of sorcery, Samayac being the “capital” of witchcraft in Guatemala. I will later elaborate on why the K’iche’ strongly associate sorcery with both volcanic and coastal regions; from now, it will suffice to say that, in a way, Y resembles his own patron saint, Maximon, for he is a merchant too, and he “buys and sells souls” to him.

“It is the work of the *mundo*. His work (is) money, money. And he kills too. If you don’t feed him, he kills, if there are no candles, he kills. He wants his spiritual food. He gives money, but also misfortunes. This saint... is a buyer

and a seller. You know, who sold the lord? Who did it? Simón Judas. He received some money, the silver of the Jews. But he regretted it. He took the money, but he said: "I don't want it anymore". "A sale is a sale", said the Jews. He went to kill God, he went to kill Jesus. Buyer and seller, oh ancestors. This saint... people say he is wicked, but he is not. He is a mirror, an example. God abandoned him. He does miracles, because God forsook him.<sup>11</sup>

Maximon here is presented essentially a merchant, just like Y. His power is conceived in a catholic way, as a *speculum*, an *exemplum* of his fallen condition: he is powerful, he can sell souls, because he sold God himself. However, he also bears some of the characteristics of other K'iche' deities: he hungers for offerings, and he brings death to those who don't feed him. Two days belong to him above all: Kame, the day of death, and Tzikin, the day of wealth.

However, Y acknowledges that Maximon, as a 'catholic' saint, is "recent". He says that the religions in Momostenango are like *tzite'* seeds, as he takes some seeds from his divining bundle, placing them over the table. Protestants (*ri evangelio*) and Mormons are like fresh or 'green' seeds (*raxa tzite'*), immature, just recently arrived (corresponding to the altar hierarchy mentioned above). Catholicism is like the red seeds (*kaqa tzite'*), older, more powerful, stronger. Finally, the "quemadero" (*porob'al*) religion, the altars, is "the oldest, the most powerful": it is like the black beans (*q'eqa tzite'*), as if they were charred by fire. "They are the ancient things, the things that are like stone". He begins talking about the use of the calendar in order to attack, hurt and kill. He brings out a calendar and start making me read the names of the days aloud. First, Ajpu,

symbolic of the dead. He says: “I burn in the cemetery, where the dead belong. The *komon*”. In Momostenango there’s a native altar in the cemetery, not far away from where the oldest church in town also stands, the *Iglesia del Calvario* (Figure 34). Appropriately, the altar is often called *kalwar*, but is also simply called *komon* (from the Spanish *común*, that is the common grave).



34. The *komon* altar during the day of the dead celebration, 2017.

At that place lives *ajaw kalwar*, the lord of the dead, which is also the patron of the day Ajpu, the twentieth day of the Maya calendar, as we have seen in the chapter about calendrics. Kame is death itself, but Ajpu is the lord of the dead, and is considered to signify the divinized ancestors in divination. “I go to the cemetery to call the dead before my enemy, so he sees the dead in the night, so he is frightened”, and thus, ends up joining them. Another day for witchcraft is Kan (snake)<sup>12</sup>. Kan is used to ask for accidents, inflicting wounds, giving bad luck,

like the one that the man who crashed in Guatemala suffered. Kame (death) is to ask for killing “that his dog, his business, his animals or him may die”:

That day is a *nawal*, it is strong, a snake can arise from it, to bite. Let’s say a *tuk tuk* hits me. I then go to the cemetery, and call Ajaw Kan. Oh, dead one, know that a person hit me in the street, I know him, know where he is, but Mundo, you know where you son is.

Lord Kan, take revenge. Lord one Kan, two Kan, three Kan... thirteen days. That the snake may rise tomorrow. He hit me, he robbed me, Lord Kan, arise. I don’t burn only one day, but thirteen or nine days, and the snake will appear to him in the street. I summon the snake, a spiritual one, and it goes through the air (he gestures the snake rising from his magic book). Let’s say he is lying on his bed. He sees the snake in the night. He is frightened: the illness comes, cold and hot come to him. He steps on his grave (laughs).<sup>13</sup>

The appearance of animals as bringers of misfortune and death (*lab’aj*, ‘omens’) is not uncommon in K’iche’ witchcraft, and sometimes is considered as an attack of the *win* spirits. In this case, however, this sorcery is not conceived as a transformation of sorts (as in other stories, where the sorcerer becomes the *win*), but more as the sending of the underworld spirits to terrorize a rival. These *win* spirits are identified with the souls of the dead in Y’s conception. According to him, 9 or 13 days of burning offerings in the day Iq’ are needed to call the *xoch*, the owl of the underworld, a powerful *win*:

If there is a bad person, we do 9, 13 days of work, then we make the animal rise against him. The animal will arrive, the owl, to call for him at night, at one o'clock in the morning (Y then hoots like a screecher owl). It arrives (saying): may this son of a bitch die! He then departs for the graveyard, the call come from there, you must raise the dead, for those animals are the souls of the dead.<sup>14</sup>

We review other days of the calendar together, although not all of them have uses in sorcery. The day Kiej ('deer') is used to call the "deer of the underworld" against an enemy. Garrett Cook (2013: 115) gathered some testimonies regarding this creature, which is also the *nawal* or soul of some altars and a protector of game: it is a huge and unnatural deer, sometimes with four eyes. For many of my informants, its appearance spells certain doom:

"Deer of the underworld, it is terrible, it is a son of a bitch. A son of a bitch. If you find that animal, you are dead, before God and the earth you are dead, if you cross him, it's not good luck, if you receive him, you will go to the graveyard, to rest".<sup>15</sup>

Finally, Y finished his exposition on sorcery with some information regarding the role of the "speaking of the blood" in it. He told me that in order to find the victim, he had to divine his location through his blood. As I have explained elsewhere, the blood of the *ajq'ij* is somewhat of a microcosm for it contains the things that are at the Mundo. The location of a person can be divined in that way too,



although Y wasn't willing to abound into more details. He said that, in order to send the dead or the animals of the underworld to his enemies, he had to 'see' where they are. In a way, it is as if the underworld powers travel guided by his own blood. This fact fuels some geographic interest in him. During our conversation, he started asking me about faraway countries where his clients lived, like the US and Spain, showing me a map and urging me to pinpoint the location of towns. He took out a photo decked in the pages of an old, western-occultist grimoire<sup>16</sup>, and showed me the image of a young Guatemalan lady, clad in her huipil and skirt before the Plaza Cibeles in Madrid. He explains she's a client of his. He then indicated me to pinpoint Spain in the map included in his old appointment book. He looked pleased, as if now he knew where to find his next victim, perhaps an enemy of this lady.

Finally, Y received another call, an urgent one, although I couldn't make out the subject of it that time. He had to leave at once: we exited the altar room, and we parted that day. After such a revealing exchange, Y became wary. He was still polite to me, and often I would come to find him, sometimes buying food in the market with his grandchildren, sometimes burning offerings at different altars in the town, especially at the Pujal Santiago Altar. Even one of his sons, all grown up, is a *tuk tuk* driver in Momostenango, and I spoke to him once or twice (not about sorcery, of course). But Y wouldn't ever talk again about his otherworldly business. "No, I'm too busy", he usually would usually say, differing potential interviews through a whole year, until I gave up. Perhaps persuaded by his blood, which guided him in so many different affairs, the sorcerer decided to hide his craft from unwanted eyes once more.

With this last testimony, we can start working out the interesting exchange of gazes and agencies that sorcery implies. While Y is not a person who initiates witchcraft himself, he certainly punishes people through witchcraft in behest of his clients. In his testimony, he didn't only outline some of the calendric practices in witchcraft, but also made me visualize how he attacks wrongdoers and initiators of witchcraft. Thus, witchcraft is defined, on his side of things, through a series of practices: the identification of a victim, the performing of ceremonies at appropriate calendrical occasions in the graveyard, the invocation of the wild *win* spirits or the souls of the dead to summon, the finding of an enemy through the 'blood-speak' and sending the spirit against him. He has a patron, like other sorcerers do. A cosmology sustains his practice, quite similar to that presented in X's testimony. However, besides these details, the interesting thing is the emphasis on the encounter of the gaze of his enemy with his servant spirits: "I go to the cemetery to call the dead before my enemy, so he sees the dead in the night, so he is frightened"; "The snake will appear to him in the street. I summon the snake, a spiritual one, and it goes through the air." This encounter also implies some sort of temporal dimension to it, for the illness and death only comes after it: "Let's say he is lying on his bed. He sees the snake in the night. He is frightened: the illness comes (...) He steps on his grave." Yes, the man sees the snake spirit or the dead somewhere, but then he starts seeing them at other places, getting sick, etc. Thus, the initial moment, the gaze on the unnerving, the dazzling, is needed, as well as a development to it, a temporal dimension when the sorcery as a series of "attacks" starts to develop.

Furthermore, the irruption of the call of the man at the beginning of my interview can give us an almost synchronic image of the extended causality of

sorcery, that which Evan's Pritchard evokes with his account on the emergence of *why* questions in witchcraft. Basically, the victim commits an offense or is simply hated by someone, and then the sorcerer makes his working, perhaps in behest of a client, or even of himself, as Y explained. Then, in the sorcerer's point of view, he sends a spirit to attack his victim. This spirit is then "seen" by the victim, perhaps in a direct way (as it happened to X and the witch) or in an indirect fashion, for he only sees its effect: an accident, bad luck or social failure. What I consider crucial is to consider how the intentions of the sorcerer and the perception of the victim regarding causality somehow 'collide', perhaps a way akin to the idea of 'collision of paths' worked out by Holbraad in regards to Afrocuban divination (2012: 224-233). But for now, let's leave this only as an indication. For now, I will present a final, briefer account of two other cases of sorcery, which can further consolidate the idea of a complex set of intentions and agencies within the 'weird causality' of witchcraft.

#### **4.5. Some cases of sorcery**

The testimonies presented until this point are those of ritual specialists, people acquainted with the real workings of witchcraft from the point of view of the sorcerer or the counter sorcerer. They present us with a deep context, but this context is perhaps detached from the point of view of a victim, an unsuspecting person that becomes involved in the machinations of sorcery. Thus, to finish the ethnographic part of this chapter I want to introduce the testimonies of an informant who, while himself was not a victim of sorcery, presented me with some cases of it which were famous in town or happened to some of his friends,

which can serve to present that other aspect of sorcery that I have ignored until this point.

The first example is rather simple, but it is from a person that my informant, Z, knew personally. A friend of Z was a successful musician. This person once told Z that some people resented his success, and eventually he got very sick. He didn't know why, and he couldn't find a cure nor treatment for his illness. Later, at some point, he realized his illness was caused by sorcery. Indeed, the friend of Z started seeing a cat-like *win* spirit at his home every night, sometimes over his bed or even inside his sheets, which left him terrified each time. He said his illness ended when he took the cat by his head and fought with it, and the cat dissolved into the darkness, ending the sorcery. While a simple case, this testimony is useful to see the presence of an offensive spirit from the gaze of the victim.

Another testimony of Z proves that sometimes sorcery is seen as an acceptable measure to punish physical transgressions and undesirable people, and in such occasions, it is silently approved. Such was the case of D and J, a pair of violent criminals. D was an ex-prison guard turned robber and thief; he was also a sexual offender. J was his accomplice. According to a story that was famous in town, one day they both robbed someone's home: they forced the door open with an axe and proceeded to loot the place, killing the dogs of the family. The only witness of their actions was the daughter of the owner of the house. Luckily, she could hide and later identified the two men. The story in town was that the family members went with an *ajitz*, who did a working at a *porob'al* altar one night, where he performed an act of sorcery as a punishment against the robbers. The *ajitz* burned offerings, and while doing so, he took out a chicken, and started

turning its head round, torturing it slowly and finally killing it. “D, he died in pain”, as Z explained, “he screamed in his bed for help, for he felt his head was being turned. He felt his neck twisting. J appeared dead in the pig abattoir at his home. He had his head sided, and his body was bitten by animals. That is the working with the chicken at the *porob'al*”.

Of course, there is much to say in the ethnological level about this story. Fowl being used as substitutes of the person during ceremonies related to sorcery has already been reported by Ruth Bunzel in Chichicastenango. Bunzel mentions that one such ceremony was the “change” or substitution (in K'iche', *k'exwachixik*) of the person, in which a fowl was offered to the underworld powers as a substitute for the victim, in order to cure it; this kind of ceremony was performed secretly, at night, in the cemetery. She noted that that protection ceremony is identical to sorcery ceremonies, but in reverse (1952: 296-297), mentioning the possible influence of Hispanic witchcraft on this kind of rituals; however, the usage of a chicken as a substitute of the person is reported among the Tzotzil of Zinacantan by Vogt ([1976] 1993: 91-93), where they are called *k'exoliletik* (“replacements”, note the root *k'ex*, which also occurs in K'iche'); these chicken are sacrificed so the ancestral gods take their lives instead of that of the patient. This coincides with contemporary beliefs regarding the “bird of the heart” (*mutil kot'anik*) among the Tzeltal (Figuerola Pujol 2010: 43); in Momostenango, as we have explained prior to this chapter, the soul or heart (*k'ux*) of the person is seen as a “chicken” inside the corral of the Santo Mundo, ready to be devoured by the underworld forces when it is left unprotected, so the substitution of the person by fowl is only natural: the special sadism of the details (these chicken being tortured during witchcraft rituals at the *porob'al* is also

mentioned by other witnesses) follows from this identification. In fact, in an explicit way, my informant told me that it was only fair that those men had to be punished like that, since they themselves had behaved like beasts of prey when they killed the dogs and robbed the family, so the reversal of roles (becoming a sort of prey themselves) was only natural. Z then explained that all perceived acts of retribution for a transgression (not only magical) are called in Momostenango *ujolom tz'i'*, "his dog-head". The meaning of this image is glossed as an unpleasant form of 'payment' (like throwing the head of a dog at someone's feet), but it also alludes to being bitten by it. *Xa ujolom tz'i'* (it is merely his dog head) was what people said of D when he died. In any case, this story presents us with sorcery as an acceptable punishment, but also it places it within a cosmological circuit similar to those described in this thesis: the inner soul of the person is tortured and destroyed by placing an image of itself, a chicken, into the space which contains it, a sacred altar; thus, this act of magic, which could be superficially characterized as 'sympathetic' in Frazer's famous categorization ([1922]1996: 11), can be better described as a case of cosmological inclusion, as other cases analysed in this thesis.

The last example is a typical case of witchcraft which happened to a family well known of Z. The story came up during a conversation about how one of the ways to know a good *chuchqajaw* is the fact that he will accept your money only after his rituals have worked; thus, Z recalled a successful counter-witchcraft working made in behalf of an acquaintance of his:

Don Diego was a man whose son was called Martín and whose daughter called Carmen. His daughter was married with Santiago. The sister of

Santiago, Paula, was the wife of Martin, so they were all family. So, we have Santiago and Martín; the sister of Martín is the wife of Santiago and the sister of Santiago is Martín's wife. They lived in the southern coast.

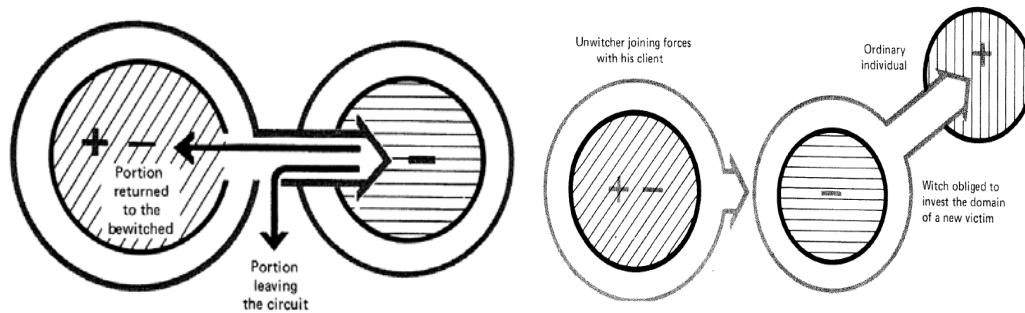
One day, Martín surprised Paula with another man and repudiated her. "Get away from my home", and they've got separated. After some while, this person, Paula's lover (draws him on the board) made witchcraft, made a working against Martín. And Martin was in bed until almost dying. Then don Diego went to the coast in behalf of his son Martín to visit a very famous *chuchqajaw* in order to help him, to save him. And he found the man, and the man denied it (being capable of undoing the working), and he asked: "Why are you here? Who told you I knew how to do it? Well, I'll do the working, you will buy two quarters of alcohol." And he took him to a ceiba (*anub'*) in his lands; when he arrived there, he carved a face on the ceiba with his machete, fashioning the figure of a face, probably like this (he draws it). In the mouth he carved, he gave it some alcohol to drink, he poured some alcohol, and then with a whip he hit the ceiba and told it "do a good working". And after that, don Diego asked: "how much?" and the *chuchqajaw* replied "no, you don't have to pay me, only until your son is cured, then you will pay me". Don Diego went through a lot to find the place, he had to cross a big river, had to take his pants off to cross it. And he said: go, if your son is alive at midnight, he is saved. And don Diego returned, and precisely at midnight Martín reacted. And he lives to this day. But eventually, Santiago, Diego's son-in-law, asked: "Who cured Martín? My sister is ill, she is grave. And so, Santiago went to the coast, with the same person. But the sorcerer said: you are

late. Your sister is dead, you don't need to do any working. Go, maybe you will see her one last time. But when he arrived, she was dead. Because the situation was that, when don Diego arrived with that person, he did the working, but the working cannot be undone, it can only be transferred to another person. When Martín's health arrived, that evil was sent to Paula's lover, for the man who made the working with the ceiba, transferred the illness to the lover. He freed Martín, but sent the same thing to the lover. The lover felt the arrival of the illness, and immediately sent it to Paula, and when Paula was grave, don Santiago asked don Diego about what he did for her to be saved. Don Santiago went in search of the man, but it was too late...<sup>17</sup>

This case presents many interesting details. The story shows a similar dynamic of witchcraft to that presented by Favret-Saada (1980), who speaks of sorcery as a malevolent sort of 'force' that cannot really be eliminated, but only sent back to its original sender (in this case, Paula's lover) by another ritual specialist, an 'unwitcher' of sorts (the *chuchqajaw* in the coast); however, this force can be further deflected by the original sorcerer to someone weaker but related to him (the return of the curse to Paula). As we have seen, in his testimony Z insists in this essential characteristic of sorcery, that is, that "the working cannot be undone, it can only be transferred to another person". This case presents us with the full image of the circuit of witchcraft, in a way, one which finalizes with successful counter-sorcery. Thus, counter-sorcery is actually a deflection of the actions of an attacker towards himself, but it could also be seen as restoring a certain agency to the victim through a third party, the counter sorcerer. Thus, the



classic scheme proposed by Jeanne Favret-Saada is perfectly valid in this case (Figure 35).



35. Favret-Saada's scheme on 'unwitching', or the return of sorcery to an attacker, and its further deflection to another individual (1980: 219, 221).

This last story can serve as a conclusion and a counterpoint to the first image of this chapter presented in this chapter, that is, the image of a vague threat of supernatural harm. What counter-sorcery does is precisely to reinvest the victim with agency, with the power to return harm, but in a legitimate context of self-defense. However, what made the story curious for Z and worthy of recalling was not only this idea, nor the details regarding rituals of counter sorcery (like the flogging of the ceiba), but also the fact that, given that all the participants were closely related, in the end the victim destroyed his own wife by getting himself rid of sorcery, thus, in a way, never truly getting rid of its insidious power.

#### 4.6. Discussion: Witchcraft as a usurpation of causality

The different testimonies in this chapter seem somewhat disjointed; after all, I couldn't produce out of my field material a consistent ethnography of witchcraft, as the ones that characterize the works mentioned in my introduction (Favret-

Saada 1980; Kapferer 2003; West 2005). However, I believe that, despite this setback, a certain contribution to the topic can be made by comparing all the testimonies presented in this chapter as describing different facets of the same phenomenon from the point of view of a ritual specialist (X), a practitioner (Y) as well as victims (the man on the phone) and those acquainted with victims (Z).

The testimony of X talks about an asymmetry of power, the contrast between the assertion “I can harm you” versus the other assertion, “You can do nothing to me”. Thus, it implies a logic of attack, but also a hierarchy of causation: the sorcerer can influence the victim, but not the opposite, at least at first. The testimony of Y describes *how* this attack occurs: the sorcerer goes, does his ritual work, which is abetted by powerful cosmological patrons and other spirits, and then a person “finds” the spirit in the form of any accident or happening. Now, the impromptu call of the man in the testimony of Y is of great importance, because he exemplifies how victims perceive sorcery, or more precisely, how the idea of sorcery arises in the eyes of the victim. The man had an accident, and suddenly he thought to himself that the accident was not naturally caused, but caused by sorcery. Now, I want to delve into this point a bit more in a theoretical fashion.

Of course, the episode of the man having an accident and immediately thinking about witchcraft as the real cause behind it is rather similar to the famous account of Zande sorcery by Evans Pritchard (1976: 22), alluded to in the introduction to this chapter. As I mentioned, recently Martin Holbraad suggested a way to analyse Pritchard’s insight in terms of ‘how’ versus ‘why’ questions or logics (cfr. 2020). In the case of the Zande man, the question was not “how” the roof of the beer-hut caught flame, by “why”. Thus, the ‘how’ is the causal chain of

events that happened, by the 'why' is something different. Holbraad characterizes this as a contrast between causal and non-causal interactions, and relates this to his proposal regarding colliding trajectories of motions in Afro-Cuban divination:

The chains of causation that how-questions rely on start with discrete events (this happened, that happened, and so on) and then set them into motion by connecting them sequentially, like a cascade of dominoes. Inversely, the non-causal intersections that why-questions involve begin with vectors of motion from which a discrete event is derived, by way of collision. In short, the 'how' starts with discrete events and ends up with moving trajectories, while the 'why' starts with trajectories of motion and ends up with discrete events (Holbraad 2020: 15).

Now, while I agree with Holbraad's analysis of Pritchard and the general sense of the dichotomy, I see things in my own ethnographic case a bit differently. The sorcerer will say something akin to this: "The *why* is nothing else but my actions. I did it. The accident or misfortune that befell you was my doing. I sent a snake flying through the air, and it met my victim, and it harmed it. It is my power." Of course, this doesn't make sense to us: how is this caused by you? But in a way, this assertion is similar to many other assertions throughout this thesis: it is not only people who 'do things', but gods or cosmological entities.

What I can propose for now is this. Sorcery is very similar to other cases of cosmological causation presented in this thesis, that is, causation as perceived as flowing from the 'above' of cosmology, rather than from the normal sequence of cause and events that characterize our world. However, it is also similar in the

dilemma that, as we have seen, in many times cosmological events are actually caused by people and their ritual actions, rather than by gods. It is not my purpose to offer my solution to this dilemma now, for this is the actual purpose of the whole thesis, but for now, I can advance this. What we see is that, in witchcraft, the sorcerer is like a *usurper* of causality. People experience misfortunes, many times in an actual sequence, and instead of attributing them to the 'how' of normal causation, they attribute it to the 'why' of sorcery. My argument, however, is that this is still a form of causation, but it is a sort of 'hijacked' causation, or more exactly, a 'downward causation' from the sorcerer to the victim, rather than the normal sort of cosmological causation that characterizes daily life. This is why the idea of asymmetry in the first testimony is so important. The relationship between the sentences "I can harm you" and "You can do nothing to me" is the essence of sorcery, at least in its initial encounters. It is also important to see the contrast between the 'observed' and the 'observer' in it. Just as X reversed his condition of being a mere 'object' of the ethnographic gaze and became the subject of another more powerful counter-gaze, in sorcery the normal flow of things is reversed by a more powerful level of causality which assumes direct responsibility over some of the happenings of my life. Thus, what I argue is that these happenings are not "non-causal" in nature, but are re-transformed into being caused in terms of a superior instance which from now on redirects them or constrain them according to its needs.<sup>18</sup>

Returning to the collection of testimonies, of course witchcraft doesn't end here. Indeed, the sorcerer can cause me harm in a way that I cannot 'act' back in a normal way, as it is possible in any other social interaction. What I need to do is what the people in Z's testimony did: perform counter-sorcery, or 'act' in the

same way that a sorcerer acts. This is a restoration of 'causal' powers to the victim, a re-investment with agency. Of course, according to the laws of sorcery, death is always the final consequence: the 'working' either returns to the sender, or 'bounces back' into his beloved ones, as in the story of Martin, Paula and the lover. Thus, the victim 'fights back', but it is curious how, in some cases, the action can even start affecting someone who is in the level beneath that of the sorcerer and the counter-sorcerer. Again, what I consider is that sorcery can be conceived as a hierarchical layering of causality, rather than a negation, that is, the emergence of a malicious causal agent who is in a relationship of hierarchical superiority to that of the victim, and exerts 'downward causation' towards it, usurping the usual flow of cosmologic causation. But with the fighting back of the victim, things get even again, and the circuit of sorcery is closed, perhaps with deadly results.

Now that I have (at least partially) shown how sorcery can be understood in the theoretical terms that I propose for this thesis, we can proceed with the final two chapters, which deal with things that are more familiar to us: political activism, and historical memory. The point of these two last chapter is to show how both political and historical action in Momostenango are cosmological, rather than just social, but in a way that individuals (in the case of politics) and the community itself (in the case of history) are empowered by mechanisms that are similar to those presented during this thesis.

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## Notes

1 Cleverly, West notices that all anthropological theorizations can indeed be seen as ethnographic sorceries themselves (2007: 83)

2 “It is worth remarking, however, that special knowledge which inheres, say, in theological or scientific expertise, has never held quite the place in anthropological accounts as materials which appear esoteric *because* they require revealing (beg immediate interpretation). An initial surprise becomes a suspension, a dazzle, and some kinds of 'special knowledge' are more likely to dazzle than others. One is held, as it were, on the threshold of understanding. I referred to having been mesmerised” (Strathern 1999: 10-11).

3 The *win* is a spirit, either that of an animal or a dead person, which is used by K'iche' sorcerers in order to harm their victims. In some versions, as the testimony of the sorcerer in this chapter, this spirit is merely summoned or asked from a *dueño* or patron. In other versions, the win is a transformation of the sorcerer's soul itself, which “flies out” of the sorcerer's mouth after performing some ceremonies and doing nine backward somersaults. In those versions, the sorcerer himself is disguised as a *win*; thus, the word *win* denotes both the sorcerer and the spirit (cfr. Zamora Corona 2019: 124-129).

4 The seventeenth day of the K'iche' calendar. The word in K'iche' means “thought”, but the meaning in both the Aztec and the ancient Maya versions were related to the earth: the Aztec equivalent was *olin*, “earthquake”, and the Maya *kaban*, *k'aab'* meaning “earth”.

5 Similar legends exist among the Tzeltal Maya of Chiapas, where certain mountains and places of sorcery exist, where people can sell souls to the lords of the mountains or *dueños* so they become indentured servants of the *dueños*, looking for their animals (Pitarch 1996: 49).

<sup>6</sup> *Mi abuela dice que vienen de la costa, desde cinco de la mañana, entraban en la mañana por el volcán de Santa María aquí por Xela. Mi abuela decía: lloraba yo, por el miedo. Yo no dormía, por el miedo, la gente en el volcán que gritaba ayuda, estaban cansados, unos dicen nos estamos quemando, otros dicen cómo pesan las piedras, otros dicen, nos estamos cansando sosteniendo el volcán, otros sólo se reían, se escuchaban los llantos de recién nacidos, de ancianos, se oyen los sonidos animales, los animales de la montaña, se veían culebrones, se escuchaba que hablaba: sácanos. Si sonase cualquier animal, no lo traigan, si ustedes traen algún animal, ese animal se hace una piedra, se forma luego...*

*La gente que llora en el volcán son la gente vendida al mal, sacaban dinero de la Tierra, van a pedir, el volcán da dinero, el volcán da de todo, a veces el volcán les dice no, no quiero gente grande, yo quiero un tu hijo, la gente le dan lo que desean, al nacer llevan y lo sacrifican, su ánima se queda allí. Ésta es la gente que ataja el fuego, la piedra, por eso el volcán nunca va a caer. Cuánta gente que ha pasado, está sosteniendo eso, el volcán tenga por seguro, jamás se va a desatar. Dice mi abuela: cada rugido del volcán es un ánima que llega para él. Ésa es la historia de lo que relataba mi abuela.*

<sup>7</sup> *Esos que matan animales son vendidos al volcán, eso hacen ellos, con tal de que ellos no van, porque les dicen: venís tú, yo no quiero venir pero te traigo comida siempre, les van a decir: quiero carne de paloma, tienen que conseguir paloma blanca o negra, ahorita quiero una oveja negra, tienen que venir a buscar, pagar lo que vale, consiguen, un toro, aquí está el toro, con tal de que ellos no van, están vendidos, pero no al cien, porque están dando de comer. Ellos alimentan a la tierra por el mal, para obtener para ellos, por eso ponen la vida de los animalitos o la gente, pero no la de ellos. Sí. Eso son los que tienen quemadero de la cruz de las dos*

*manos, la mesa del Santo Mundo. Esos queman ahí, pero no todos, sólo los vendidos. Ahí se habla directo, eso se ve mucho en el volcán de Santa María por Xela. En el quemadero ese del Juan No'j. Hay que llevar fruta, verdura, caldo de res, pollones por cada entrada, es ahí donde, si son afortunados y desaparece la comida, seguro van a ser ricos. Se venden. Tienen que ir constantemente a dejarles comida, ir a pedirles ellos mismos, que otro se va a vender con tal que les ayude, entre más bastante son, poco peso, una enfermedad.*

*Si te vas al mar, en el mar hay quemaderos, si ustedes van allí, el mar les va a dar, pero se van a quedar para atajar el agua, cuando hay temblores, es porque mucha gente está encadenada en el mar. Ya están vendidos. Ésa es la historia del llegar a querer a ser algo de la noche a la mañana. El dios de la tierra, ahí está su contraparte, es el mal. Cómo se compiten, podría decirle, está el volcán, está el agua, es como para ganar más gente. Dan su vida a cambio.*

*La Tierra, se queda en paz, por unos cuantos años, pero sólo hasta que tienen que ir a sacrificar a alguien ahí, no hay necesidad que sea gente. A veces matan palomas, matan ovejas, hasta matan toro, en lugares encantados van. Son la gente que, como decimos nosotros, están vendidos al mal. Porque la tierra da dinero. Ellos van al volcán de Xela u otros, le van a decir: te traemos una persona, o un toro, queremos dinero, dejamos esto a cambio. Tons el mundo les dice: está bien, pero el día que te mueres, te vienes aquí conmigo, les dice: el día que te morís te vas a atajar fuego, piedra. Ellos le dicen: venimos a ayudar con tal cosa, hacen su ceremonia y les aparece muchas cosas.*

<sup>8</sup> *Hay un señor que vivía por acá abajo, hizo su ceremonia allá, y un día le apareció un animalito, lo siguió y había una olla de barro, al llegar a su casa con ella puso su altar en una esquina, empezó a hacer su ceremonia a la par, lo tapó con un manto*



*blanco, cabal a media noche escuchó que empujaban la puerta, al amanecer, cuando vio la olla, lleno de dinero. Agarró el dinero, compró cosas, hizo casas, cuánta cosa no tuvo, hasta peones tenía para la comida. Pero cuando murió, a media noche cabal, sus familiares le abrieron la caja, y había puro hueso de animal, encontraron puro hueso de venado, él se convirtió en un venado, él eligió ser guardián del mundo, él se volvió un venado, fue a cuidar al volcán, por eso mucha gente quiere cazar animales, pero no pueden, porque esos animales son ánimas de personas, se desaparecen, cuidan el lugar.*

9 In K'iche': *Re' nantat ri ma k'ota kachachike, ri ke' numik, re' sachinak*

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the win is also called *ch'ekenel*, "the victorious, he who wins people over", a term which is related to the hunting term *ch'ekenik*, "to win", to catch a prey. When the *win* kills someone, it is said *xax ch'ekik*, "he was won", or *xuch'eko*, "he was won, killed".

<sup>11</sup> *Éste es su trabajo del mundo. Su trabajo de él, dinero, dinero. Y también él mata. Si no le dan comida, mata, si no hay veladora, mata. Quiere su comida espiritual. Da dinero, y da accidente. Este santo, comprador y vendedor. ¿Usted sabe? Bien, ¿quién vendió al señor Jesucristo? ¿quién vendió? Simón Judas. Recibió un par de billete, la plata de los judíos. Pero se arrepintió. Agarró el dinero, pero dijo "yo ya no quiero el dinero". "Vendido es vendido", dicen los judíos. A Dios, fue a matar a Jesucristo. Comprador y vendedor, abuelos. Ese santo... más que todo mucha gente dice, es malo, pero no es malo. Sino que es como un espejo, es un ejemplo. Dios lo dejó. Es santo, tiene milagro, porque dios lo abandonó.*

<sup>12</sup> Kan doesn't mean "snake" in current-day K'iche'; the word is *kumatz*; however, the meaning of the day was known to be related to snakes among the Ixil, according to Lincoln (1942).

13 *Ese día es nawal, es tremendo, se puede alzar la culebra, para morder. Hay un tuc tuc allá, me pega, está bueno. Tons yo me voy al cementerio, voy a llamar al ajaw kan. Sabé señor muerto, una persona me pegó en la calle, la conozco yo, sé de dónde viene, pero Mundo, usted sabe dónde viene su hijo. Ajaw Kan, vénguese. Ajaw Jun Kan, Kieb' Kan, Oxib' Kan... 13 días. Qué se levante la culebra mañana. Me pegó o me robó en la calle, Ajaw Kan, levántese, pero no sólo un día voy a quemar, sino 13 días, 9 días, y cabal esa culebra se le aparece en la calle. Llamo a la culebra, espiritual, no se mira en vivo, sino al aire se va. Está acostado en su cama... mira la culebra en la noche. Usted se asustó, pego la enfermedad, viene frío, viene calor. Cementerio pisado (risa).*

14 *Si hay una mala persona hacemos 9 días de trabajo, 13 días de trabajo, entonces hacemos que se levante el animal contra él. Este animal va a llegar, el tecolote, a llamar en la noche, a la una de la mañana (imita al tecolote). Llegó, qué se muera este hijo de puta. Ya se va pal cementerio, ya llegó el aviso, porque tienes que levantar a los muertos, son espíritus de los muertos ese animal.*

15 *“Es tremendo, es un hijo de puta. Hijo de puta. Si usted encuentra este animal, usted se muere, delante de dios, delante de la tierra usted se va a morir, si usted mira este animal, si lo cruza, no es buena suerte, si usted lo recibe, usted se va al cementerio a descansar. This testimony is interesting, for it somewhat corresponds to X's information that the deer of the underworld are the souls of dead sorcerers; XX only would insist that it is the soul of a dead man.*

<sup>16</sup> *The book, of a rather lengthy title, was *La Magia Blanca Secreta y Adivinatoria para aprender las Ciencias no descubiertas con importantes secretos sacados del sabio Alberto el Grande nunca hasta hoy publicado, seguido del arte nuevo de echar las cartas y de la baraja española y completado con una colección de secretos de**

física y química por los célebres tratadistas de Magia Spurzheim y Zimmermann. It was the Mexican edition of it, by Editorial Saturno, with no date.

<sup>17</sup> *Don Diego se llamaba un señor, y tiene su hijo que se llama Martín y una hija que se llama Carmen. La hija de don Diego está casada con Santiago. Entonces, la hermana de Santiago es la esposa de Martín, son familiares. Está aquí Martín, está aquí Santiago, entonces, la hermana de Martín es la esposa de Santiago, y la hermana de Santiago es la esposa de Martín, son cuñados por doble razón. La esposa de Martín es Paula. Paula es su esposa. Ellos vivían en la costa sur. De pronto, Martín sorprendió a Paula con otro hombre y la repudió. "Vete de mi casa", se separaron. Luego de un tiempo, esta persona, el amante de Paula, hizo una brujería, un trabajo a Martín. Y Martín estuvo en cama hasta casi morir. Entonces Don Diego fue, por su hijo Martín, se fue a la costa, a visitar a un chuchqajaw muy famoso, por ayudarlo, por salvarlo. Y él fue a encontrar al hombre, y le dijo todavía, el negó, le preguntó: por qué me vienes a buscar, ¿quién te dijo que yo sé? Bueno, voy a hacer el trabajo, me vas a conseguir dos octavos de alcohol, y lo llevó a una ceiba (anub') en el terreno del señor de la costa, y al llegar ahí hizo una cara en la corteza con su machete, hizo una figura de una cara, posiblemente así (la dibuja). En la boca que hizo, el alcohol le dió para que tomara, lo regó el alcohol aquí, y luego con un chicote dizque lo golpeó y le dijo "haz un buen trabajo". Entonces, después de eso, don Diego le preguntó ¿cuánto? Y le dijo "no, no me tienes que pagar hasta que esté sano tu hijo, hasta entonces me pagas". Le costó a Don Diego llegar, tuvo que pasar un río grande, me dijo que se sacó su pantalón para cruzar el río hasta donde está este hombre. Y le dijo: ve, si tu hijo está vivo a media noche es porque ya se salvó. Y regresó don Diego, y justamente don Martín a media noche reaccionó. Y él ahora vive, Martín. Entonces el mismo Santiago, que es yerno de don Diego, le preguntó,*

*¿quién curó a Martín? La hermana de Santiago está muy grave, está muy enferma. Entonces, don Santiago fue a la costa con la misma persona. Pero el brujo le dijo: viniste muy tarde. Tu hermana está muerta, no necesitamos hacer ningún trabajo. Ve, tal vez alcances a verla. Y cuando regresó, ya había muerto... Porque la situación, cuando don Diego llegó con esta persona, le hizo el trabajo, pero el trabajo no se puede eliminar, sólo se puede pasar a otro. Cuando llegó la sanidad de Martín, el mal se lo pasaron a él, porque este hombre que hizo el trabajo con la ceiba, esta enfermedad se la trasladó al amante. Lo liberaron a Martín, pero la misma cosa la mandaron al amante. El amante sintió que llegó la enfermedad, él inmediatamente se la mandó a Paula, y cuando Paula estaba muy grave, don Santiago le pidió a don Diego, qué hiciste para que se salvara. Don Santiago fue a buscar a este hombre, pero ya era muy tarde.*

18 If the reader could excuse the disparate nature of this comparison, it is similar to how the evolution of ants stopped responding to the direct needs of any individual organism, but to the needs of the colony itself in its social division: the base level was hijacked by an emergent entity, that of social organization among living beings. The point is that the normal course of things starts being determined by something that was originally only a part of it, and then suddenly emerged as an agent with causal powers. However, another point must be made. While I would say that from my point of view, 'how' and 'why' are both causal, I think that they are a bit different in regards to how causality acts in each one. Although the testimony of Y was very clear in attributing himself a direct causal agency over misfortune, I believe that in most instances, sorcery doesn't cause things directly, but actually 'constrains' causality to its wishes. Sorcery doesn't really need someone making a ritual each time that the victim feels pain or

perceives misfortune. It just needs that the victim considers that such acts proceed from sorcery each time they happen. Thus, as I will argue in detail in my conclusion, causation here is of perhaps that variety which has been called 'medium downward causation': a constraining influence, rather than a direct causation (cfr. Emmeche, Køppe and Stjernfelt 2000: 24).

## CHAPTER 5.

### The Struggle for the Earth: Indigenous Politics of Resistance Against

#### Extractivism

“They do not consult any medical man; here on the mountains, where people still hold by ancient ways and customs, they go to a wizard. Each tribe, distinguished from the rest by speech and dress, has at least four of these aged wisecracks. By means of charm and spell they drive out all manner of evil spirits, which are supposed to be the cause of all complaints (...) These wizards also exercise some sort of authority, acting as headmen of their villages (...) They keep a careful watch over the mineral treasures of the mountains. It is known, for instance, that there are rich quicksilver deposits, but if any white man attempts to start prospecting, the wizard sends for his satellites, and the expedition never returns. Many things may happen among these mountain ravines which are never brought to light.”

(Prince William of Sweden, *Between Two Continents, Notes from a Journey in Central America*, 1920: 215-216)

#### 1. Introduction

The quote that figures at the head of this chapter was written by Prince Wilhelm, duke of Södermanland, referring to the trip he made to Guatemala and other countries of Central America during the final years of the dictatorship of Manuel Estrada Cabrera, who ruled the country from 1898 to 1920.<sup>1</sup> The anecdote itself doesn't refer to Momostenango, but to the nearby K'iche' town of Almolonga, near Quetzaltenango; however, it shows that the current-day struggle of the Maya peoples of Guatemala against Western extractivism goes a long way in history.<sup>2</sup> The 'wizards' mentioned by Prince Wilhelm are nothing but *ajq'ij* or K'iche' calendrical specialists (like Rudy or Virgilio, or like Marcelino was) who, just as today, held important appointments in the indigenous government of their towns. However, this is not the only continuity that this quote betrays. In fact, just as in the past, the struggle against mining companies is not only grounded in local

politics: it is also grounded in a close relationship between cosmology and power. The passing and thoroughly exoticizing observations of Prince Wilhelm don't explain why the K'iche' people of his day kept watch over the mineral treasures of the mountains, making it sound as if it was, perhaps, only related to the assertion of indigenous control over their own territory. The truth, of course, is more complex, and it has certainly to do with the cosmological engagements described in the first chapters of this work.

This chapter will present the story of one of the most politically engaged and ritually accomplished among my informants: Miguel Ángel Pelicó, a K'iche' activist widely regarded as a strong *ajq'ij* in Momostenango. Miguel Ángel is a member of the Autoridades Ancestrales movement, a movement of revitalization of indigenous political and social practices and resistance against extractivism and other threats to indigenous territories. As I hope to show in this chapter, this kind of activism is not merely neo-Maya in its scope or ideas, as it has been formerly characterized (cfr. Ponciano 2007). Instead, I will show that what this movement has done is to follow the political structures and the cosmological logic extant at the communal or "traditional" level, taking them to a new level where national and global issues can be addressed.

Regarding its theoretical outlook, this chapter will engage with a subject that is currently in vogue in anthropology, that of what been called "cosmopolitics", in the sense of Isabelle Stengers (2010), retaken by Marisol de la Cadena in her work about Runakuni (Quechua) shamans, *Earth Beings* (2015), or, more recently, what has been called "politics of nature" (Rivera Andía and Vindal Ødegaard 2019: 8). Indeed, indigenous struggles against Western extractivism has been considered as a strong starting point for a wider debate on ontology,

politics and ecology (cfr. Rivera Andía and Vindal Ødegaard 2019: 6-13); however, there is no lack of controversy regarding how the complexity favoured by the ontological school sometimes seems to overlook the everyday life groundings of social and ecological practices (Killick 2015: 15). While, in contrast to these criticisms, I wholeheartedly agree that ontological approaches have a potential to create a different kind of politics (Hague 2012) or, even more, that they can be considered as a political aim themselves (Holbraad and Pedersen 2018: 293-297), I also recognize that more ethnographic studies can cast more light on this and other debates (Rivera Andía and Vindal Ødegaard 2019: 10) and that some aspects of indigenous politics of nature have been certainly overlooked in recent ethnography.

Indeed, another kind of criticism can be levelled against some recent examples of ontological approaches, which doesn't completely detract from the general aims of this 'school'. In general, recent ethnographic accounts of indigenous resistance against extractivism emphasize a conflict of ontological differences, presenting the 'cosmopolitical' conflict of Western extractivism vs indigenous "politics of nature"; usually, the outlook is politically pessimistic. In these accounts, in general, the particularity of indigenous ontologies of nature are presented and contrasted with Western extractivism, while the actual trajectories of indigenous agents of resistance are overlooked or just explained away in the terms of "their ontologies" and outlooks on the relationship of nature and culture. However, something that is missing from many of these accounts is precisely how indigenous practices articulate resistance not only in terms of being ontologically opposite to Western extractivist agendas, but in how the ontology that emerges from these practices *empowers* indigenous agents in order



to resist these agendas. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to present a side often overlooked in this story, that of the indigenous practice of power, and furthermore, to present a story of successful indigenous resistance to extractivism. Anticipating my argument, what I will try to show during this chapter is that it is the Earth itself which gives power to indigenous activists in order not only to defend itself, but also to become successful political figures within their communities, or to become 'Earth-beings' themselves, in the terminology of Marison de la Cadena.

## **2. "Autoridades Ancestrales": Neo-Maya Activism and new political structures**

In the first chapter I have presented the reader with two of the main elements of the political structure of Momostenango: that of the communal authorities belonging to hamlets (*cantones*), and that of the municipal authorities. However, that account was incomplete, because it left aside a new form of power that emerged after the signature of the Peace Agreements in 1996: ancestral authorities, a movement that has taken roots among all indigenous groups in Guatemala, not only Maya.<sup>3</sup> The self-described mission of ancestral authorities is the resolution of social and political conflicts according to indigenous tradition (Ariffin-Cabo 2011: 2). Some informants in Momostenango described them to me as "cultural", a correct assessment regarding the origin of their authority, for the basis of their existence is the notion that there is a difference between the fact that a political authority is indigenous, and the fact that this authority is considered "ancestral", that is, "truly motivated" by indigenous tradition (Ariffin-Cabo 2011: 7-8). This assertion seems contradictory when we ponder on the fact

that communal authorities in Momostenango are indeed traditional; however, ancestral authorities tend to reject the system of *alcaldes* and the like as creations of the colonial period (given, among other things, their usage of Spanish Colonial terminology) and instead appeal to a certain notion of indigenous authenticity: thus, the notion of ancestral authority is founded on a conception of power born from ‘nativist’ activism, and, specifically, from the so-called Maya spirituality movement.<sup>4</sup>

Ancestral authorities throughout Guatemala organize themselves in different councils or *consejos* integrated by respected members of indigenous communities that engage in traditional practices and are regarded as “Maya authorities” such as calendric priests (*ajq’ijab’*), indigenous magistrates (*q’atal tzij*) and midwives (*ajkun*), just to quote a few examples of likely candidates (Ariffin-Cabo 2011: 8). In practice, they function exactly like the *pasados* system, that is, one only can become a member by being appointed by other members of these councils. In the case of Momostenango, the relevant organization is the Council of Ancestral Authorities of the 31 Communities of Momostenango (*Consejo de Autoridades Ancestrales de las 31 Comunidades de Momostenango*), a gathering of 160 traditional authorities who gather two or three times a year. Miguel Angel offered me its basic outline, which is very close to the scheme of communal authorities. The Council is integrated by 9 members who are rotated each 2 years. The nine members are as follows:

*Nab’e k’amal b’e* (President)

*Ukab’ k’amal b’e* (Vice President)

*Ajtz’ib’* (Secretary)

*Uk'ab' ajtzib'* (Second secretary)

*Ajpwaq* (Treasurer)

*Ukab' Ajpwaq* (Second treasurer)

*Nab'e Mortom* (Vocal)

*Ukab' Mortom* (Vocal)

*Urox Mortom* (Vocal)

A quick overlook of their functions would be the following: the two presidents (who rotate each half-month just as *principales* in the local level do) are the figureheads of the organization. Their votes count as two in the council. The secretaries are organizers and record keepers and the treasurers are bookkeepers, just as the ones in a communal *alcaldía*. Finally, the *mortom* or stewards are members with a voice in the council and are in charge of minor tasks.

A few words on the conception of power which is at the basis of ancestral authorities movement are needed. An interesting summary of the critiques that this kind of organizations level against other indigenous forms of authority can be found in a document prepared for the German Corporation for International Cooperation (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit*) by Pressia Arifin-Cabo, Deputy Representative for UNICEF:

Current day indigenous *alcaldes* can barely be considered traditional authorities because the appointment of an *alcalde* doesn't occur through traditional procedures. The position of *alcalde* and indigenous *alcalde* were created and imposed by the Spaniards. Indigenous authorities can

be elected by popular vote or by official appointment, while ancestral authorities are elected on the basis of their *nawal* or energy. The conception of authority is concentrated on a person that serves the community and works for it, not on a person that holds power over the community. (Arifin-Cabo 2011: 7).

Thus, ancestral authorities criticize regular indigenous authorities not only on the basis of their colonial historical roots, but also on the basis of a conception of power that is defined as a service to the community, an idea which closely resembles the slogan of an organization like the Mexican EZLN, *mandar obedeciendo* (“ruling by abiding”, cfr. Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional 1994).

Finally, we need to stress that the political mission of these groups goes beyond the solution of conflicts in the basis of an authority which responds to indigenous interests and emanates from indigenous conceptions. At least four specific causes, all which have a great relevance to the agenda of the ancestral authority council in Momostenango, are stated as crucial for them (cfr. SERJUS 2012):

- 1) The defence of indigenous territories (particularly against private extractivist projects which are closely aided by the neoliberal Guatemala state).
- 2) The recognition of indigenous law and jurisprudence
- 3) Demanding more accountability from local authorities
- 4) Proposing alternative, sustainable plans for local development.

As we will see, the first and the third cause are the most immediately relevant for our chapter, especially in the life of Miguel Angel and other leaders; however, Miguel Ángel and other members of the *ancestrales* movement have regularly pushed the rest of the points of the agenda, signing declarations law reforms in Totonicapán with the aim of reappraising native law systems in Guatemala (cfr. Consejo Departamental de Autoridades Ancestrales y Comunitarias 2016).

### **3. Miguel Ángel Pelicó: local authority and activist**

At first, during my fieldwork, I wanted to concentrate on a *costumbrista* family such as the Ramos, but I was also curious about indigenous politics of resistance against multinational mining projects which, as I have mentioned, are a strong subject of conflict in present-day indigenous Guatemala. Before I arrived to the town I already knew that, in 2013, there was a referendum organized in town rejecting mining companies, a huge victory for indigenous territorial rights in Momostenango (Domínguez 2013). However, while also sympathetic to the cause, Virgilio and his family were not really that involved in its organization. Instead, this form of resistance was organized by the Council of Ancestral Authorities, with the help of other indigenous organizations. Thus, I always kept an eye open for the chance of meeting someone involved in these activities.

The opportunity came a few months into my fieldwork, although indirectly at first. An acquaintance of mine, doctor Viktoriya Valikova, a Russian philanthropist and medic who built a clinic near the mountain community of Chwinajtajuyub' (cfr. Sorokina 2017), told once me how, after building her clinic, she hired a calendric priest to consecrate it through an offering-burning

ceremony, a practice that is carried traditionally by the K'iche' in the inauguration of houses and other buildings. She spoke highly and in a sympathetic way about the calendric priest who did, Miguel Ángel Pelicó, and I was interested in meeting him, so she called him and he accepted to meet me. He missed our first appointment at a café, which is usually a very bad sign, for the implicit "appointment etiquette" among *chuchqajaw* is that they sometimes would not refuse a meeting in words but repeatedly fail to appear later. However, later Viktoriya called me and told me that Miguel Angel called her again and was really interested in meeting, so I arranged another meeting with him at his home.

Miguel Ángel's home is at barrio Santa Ana, one of the main wards of Momostenango. He lives right in front of a major public altar in the town, Puja'l Santiago ("the spring of Santiago"), at the western base of the Pak'lom Hill in Momostenango, also called Wukub' Sacramento. It is considered a place of great power (the ceremony described in chapter 3 took place there), being one of the major public altars of the town, and I always saw people burning offerings almost every time I took the road to Miguel Angels' home. Miguel Angels' wife greeted me and conducted me to the family's dining room, where Miguel Angel appeared. A serious looking man in his mid-forties, Miguel Ángel has a certain aura of authority and command (Figure 36). He then tells me that he missed the first appointment because he is an electrician and he had to check electricity meters all around the town, and he had a particularly bad day. In fact, Miguel Angel owns a motorbike, which he skilfully rides through the town, whose mountain roads are particularly steep and a bit treacherous due to lack of maintenance.

Miguel Angel explains that he has to consecrate (*saturar*) a *meb'il* stone (we met on a 10 Tzikin day, a very propitious day to carry such a ceremony), but

he has time to reply to a few questions. Miguel Ángel introduces himself stating his calendric *nawal*: “I am 13 Kiej. People obey me, for that is my *nawal*. When I speak, everyone obeys. This doesn’t happen because of me, nor because of what I am. This is what God wants”. Indeed, in K’iche’ calendrics Kiej is the day related to political power, being one of the days that can be *alcaldes* of the Mundo<sup>5</sup>, and 13 is the highest coefficient in the divinatory calendar, usually implying accumulated force, so it is a very impressive *nawal* to have. Miguel Ángel attributes his domineering nature in his daily life to his *nawal*: “If I tell my son to come home when he is late, he obeys. My *nawal* is commanding, it is strong”. Then, Miguel Ángel proceeded to explain a bit about how he became a calendric priest and a traditional authority.

It all began at the end of the nineties. At the time, he was not a traditional lineage head, nor a calendric priest. He didn’t inherit any *awas* altars. However, he had a “shamanic calling” of sorts. He had bad luck and illness, and he went to a divining priest, who told him that his soul was a prisoner in the underworld. His soul was then freed by him, and Miguel Ángel was given the opportunity to become a calendric priest himself: according to the calendric priest, his illness was precisely the result of him not attending to his call. Therefore, Miguel Ángel sought initiation as a calendric priest, and this opened to him access to the communal authorities of his ward. Thus, he became the traditional *alcalde* of Barrio Santa Ana, one of the main wards of Momostenango. He also became involved in the ancestral authorities movement, and was appointed as the president of a side organization which helps the movement, the Coordinadora de Organizaciones Indígenas de Momostenango (COIMO). According to Miguel Ángel, it all was because of the force of his *nawal*: he said the *pasados* liked him

quite a bit, because of his strong personality. While asked about the relationship between the native calendar, organized in political lines, and himself, Miguel says: “I am an authority: people listen to me, hear me, obey me, for I am a spiritual authority too: I can rescue souls from the jail of the earth gods. I rescue people, for I am a *licenciado* before the Santo Mundo”. Thus, he conceives his position as a calendric priest as a sort of political or bureaucratic dealing with the underworld, which, at the same time, strengthens his position in actual politics.



36. Miguel Ángel Pelicó burning offerings at the calendrical ceremony of Wajxaqib' B'atz' .

Miguel Ángel then abounded in his political vision, which is the one of the ancestral authorities movement. His political cause is “the defence of our territory”. Furthermore, he is engaged in a more nativist view of *costumbrismo*,



rejecting some of its catholic elements. He explains that the memory of the conflict between Acción Católica and *costumbre* is still alive, and he recalls some episodes which happened in the pre-civil war period, where members of Acción Católica would destroy ancestral altars and ritual paraphernalia.<sup>6</sup> He compares these acts with the persecution of native religion during colonial times: “As for ourselves, they burned our legacy, our knowledge. What was the consequence? Many were blinded, became deaf, lost their hands, fell on rivers, under mudslides, the lightning strikes, disgrace came, darkness, our ancestors suffered it, we were enslaved and persecuted.” This rejection even goes to the language he uses in his prayers, a subject on which we will come back: “I only use pure K’iche’. Not a single word of Spanish in it”. He certainly offers cult to the saints, uses crosses and bibles and prays at the main catholic church in Momostenango, but he is careful to emphasize the K’iche’ elements of the ritual over the catholic ones. However, as I will explain later, this purism is not at all rejected or perceived as artificial by *costumbristas*.

Miguel Ángel also relies on the divining power of the “blood-speak” mentioned in chapter 1 to make personal assessments. At one point during our first meeting he even started to divine about my visit (I didn’t ask him to), counting days with his hand and stopping whenever “his blood” told him to: “Aqab’al, a new beginning, the dawn. Tzikin, a fortunate day. Kawok, you will march slowly. Tzikin, good fortune prevails.” Thus, he concluded that our encounter will somehow “bring a new beginning”, and that I would be lucky in my endeavours. While this would seem like a gratuitous detail, I need to stress that many of my interactions with my *ajq’ij* informants were dependant on how they perceived my intentions based on what their blood told them about me.

Sometimes I was lucky, and I was trusted: in fact, I made a lasting friendship with Miguel Angel, who always granted my requests. But at some occasions, I often wondered if a rejection without apparent cause had to do with a negative divination verdict.

At the end of the interview, Miguel Angel opened a huge curtain at the back of his dining room. The curtain separates Miguel Angels altar from it (Figure 1). It is not a stone altar like those of Virgilio and Rudy, but a table with ceremonial implements. Decorations on Virgilio's table altar were sparse, while Miguel Angels' one was more spectacular, with a huge bible, a huge icon of the Mexican Virgen de Guadalupe, an image of Christ, of Saint Michael, as well as K'iche' clay figurines, representing the days of the calendar personified. I will not deal here in detail with Miguel Angel's ceremonial activities, to which I frequently attended. However, I must stress that his prayer style was well liked, for it was not really a neo-Maya style of prayer (which incorporates many New Age fabrications), but more of an old-school style of prayer, mainly based in old expressions in K'iche' and excluding Spanish terms. In fact, many of the ritual addressing forms that I mention throughout my thesis come from his prayers, but their legitimacy is confirmed by the fact that they have been previously recorded in the old ethnographies of Schultze-Jena (1933). When working on their translation, my Protestant friend and K'iche' teacher Abraham praised him vividly: "this is pure K'iche'" (*esto es K'iche' puro*), he said, and then he clarified that his usage was really elegant. Even as a Protestant, Abraham praised the usage of authentic expressions of addressing to the ancestors, and clarified that K'iche' language is considered to have a particular quality to it, *q'aq'al* or "heat", not unlike the notion of *nawal* explained in previous chapters, a sort of description of its

capacity of rhetoric persuasion; in contrast, Spanish is considered to be “cold”, to have a weak *nawal* and thus it is not as useful as sacred speech, even to the point that Protestants favour the recitation of K’iche’ versions of the bible, and even “feel” the *nawal* of K’iche’ language raising as “heat” during prayers. Thus, he recognized that Miguel Angel’s style and language was peculiarly moving while conveying an idea of command and authority, not unlike the idea of *nawal* as the heat-force of someone’s co-essence. He literally said to me about this particular language *are la’ usumil ranima* (this is the deepest recess of our souls), which he translated into Spanish as “*esto es lo más profundo de nosotros*” (Figure 37).



37. Miguel Angel’s altar during a “*saturación*” or consecration/cleansing. The *meb’il* is the crystal placed in front of one of the San Miguel images.

#### **4. Miguel Angels' career as an activist: COIMO and the Ancestral Authority council**

Nowadays, Miguel Angel has mostly ceased being an activist, concerning himself with his private life. This is not out of a loss of conviction in the movement or connection with it, since he regularly attends meetings, but because, by the principle of authority rotation, new people have come to the forefront and also, after his personal victory over the municipal *alcalde's* taxes plans and the collective victory over mining companies concessions, Miguel Angels' two main political objectives were (at least temporally) achieved. Nowadays, the Council of Ancestral Authorities in Momostenango concerns itself with pushing other agendas, like the recognition of indigenous jurisdiction and its sustainable development agenda. Thus, he would usually characterize the situation by saying: "we are sleeping now, but we are always vigilant".

Miguel Angel and I would usually go over his activist career during interviews at his home. His extensive political career began after he became a calendric divining priest. As I've mentioned, at some point he entered into the Communal Authority system, becoming the *alcalde* of the Santa Isabel ward, one of the 4 main wards of the Momostecan town centre. He was introduced to the ancestral authorities movement through similarly-minded prominent Momosteco activists, like the ex-guerilla fighter and activist Abraham Vicente, the former leader of the Council of Ancestral Authorities or *nab'e kamalb'e* ("first guide") at the time of the anti-mining referendum, Gumersindo Kalel, and his friend, the late David Coxaj, who was *nab'e kamalb'e* at a later point and passed away on 2018. Eventually, he was appointed as the president of the National Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of Momostenango (Coordinadora de

Organizaciones Indígenas de Momostenango, COIMO) on 2011,<sup>7</sup> and served as either first or second president (*kamal b'e*) of the Ancestral Authorities council during 4 years (2012-2015). As leader of COIMO and prominent member of the Ancestral Authorities council, Miguel Ángel pursued a general agenda of demanding accountability from the *alcalde* at the time, Santiago Federico Pelicó Rojas, from the UNE party and his municipal corporation, who would usually seek to implement decisions without taking into account public opinion, while using his political connections to dominate and coerce the communitarian or traditional authorities.

Miguel Angels' relationship with the town *alcalde* was rocky from the start. As *pasado* of the Santa Isabel ward, president of COIMO and member of the Ancestral Authorities council, Miguel Angel had great influence in communal resistance movement, and his pursuit of Municipal accountability brought him at odds with the Municipal *alcalde* on many occasions. On November 4, 2011, Miguel Angel was violently attacked on the road to his home near Paqlom Hill, by seven hooded men who were riding motorcycles, while he was strolling around with a companion. It was an act of intimidation, for he was not robbed, and his companion was left untouched. He was beaten up and many death threats were made against him. Fortunately, his companion came back, feigning he had gathered some help, and the attackers fled. The news report on the incident at the time stressed that this was due to Miguel Angels' political activity (CERIGUA 2011).

Miguel Angel himself attributes the attack to the Municipal government under the *alcalde*. Politically, but ritually too, these events confirmed for him the necessity of having a new kind of indigenous authority oriented to the defence of

the territorial claims of the community, beyond the Municipal/communitarian government dichotomy. For Miguel Angel, his career as an activist and politician was a time of intense ritual activity, not only because he had to carry rituals to aid the success of his political dealings, but also because he carried rituals to protect himself of political sorcery. Indeed, the *alcalde* had his own personal calendric priests, who, in Miguel Angels' consideration, carried on witchcraft against him. He says that there were other attempts on his life which never made it into the press. Ultimately, he attributed his repeated survival to the strength of his *nawal*. Discussing these events, he said to me: "Nobody can kill me, even if they beat me up: my *nawal* stops their bullets. They fear me, because they cannot kill me."

And indeed, despite these physical attacks, Miguel Angel didn't back down. A major, final victory for his administration at COIMO was achieved in his successful organizing of the indigenous resistance against the real estate tax known as IUSU (Impuesto Único Sobre Inmuebles; see SAT 2012). The implementation of this tax, of general application in Guatemala, was attempted in 1997, just after the Civil War (1982-1996), but local resistance achieved the derogation of it in Totonicapan, the indigenous majority department to which Momostenango belongs. On 2015, the *alcalde* of the town, Santiago Pelicó, wanted to reimplement the IUSU, which prompted widespread resistance in the town. On 26 June 2016, COIMO, with Miguel Ángel as its head, convoked a public demonstration before the municipal building at the town centre, demanding the majors' resignation (Figure 38). Four thousand people participated: this manifestation was supported by the Ancestral Authorities council (Domínguez 2015a).



38. Momostenango's townsfolk in protest against the IUSU tax (Prensa Libre 2015a). The protest was coordinated by Miguel Ángel Pelicó.

In retaliation, the mayor sued Miguel Ángel and all the members of the Ancestral Authorities council for "coercion" (Batz 2015), calling them before the judiciary authorities of Totonicapán. However, shortly after, the authorities dismissed the complaint and the IUSU plans were scrapped, which prompted the reaching of an agreement between the municipal alcalde and the *ancestrales* on July 1st (Domínguez 2015b). This was celebrated as a big triumph for COIDE and the Council of Ancestral Authorities. Furthermore, they even countersued the alcalde in August 2016; the complaint was dismissed too, but the outcome was considered as a clear proof of the power of the organization (Domínguez 2016).

Regarding his usage of the calendar in his political dealings, Miguel Ángel told me that there are days for protection, and days useful for political dealings. "Imox makes you invisible, so you won't be found, but also to reveal an enemy. This is what the Momosteco soldiers used in the war against El Salvador (...) Tijax ("flint knife") cuts the slanders of your enemy. It is used to cut evil, evil intentions and evil acts." Furthermore, he equated his authority with this calendric *nawal*,

for the word for an authority in K'iche' is *q'atb'al tzij* "the cutting word" "My word has authority, because it cuts, with Tijax I cuts the words of others and impose my opinion". Other days were used to reach agreements, like Kiej ("deer"), which, as we have seen in previous chapters, is used by the communitarian authorities but also by the ancestral council for their meetings. B'atz ("thread") is used to wrap up things, like an agreement: he did one such ceremony after the referendum. As we have seen, though, it is not really a conflict of *costumbristas* versus Ladinos anymore, but one of K'iche' vs K'iche', and thus both sides resort to ritual practices to achieve their aims. Miguel Angel says about this: "My enemies do burn offerings too, but they are sorcerers". Thus, Miguel Angels' political activity had in his eyes two facets: one as a communitarian leader, the other as a supernatural *licenciado*, propitiating the earth and calendric gods in order to achieve his political objectives; in fact, the word he used to characterize his rituals was *despacho*, a word which curiously has appeared in other works regarding rituals addressed to earth beings in South America (see de la Cadena 2015: 94-95). The word means "remittance" of an offering, but in Momostenango, it also alludes to an actual audience in the "office" (*despacho*) of a calendrical/earth divinity, which are seen as bureaucrats of the Santo Mundo or "Holy Earth". In fact, Miguel Angels' ritual language was always evocative of such gathering, describing how the *dioses mundo* entered his altar-room to hear his petitions:

*Rí ajaw, e remelik, e tikilik e chemelik.*      The lords are sitting, gathered and present

*Wane na'bi ch'ob'olik*

*Ru le mik ru nutik chwachalaq*

Maybe there is no refinement

In my words before you,<sup>8</sup>



<i>We ne kinb'e na q'ij,</i>	I may take too much of your time,
<i>Wetam taj.</i>	I don't know.
<i>Kin jach chiwach alaq</i>	I bequeath in your presence
<i>K'olik ri ri nu kotz'i'j,</i>	These flowers of mine that are here,
<i>Ri nu chaj.</i>	These candles.
<i>Kin b'ik che alaq:</i>	I tell you:
<i>K'ama alaq, taka' alaq,</i>	Receive them, hear them
<i>K'ama alaq, taka' alaq,</i>	Receive them, hear them
<i>Ri tzij, ri k'olik...</i>	The words that I say before you...

Usually, after a similar introduction, he would expose “his case” before the earth divinities. Sadly, I couldn’t record a prayer with a political content: most of them were concerned more with the worries of his current clients on divination. However, Miguel told me that vying for the soul of someone in the underworld consisted in an exercise of rhetorical persuasion with these entities to side with him, trying to win them over as in a legal battle. Thus, it is not hard to imagine a similar supernatural “legal battle” between him and his enemies taking place during his political dealings, each one of them burning offerings to further their cause. When I asked him about the parallels between the calendrical order, which has an *alcalde* day, its secretary, treasurer, the so-called *gobierno mundo*, and the town order, he told me: “this is the order of things: there is an order in town, and there is an order in the *Mundo* too”. What is interesting is how the door to access both powers are somehow interconnected, but I will return to this in my conclusion, which will be more theoretical. For now, I want to finish my account

on Miguel Ángel's activities, in particular regarding his participation in the resistance against mining companies.

## **5. The struggle against mining companies**

Approaching the end of my fieldwork, Miguel Angel invited me to the celebration of the anniversary of the referendum against mining companies, a huge victory for his organization. The referendum took place on 1st September 2013, and thus this was its fifth anniversary (2018). However, before writing on my ethnographic experiences surrounding it, some context is needed.

It is a badly kept secret that the mountains of rural Momostenango probably hide veins of gold and silver, as well as other ores. According to my informants, this has been known for many years, even before the beginning of the XXth century.<sup>9</sup> While not being formerly recognized as a region particularly endowed with mineral resources (Carmack 1995: 13; McBryde 1947), similar information has encouraged mining companies to attempt exploration and prospecting activities. In 2001, the government of Guatemala granted permission to a mining company, Montana Exploradora de Guatemala, part of the Canadian mining conglomerate GoldCorp, to carry out prospection activities in Momostenango. It also granted numerous mining concessions to the company. The main project was called Centauro II, and it contemplated the mining of gold, nickel, silver, cobalt, chrome, antimony, zinc and rare earth materials. (OCMAL 2019).<sup>10</sup>

While not being formally started, the prospection authorization was renewed in 2007 and again in 2012, something which raised great indignation in the community. However, the *alcalde* at the time, Santiago Federico Pelicó Rojas

(the same *alcalde* with which Miguel Angel would have the taxes conflict), was secretly partial to mining and, while saying in public that he was opposed to mining projects, he himself arranged the renewal and granting of permits at Totonicapan and Guatemala city, which prompted the beginning of the movement.

The anti-mining movement was organized both by disaffected communitarian authorities and ancestral Authorities. The three figure-heads of the movement were Renato Vicente, Gumersindo Kalel, and Abraham Vicente, a veteran guerrilla fighter during the Civil War (Figure 39). It began with a legal protection appeal (*amparo*) presented by the Communitarian and Ancestral communities before the Constitutional Court of Guatemala. The reason of this appeal was the absence of a legal local referendum regarding mining, which was a violation of the ancestral territorial rights of the Momosteco K'iche' and of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention of 1989 (General Conference of the International Labour Organisation, 1989), which the Guatemalan government ratified. The court decision was favourable to the communities, but the Ministry of Energy and Mining appealed against this decision, which prompted further litigation. In the context of this litigation, the communal referendum was organized and carried on in September 1<sup>st</sup> 2013 (Domínguez 2013).



39. The three main leaders of the Ancestral Authorities movement responsible for the referendum during a press conference (front row): Renato Vicente (left); Gumersindo Kalel (mid), *nab'e k'amal b'e* at the time, and Abraham Vicente (left; photograph by Cristina Chiquin, 29 May 2013).

The content of this complaint was not only regarding territorial rights conceived as property, but it had a dimension related to K'iche' religious life, explicitly recognized in the communities' plaint: "The communities were concerned about the impact that mining activity will have on K'iche' spirituality because the mountains that are projected to be mined have a fundamental function in the town, where sacred places exist" (OCMAL 2019). Similarly, crucial aspect was the environmental impact of mining activity, which could lead to extensive contamination and damage to the community.

Finally, a Municipio-wide referendum was organized by both the Council of Ancestral Authorities and concerned communitarian authorities. More than 50,000 people voted overwhelmingly against mining. The referendum gave more strength to the Ancestral Authorities argument before the Constitutional court,

and thus, in 2015 the court decided against the Mining Ministry again (Figure 40 and 41).



40. Ancestral Authorities carry their batons during an appeal before the Constitutional court of Guatemala (Consejo del Pueblo Maya 2016).



41. The referendum against mining at Momostenango. Left: Gumersindo Kael, *nab'ekamal b'e* of the Ancestral Authorities, makes an appeal to participate in the referendum at the main city hall or Sal6n Municipal (Consejo del Pueblo Maya 2013). Right: voters at the town central park (Dom3nguez 2013).

As president of COIMO, Miguel Angel was close to the movement, and in one occasion he showed me some of the locally produced DVDs with their reunions, as well as the referendum itself: the discussions and speeches were carried mostly in K'iche'. The video of the election of the Ancestral Authorities belonged

to the post-referendum period, being filmed in 19 January 2014, but it was important as a depiction of the strategies and aims of the organization after their victory (Cámara Nueva Visión 2014). The Council of Ancestral Authorities always timed their meetings, like their elections of new authorities, on days like Kiej, associated with political power: this fact was mentioned during the meeting. The referendum itself was made on an 11 Ix date, associated with the earth. During the election of 2014, Kalel made traditional appeals to the ancestors, and the council had a K'iche' calendric priest who prayed before them, appealing to the dead ancestors in the same ritual language used by Rudy and Miguel Angel: “*qanan qatat, sak ki wi, sak ki jolom*” (mothers, fathers, white are your heads and hairs...). Thus, ritually and politically, their meetings were somewhat of reflections of the ones made at the communal level. A gathering of the members of the council deliberates and nominates the new members of the council, who receive metal-tipped *varas* just as the communal *alcaldes* do. During the meeting, long speeches were made by its most prominent members, discussing their political vision and tactics. (Figures 42 and 43).



42. The *nab'e kamalb'e*, Gumersindo Kalel, speaks at the election of Ancestral Authorities (Cámara Nueva Visión 2014)



43. The *kamal b'e* Macario Torres addresses the ancestors at a political meeting, while the Ancestral Authorities pray with him (Cámara Nueva Visión 2014)

I have already touched upon the agenda of the Council of Ancestral Authorities, but despite their seemingly hard confrontational stance, their actual approach is that of both pressure and dialogue. In fact, Kalel emphasised during these meetings that, while being (still) in a frontal confrontation with the mining companies, the situation with the *alcalde* was more that of making his words match his deeds. Their ultimate aim is to get recognition as a valid form of authority beyond both the communitarian and the party level. In fact, one of their current causes is to get a building completely dedicated to their reunions, something which the *alcalde* had promised (but not fulfilled): “we don’t make electoral politics”, Kalel said, “on the contrary, you were appointed in an appeal to directly represent the interests of our communities. We don’t make politics saying “vote for me”, we are not elected by virtue of any political propaganda. We want to be recognized by law, to promote unity. If the *alcalde* said: I have my functions, and you have yours. I would applaud this (...) We need unity and development, to be together. We have a common cause for the people: this is what we want.” Beyond these tactical considerations, what is strongly shown



here in more symbolic terms is how the Ancestral Authority is somewhat of a replication, in the terms of Vogt (1965), of the traditional communitarian forms of authority, down to its ceremonial practices, but in a new context that is neither communal nor electoral. It is as, in a way, modern activism had been encroached by the older conception of power, in a process that both transforms 'nativist' activism and traditional conceptions of power. But more on it will be said in the conclusion.

To finish this chapter, I would finally like to add some information about one of the most prominent and still active figures of the movement: Abraham Vicente, who evolved from a guerrilla fighter in the eighties to a member of the Ancestral authorities today. It was Vicente who organized the commemoration of the referendum on 2018, and he is still a strong figurehead in local resistance politics. Some words on his political involvement with both the guerrilla and the new resistance are needed to understand how, in a way, the struggle against the military dictatorship has evolved into the struggle against neoliberalism and mining companies, which are supported by the military-supported right-wing political parties of today.

## **6. Abraham Vicente: from guerrilla fighter to environmental activist**

Some days before the anniversary celebration, I got a call from Miguel Angel. His daughter, a student at the Centro Universitario de Occidente (CUNOC), a centre of the University of San Carlos of Guatemala located in the near city of Xela, had to interview Freddy Rodriguez, agronomical engineer and professor at CUNOC, and native of Momostenango. Rodríguez was a victim of persecution during the last period of the civil war (1982-1996), and barely made it out of Guatemala



alive, becoming a refugee in Chiapas, Mexico. Miguel Angel asked me to support her daughter with my recording and photographic equipment, but also had an interest on the material. So, we went to Xela to interview Rodríguez (Figure 44).

During the interview, Rodríguez talked about his personal life, and also about the activities of the guerrilla in Momostenango. At the time, many academics at CUNOC, especially those with Marxist inclinations or ties to the guerrilla, disappeared and were killed. He recalled how his family was intimidated by the armed military patrols, which prompted him to escape to neighbouring Chiapas. Luckily, he survived the army checks at roads and the border; in fact, at the time carrying a copy of Marx's works was an offense punishable with death. After he escaped, the Mexican government was generous: they offered Freddy to further his education at the National Autonomous University of Mexico in the capital and later relocated him as a teacher of agronomy in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, until the armed conflict ended, a wait of 14 years for him. Luckily, later his family made it to San Cristóbal, too.



44. Professor Freddy Rodríguez interviewed at CUNOC.

During the interview, Freddy told us that Momostenango had an active guerilla, something that is still not well known nor studied, since most of the guerrilla

activity and the corresponding armies' genocidal activity were done in the Ixcán and Quiché region. Momostenango was considered a low risk or "green zone" at the time, and thus military repression was not based on genocide against the general population, as in other places, but in selective assassinations. Some people at Momostenango helped the guerrilla with resources and with their capacity, as a merchant town, of transporting resources and people: "There was lots of repression. In the Quiché region there were full populations razed. In Momostenango it was selective violence. For example, against *educadores populares* (propaganda commissars). Lots of the people that was disappeared were indeed guerrilla, some were tortured and denounced their partners, which prompted more repression." Women from Momostenango were also commanders in the Frente Guerrillero, which operated in Xeqemeya, near Santa Lucía la Reforma. Many *educadores populares* were kidnapped and disappeared. However, the guerrilla was not as strong in Momostenango, in part because the dual agricultural/mercantile patrilineage system had been successful in fending off big plantations and other forms of capitalist exploitation. The population, strongly indigenous, was sympathetic to the cause, but also cautious. Thus, the guerrilla in Momostenango pursued the "prolonged popular war" approach.<sup>11</sup> According to Freddy, Abraham Vicente was one of the commanders of the local guerrilla front; one of the other leaders, called Luis, is still a doctor at the community.<sup>12</sup>

Some days after the interview with Freddy, I went to the anti-mining referendum commemoration, with Abraham Vicente at its helm (Figure 45). Curiously, it was celebrated right in front of the towns' secret altar, in front of the towns' main square. The charred facade of the place is a reminder of the ritual

activity carried there in secret by the highest standing calendric priest, was a weirdly appropriate scenario. After a small parade through the town, there was a miniature version of the traditional “deer dance” (*danza del venado*). While seemingly a gratuitous feature of identity and folklore, the subject of the dance is the relationship between the white owner of a hacienda and the *awajmundo* or spirit animals of the earth divinity, so it made an interesting contrast with the metaphorical subject of the struggle of the earth divinities themselves against mining companies. Abraham Vicente made an appeal in K’iche’. He insisted in how mining would bring an uneven and illusory development to the town, “wealth for a few years, misery after”. He finished his speech saying “our ancestors have commanded us to protect this land and that is what we are doing”.





45. Abraham Vicente speaks during the fifth anniversary of the anti-mining referendum and a small *danza de los venados*.

Afterwards, we went to a traditional meal with the Council of Ancestral Authorities, in the patio of a house in the town centre. During the meal, the members of the council discussed the wider national context. In those days, the presidential persecution of the anti-corruption commission of the United Nations (Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala, CICIG) broke out in different legal actions against Thelma Aldana, head of CICIG and former supreme justice. These actions would end in the unilateral dissolution of CICIG by the military backed president, Jimmy Morales, former TV comedian (cfr. BBC News 2019). Thelma is well liked by the ancestral authorities movement, for she was instrumental in the organization of the anti-mining referendum, meeting with the communities before it. Those opposed to president Jimmy Morales had planned some demonstrations against him in Guatemala City. The members of the

traditional authorities pledged their support. It was there that I realized that the political consciousness of the population was very strong, unlike the impressions of some anthropologists that worked in the region in former years, which emphasized apathy (Bocek 2006). On the contrary, political effervescence exists, but this kind of discussions are usually not conducted before people not working in the relevant local organizations.

Seeing it and hearing Abrahams' speech in K'iche' and Spanish was a strong reminder of the ties between current day indigenous resistance and the struggles of the eighties, and a proof of the political metamorphoses of the speech of indigenous resistance against the Guatemalan State and extractivism. While during the eighties Marxist literature dominated (Fredy told me it circulated through pamphlets and comics in Spanish, while propaganda in Maya was oral), today the struggle has shifted towards a speech which defends indigenous rights and their ties with both cosmologies and sacred practices. However, I would argue that, locally at least, this rediscovery or successful fusion of indigenous identity with anti-capitalist resistance was made much more powerful and effective when the more one-dimensional speech of the guerrilla, which was still too rooted in an identity-agnostic and universalist Marxism, was abandoned: the success of the referendum *vis-à-vis* the stagnation of the guerrilla in Momostenango is a proof.

Until now, this chapter has remained close to its ethnographic narrative, in order to give a detailed and involved account of Miguel Ángel's political biography. However, now it becomes necessary to address some of the points that were outlined in the introduction, namely, to discuss the importance of this material regarding wider debates on indigenous political practices related to

nature, as well as anthropological debates about ontology, to try to devise a somewhat different position.

## **7. Discussion and conclusion**

In the introduction to this chapter, I have mentioned the recent ascendance of ‘cosmopolitical’ and ontological models in the study of indigenous politics of resistance to extractivism, as well as some of the criticisms and risks inherent to these proposals. In general, these proposals have been extraordinarily successful at depicting the ontological differences of indigenous and Western politics in regards to landscape and nature, but some of them have also somewhat tended to fall into common traps such as exoticization, ontological reification and a lack of grounding in real life political processes. Thus, the first and most important precaution to be taken is thus to remember that political action in indigenous communities is in no way pre-determined by a reified indigenous ontology, which would be all too similar to prior ideas regarding a reified holistic cosmology of nature.

Indeed, Miguel Angel’s career did not start out of an ideological commitment with a reified cosmology/ideology, or merely by being already within a pre-determinate ontological outlook; instead, his political compromise started precisely in the same way in which engagements with cosmology have tended to appear throughout this thesis: in contexts of personal risk and social struggle. Miguel Ángel didn’t start his political career by defending ancestral indigenous sites, he started his political career by an experience similar to that in which many others in town first relate to the cosmological: by recognizing himself as being “inside” that cosmological dimension, a literal captive of the

prisons of the *mundos*, punished by *mundo* spirits, which was the reason why he was sick and had bad luck in his life. Only by recognizing himself as included in that cosmological dimension, and then exerting actions that were not only social in nature but also cosmological, is that he became a calendrical diviner, then an authority and finally an activist. From then on, we can see Miguel Ángel, constantly advancing in both 'worlds', guided by the strength of his own *nawal*, his *mundo* counterpart which is also the reason of his political agency.

At a later point of our friendship, Miguel Angel and I discussed concerning the nature of his *nawal*. He told me that it didn't have an animal form (unlike, for example, Rudy's eagle *nawal*), but it manifested in his dreams in a different way. For example, he told me that, as a kid and later in life, he would dream himself covered in the armour of the archangel Saint Michael. For him, that was the manifestation of his *nawal*. As readers who know Spanish will realize, the name Miguel Ángel is really an allusion to the Archangel Michael, so in a way it is almost a pun. In *costumbrismo*, Saint Michael is also regarded as a manifestation of lightning or *kak'ul ja'*. Miguel Angel would tell me that he usually had dreams of flying with the armour of San Miguel, prefiguring the attempts on his life too:

I entered the church in Momostenango and found soldiers and chopped their heads and hands with my sword. I dreamed that in the church, on the altar, there were demons, and they shot at me, and I fell. But I raised again. They then said among themselves: he is alive! And I escaped. This is what the *chuchqajaw* told me: this is your vocation, this is your destiny".

Thus, it is hardly a surprise that Miguel Angel's altar had multiple icons of Saint Michael brandishing his spear and covered in his armour (see Figure 40). While Miguel Angel perhaps didn't share the same *naqualismo* ideas of other *costumbristas* like Rudy and Marcelino, he indeed visualized the force of his



personality and destiny as tied to a supernatural image, both his protector and his destiny (Figure 46). In a way, as Miriam Lamrani has suggested on her dissertation regarding the cult of saints in Mexico, specifically Santa Muerte (Lamrani 2018), it was an image of his own inner life or intimacy, externally manifested; however, it was also an image of his political life (the attempt on his life as the demons against San Miguel). Thus, it is not only that the image is a symbol; the image is somehow himself; as he said: “I am *nawal Kiej*” (*yo soy nawal Kiej*).



46. Miguel Angel burns offerings at the *patio* of the church, before the image of Santiago, patron of the town.

Now, before developing this analysis further, one must consider Miguel Ángel’s activism in relationship with other forms of power. One of the most common mistakes in the superficial assessments regarding the ancestral authorities movement is that they are “not truly traditionalist” or even worse, that they represent a New Age version of indigenous religiosity. However, what transpires in both Miguel Angel’s testimonies and the meetings of their members is that what these organizations do is actually replicate the practices of traditional



authorities and rearticulate them in new contexts, and furthermore, they do it regardless of religious affiliation. Thus, there is hardly anything “neo-Maya” about the members of the council, for many of them are indeed *costumbrista* members of the actual communal authority system and engage in traditional practices at *awas* altars of their own. Instead, what is new is the context, the engagement into which they have taken their cosmologies.

I have mentioned Evon Vogt’s theory of “structural replication” (Vogt 1965). Closely related to that idea was his theory of “encapsulation”, which he defined as “the conceptual and structural incorporation of new elements into existing patterns of social and ritual behaviour” (Vogt 1969: 582). While seemingly describing a dynamic proper of a “conservative” society, in fact, Vogt was not only thinking of it as a mechanism of native resistance to colonial religion and society, but also as some sort of dynamic of social change. As Vogt mentions, instead of confronting Catholicism or outright rejecting it, the Tzotzil Maya decided to “encapsulate it” through their “cultural” practices. For example, crosses were not rejected: instead they became symbols of the ancestral caves where ancestors reside in the sacred mountains. As such, they were “encapsulated” not only conceptually but formally, burdening them with symbols that allude to native cosmology, such as pine trees, flowers and the like, symbolic of the telluric divinities and their *nagual* abodes (cfr. Vogt 1969: 286-287). Similarly, Saints were incorporated to the *nagual* cosmology, as protectors of the animal souls of people (as we have seen with San Antonio Mundo). Furthermore, this form of “encirclement” of the new by the old was closely related to the (old school) idea of replication or repetition of structural patterns in many levels, since relationships of protection and patronage of the ancestors towards the

people, shamans towards their clients, parents towards children, etc, were always characterized by the idea of “embracing” which ultimately belongs to the “corral” cosmology of *nagualismo*.

What is very interesting in the current day Momosteco case, and especially in the case of indigenous activism, which is a new feature born out of the needs of the current geopolitical circumstances, is the fact that a certain kind of formal replication of the communitarian authorities exists by the Council of Ancestral Authorities. Ancestral authorities seemingly ‘copied’ the formal structure of communal authorities (*presidente, tesorero, secretario*, although using K’iche’ terms: *kamal b’e, ajpwaq, ajtzib’*), as well as their rituals and symbols of power, by porting batons or *varas*, gathering in similar calendrical dates, burning offerings and making similar appeals to the ancestors in their gatherings. However, more than native activism re-appropriating the traditional, it is as if the traditional structures and cosmology of the communal level of power had performed an effective encroaching of our current’s day geo-ontological conundrum, to borrow Elizabeth Povinellis’ expression (2016). Thus, it is not simply that different cosmologies have clashed: the process is, from an internal perspective, that the indigenous cosmological has somewhat engulfed or encroached our current dilemma. Thus, my reading would be akin to that of Knut Rio and Annelin Eriksen’s depiction of visionary leaders in Vanuatu, who have insisted that it is not only the leaders who have agency: cosmology itself must be seen as something invested with agency in order to understand them (Eriksen 2014: 55). Thus, yes, at one point, it is cosmology itself that acts, expanding and entering in contact with new dimensions of social life and history, but the story doesn’t end here.

In chapter 3, I have mentioned how the previous and deceased members of a *cofradía* become like the dead ancestors that the new members of the *cofradía* must pray to in order to perform successfully: thus, Rudy prays to the dead members of Sociedad Santiaguito and performs rituals that describe his future undertakings before their spiritual presence. The word used to describe these deceased ancestors of the Sociedad or *cofradía* is the same as the one used to refer to the gathering of the ancestors of the patrilineage: *may* “the ranks” (of the dead). However, this idea is also starting to appear among the *autoridades ancestrales*. During my time at the town, one of the friends of Miguel Angel, David Coxoj, died. He was the *nab'e kamalb'e* of the Council of Ancestral Authorities at the time, so his death was particularly painful for the council. He was well liked because of his knowledge of the tradition, too. When Coxoj died, Miguel Angel had a dream. He dreamed how a man dressed in white showed him a lightning in heaven. Then, a voice said the word: *may*. He was thus sure that his friend had become a *may*, a calendric ancestor. Thus, in a way, ultimately, this is how power is made: to gain power, you must be favoured by the living, the earth divinities and the ancestors, in order to eventually join the latter. It is especially compelling how this power is not really tied to traditional forms of government, which have somehow lagged behind the times. Instead, it has become ingrained in new forms of power. Thus, by dying while being a *nab'e kamal b'e*, Miguel Angels' friend became a veritable *may* or ancestor of the organization itself, a cosmological power himself, just as a former *chuchqajaw* at a patrilineage would or a *cofradía* president would: a kind of *dios mundo*, as Rudy said about his ancestors (“they are gods”, *son dioses*). Thus, the final aim of the calendrical practice is not only to

know about time in order to have power: it is to become part of the order of time itself, in order to rule.

Now, regarding the former in its relationship with recent engagements with indigenous 'cosmopolitics', it is indeed important, but not complete, to only say that indigenous people ascribe varying degrees of political and social agency to landscape features and thus they strive for their protection. This is true indeed, but it is not the whole story, at least not in Momostenango. The important thing is this: the (indeed extant) agency of the sacred places and landscapes is part of a wider network that defines the political agency of Miguel Ángel himself. None is really subordinate to the other: in fact, as the case of Miguel Ángel deceased friend shows, an activist is a prospective 'Earth being' himself. Thus, it is not a nature that is merely an animated 'other' what Miguel Ángel is defending: he is defending a nature which is the sum of his ancestors (being *dioses mundo* themselves) and their relationships with 'earth beings' or *dioses mundo*, the *rajawal ri uwachulew* or 'rulers of the visage of the earth.' He defends a nature that is power, but also an earth which becomes *his* own power.

Therefore, we find the same dilemma that we have encountered in previous chapters. On one hand, we have a cosmology that 'acts' in a way, becoming determinant in social life, even expanding to new historical and political contexts. In the other, we have people acting in a cosmological fashion, that is, people who are invested with cosmological agency, and even more, who actively work towards obtaining it. The question is: who is doing which? As mentioned before, my conclusions will try to work out this final question, but for now it can suffice to say that not only daily endeavours or ritual endeavours in

Momostenango are permeated by this paradox, but also political careers and activism.

Now that I have tried to work out a more political version of the cosmological proposal of this thesis, it is time to present its last chapter, which deals with a dimension of life which is born out of the political, but projected into time: that of history. Thus, the next chapter will deal with a subject that has remained scantily studied in extant bibliography: the lore surrounding the highest ranking sacred altar of the town, that which is said to contain the soul of every person in Momostenango, and its relationship to a crucial historical event which left an important imprint in the reconstitution of the identity of the community at the beginning of the XXth century: the war between Guatemala and El Salvador in 1906.

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## Notes

1 The figure of Estrada Cabrera has an important and unexpected relationship to Momostenango, which I will explain in the next chapter.

2 For general overviews regarding contemporary extractivism in Guatemala and its relationship to social conflicts, see Morales 2014 and Véliz Estrada 2015.

3 For example, the National Council of Indigenous Ancestral Authorities of Guatemala incorporates Xinca and Garifuna representatives, both non-Maya ethnicities (see National Council of Indigenous Ancestral Authorities of Guatemala 2009).

4 See Morales Sic 2004 and Ponciano 2007 for a general assessment

<sup>5</sup> There are four days that can start a year in the K'iche' Calendar, Ik', Kiej, E and Noj; thus, they are called *alcaldes*, since they rule each year. The treasurer of the "government of the mundo" (*gobierno mundo*) is Tz'ikin, and thus it is a day related with wealth, while the secretary of the mundo is K'at, related with retribution.

<sup>6</sup> This kind of acts continue, but now more under Mormon and Evangelic influence.

<sup>7</sup> COIMO is an organization which coordinates Traditional Authorities to pursue specific development agendas, called Community Development Agendas. These are defined as "instruments of negotiation" from the communities before the municipal government, as well as outside ONGs. For example, one of such agendas is the Project of Food Sovereignty, which tackles nutritional problems. (SERJUS 2012).

<sup>8</sup> The expression could be rendered more literally as: "perhaps there is no order in this bundle (of words) that I present before you", ironically a very elegant way to say that he is not being proper in his speech.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Carmack gathered similar information: in fact, gold was mined in Buenabaj at some point (1995: 14).

<sup>10</sup> Other projects were called Iralda II and "Lucía". Five concessions were granted to Reserva Caribe S.A; two to Pangea and one to Entre Mares de Guatemala S.A. (Chiquin 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Regarding different guerrilla styles at the time, Fredy said: "The FAR (Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes, Rebel Armed Forces) followed a style of spectacular strikes that would demoralize the army and make them feel that they were not winning the war; other groups carried tactics of protracted popular war, a war that would

drag on for many years, wearing the army out. Their philosophy was to minimize the suffering of the people, without exposing them to repressions. The EGP (Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres, Guerrilla Army of the Poor) wanted the population to get involved. That is what caused the destruction of entire towns by the army, as it happened in Quiche, in Chu Pol, where they even dynamited the church (...) all men were killed". Thus, the guerrilla approach in Momostenango was to minimize civilian involvement and casualties.

12 Sadly, this interview was made at the end of my fieldwork, but I intend to go back and interview Abraham directly in the future.

## CHAPTER 6

### Altars of History: On War, Cosmology and Social Memory

*Brujos y soldados de Momostenango lo guardaban*  
“Sorcerers and soldiers from Momostenango  
protected him (the president)”.

**Luis Cardoza y Aragón, “La tiranía inefable”**

#### 1. Introduction

Historically-oriented chapters are fairly common in many ethnographies; however, that a chapter of this kind is left for the last part, as is the case with the present chapter, is certainly uncommon. After all, in the classical dichotomy of the historical vis-à-vis the socio-structural, history has usually held the upper hand, despite the continuous defence that anthropologists have made of the “structural” side of the dichotomy (cfr. Evans-Pritchard 1961, Lévy Strauss 1966). Indeed, in Western epistemology, “structure” has been usually conceptualized as an effect of history and causality, change has been considered superior to the “primitive” denial of historicity that the structural seems to imply, and this superiority has furthermore been considered as essential to the integrity of history (cfr. Rousseau 1975: 37-38). In consequence, when history usually appears in an ethnography, it plays the role of providing a background or some context to the understanding of the second: thus, in general, history has been conceived as a potential framing, a background for the theoretical arguments of anthropology (Baily 2018: 109).

This chapter has a different orientation, one that is deeply informed by Marshall Sahlins’ classical work on the debate surrounding the dichotomy structure/history, *Islands of History* (1985). In a similar way to Sahlins reflection of the clash between Hawaiian cosmology and the expedition of James Cook, this



chapter will try to rethink the relationship between historicity and anthropology through the re-telling of an event in which the cosmological and ritual practices of the Momostecos clashed with a historical outside. Thus, the main topic of this chapter is the agency of cosmology in history, as well as the agency of people trying to change history through cosmological action. Concretely, the subject of this chapter is the role of Momosteco soldiers and their sacred altars in the victory of Guatemala against El Salvador during the War of Topoposte (1903-1906). This story, which circulates among many people in Momostenango, is not only relevant today as a historical event of note, but also because the most important altar of the town, the *awas rech tinamit*, a place that has crucial cosmological significance (cfr. Tedlock 1992: 147; Carmack 1998a: 342-343), is said to be connected with the death of the president of El Salvador at that time, Tomás Regalado, which took place during a skirmish with Momosteco soldiers at Cerro El Sillón in 1906. To put it in plain terms, as many of my informants told me, “the altars won the war” and, even more, according to local lore, the ulterior destiny of Regalado is still connected to the altar itself.

As mentioned, the theoretical background of this chapter is the debate on the relationship of anthropology and historicity, which has been variously conceived as that of “structure and process” (Vogt 1960), “hot societies” vs “cold societies” (Levi-Strauss 1960) or structure and history (cfr. Sahlins 1985: 136-156). Of course, contemporary debates on this topic are not deployed anymore along the lines of the aforementioned classical categories, and instead have developed new and often provocative perspectives, such as in Marilyn’s Strathern proposal of treating events as artifacts ([1990] 2013), or as in Caroline Humphrey’s proposal regarding personhood and “decision events” (2008). In

order to make an intervention in such a complex debate, in this chapter, I will present first to the reader an account of the death of Tomás Regalado from the perspective of historical works, which are themselves fascinating when read in the context of what I have explained regarding cosmology in Momostenango. After this, I will explain how Momostecos today view the topic through different ethnographic engagements; finally I will try to work out an original proposal regarding cosmology and historicity in line with the one developed in this thesis.

## **2. *El Señor Presidente* and *El Santo Mundo***

Manuel Estrada Cabrera, president of Guatemala from 1898 to 1920, has become one of the archetypes of the Latin American tyrant, not in small part thanks to the classic novel of Miguel Ángel Asturias, *El Señor Presidente* ("Mr President", 1946). His meteoric rise, from being a pauper in the streets of Quetzaltenango to the all mighty ruler of a country, was almost supernatural for his contemporaries; his bloody rule, marked by megalomania, personality cult and repression, became in the masterful writing of Asturias the rich subject of a classic of Latin American *realismo mágico* aesthetics (Couffon 1962). However, there is a little-known and almost surreal episode in Estrada Cabrer's life that is only obliquely alluded to in Asturias novel, despite the leanings of his writing toward the fantastic, and which is more deeply dealt with in one of its possible models, the non-fiction biographical book on the tyrant, *Ecce Pericles*, by Rafael Arévalo Martínez (1945). It seems that, according to the private accounts of General José María Letona and Prince Wilhelm of Sweden, in the weeks before his regime was overthrown by protesters in April 1920, Estrada Cabrera consulted with Momosteco calendric priests regarding his destiny (Wyld Ospina 1929: 185; Arévalo Martínez 1945:

560; Rendón 1988: 14).<sup>1</sup> The question, is exactly when and how did the fate of Estrada Cabrera meet with the cosmological practices of Momostenango?

It all began in 1906.<sup>2</sup> Estrada Cabrera was down on his luck. Those who had fled Guatemala because of his repression gained at the time enough political and military support abroad to attempt a military invasion against him. Both Porfirio Díaz, dictator of Mexico, and Tomás Regalado, military *caudillo* of El Salvador, granted permission to the troops of the leaders of the rebels, the ex-president and general Lisandro Barillas and José León Castillo, to pass through their respective borders. But the first rebel invasion failed at El Ocós (Rendón 1988: 184). Something more, in terms of firepower and political support, was needed to oust the tyrant.

Pragmatic, cautious and a tyrant himself, Porfirio Díaz didn't commit to give any further support. But Regalado, romantic and ambitious, had grandiose plans. Having being president of El Salvador and being at the moment the most influential general under the government of president Pedro José Escalón, he dreamed to restore the former Central American Union, formed in the nineteenth century by Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. By defeating Estrada Cabrera, he could not only retake power in El Salvador again (he had already finished his democratic term), but in all of Central America. Escalón, a political realist, disapproved of Regalado's fanciful plan; in a display of bravado, Regalado bombarded the presidential palace with some cannon rounds and departs to seek glory in Guatemala (Flores Escalante and Kunny Mena 2004: 191). But Estrada Cabrera had an ace in his sleeve: Momostenango.

Momostenango experienced a deep transformation at the ending of the nineteenth century, a transformation that, while being led by a Ladino, in some

respects resulted in a renaissance and expansion of *costumbre* and traditionalism. Teodoro Cifuentes, a Ladino general with deep Momosteco roots, became the main political power broker in the community at that time (Carmack [1979] 2001: 303)<sup>3</sup>. He is still known to this day as “El Reformador”, for he indeed reformed the town (Figure 47). He re-traced the streets of the town, under his orders the catholic church was built, and he built an imposing barracks building as the government centre of the town, which later became the Municipal Administration building; some people call still “El cuartel” instead of “La Muni”. He also embellished and modernized the town centre, building parks and beginning the re-construction of the town church. Thus, in a way Cifuentes consolidated the role of the current town centre, centralizing the life of the town. However, his work was not only military or administrative, as we will see: his politics were also deeply related to the ritual life of the town. For, while a Ladino, Cifuentes was deeply indebted to indigenous elites, to the point that he used his political power to consolidate *costumbrismo* as the official religion of the town, and to consolidate its relationship to the local government institutions, as we will see.



47. Momosteco general Teodoro Cifuentes. Photograph by Emilio Eichenberger (circa 1909). Permission by Hansel de Paz, descendant of Cifuentes.

As a general in the Guatemala army (Figures 48 and 49), Cifuentes power didn't just derive from the local sphere, but from his dealings with the central powers of the time, specifically from his personal friendship with Estrada Cabrera. Thus, his Momosteco troops slowly became a presence in the army of the time; according to Rendón: "The Indian soldiers of Momostenango were reputedly the best in the country and were devoted to Cabrera" (1988: 193). This was not a coincidence, though. Estrada Cabrera, son of an indigenous woman from Quetzaltenango (Rendón 1988: 18), was inclined towards meritocracy: in his propaganda, his rise from humble origins was a paramount example of social ascension. Hated by the liberal Ladino elite of Guatemala City, Cabrera presented

a revitalized version of the Guatemalan *conservador* politics of the XIXth century, which, while authoritarian and anti-progressive (Catholic), were also an interesting counterpart to the racial prejudices of the progressives, who resented indigenous people and considered them representatives of “backwardness”.<sup>4</sup> To the contrary, the official ideology of Estrada Cabrera was deeply marked by the idea of merit and social ascension regardless of origins (which reflected his own personal destiny), which was combined with a fierce anti-democratic authoritarianism. Thus, an important element in his national ideal was “the Indians that redeem themselves” (*los indios que se redimen*), the name given to the educated indigenous elites that could both influence their communities and the state, the foremost example being the members of the Agricultural Institute of the Indigenous, *Instituto Agrícola de Indígenas* (Abac, Manuel T. and Beltrán 1897). However, these local elites always had to follow closely the despotic dictates of Estrada Cabrera, who saw himself as an exceptional case of social ascension. For example, as a somewhat paradoxical example, Cifuentes himself (being a Ladino) was called “an Indian general” by Estrada Cabrera (Carmack [1979] 2001).



48. Teodoro Cifuentes (fifth from the left) with his captains and some of his Momosteco troops. Photograph by Emilio Eichenberger. Permission by Hansel de Paz, descendant of Cifuentes.

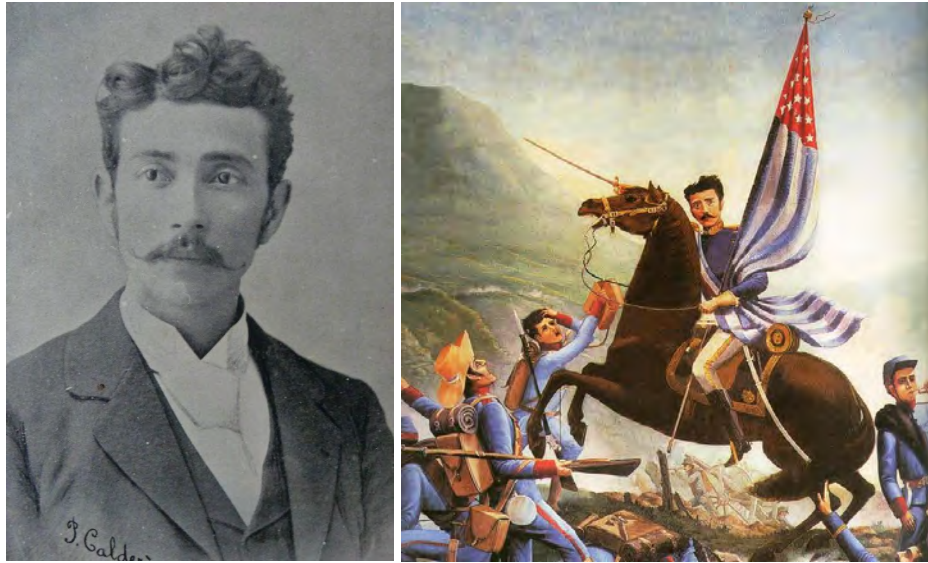


49. Teodoro Cifuentes (third from the left) along some of the generals of Guatemala who participated in the war of Totoposte against El Salvador (Photograph by Emilio Eichenberger, 1906).

On the contrary, Tomás Regalado was a representative of the liberal vision, which favoured a cosmopolitan Central American Union in place of *conservador* localism; thus, he allied with Guatemalan liberal émigrés. Regalado prepared to invade Guatemala on July 1906. After bombarding the presidential palace at San Salvador in a display of bravado, he departed for Santa Ana, relatively near the border with Guatemala, where he gathered more supporters; afterwards, he and his troops reached the border near Chalchuapa. Regalado moved then into Guatemala: Metapán, Atescampa and Jérez soon fell to him, and his troops approached Yupiltepeque. Regalado intended to take Jutiapa, capital of the Guatemalan department of the same name, bordering El Salvador. However, Estrada Cabrera had previously ordered Cifuentes and Alarcón to move in with the regiments of Amatitlán and Momostenango to meet Regalado.

On the morning of July 11, Regalado began to ascend the El Sillón hill, near Jutiapa, wanting to capture the Guatemalan flag there and raise that of the Central American Union. “Follow me! Let’s rally to the banner!”, he said to his soldiers before doing a charge. But his luck was grim: a battalion of Momosteco soldiers waited for him in ambush. As soon as Regalado arrived holding the Union banner, a barrage of fire covered him. Seven bullets hit him, the first one in his face and the rest in the thorax. He died immediately. Even his golden watch was pierced by a 7mm calibre bullet: according to the legend, the hands mark eleven o’clock to this day (Flores Escalante and Kunny Mena 2004: 198). Oral tradition records that the name of the Momosteco who killed him with a bullet to the mouth was Tomás Chanchavac (FODIGUA 1991). Regalado’s romantic folly had come to an end (Figure 50).





50. Left. Tomás Regalado, president and caudillo of El Salvador, ca. 1908 (Photography by Pedro Calderón). Right: Regalado, few moments before his death (*Retrato ecuestre del General Tomás Regalado*, by Luis Vergara Ahumada)

After the death of Regalado, El Salvador was forced to sign a peace agreement; Díaz, wily and diplomatic, sent his congratulations to Estrada Cabrera. His victory collapsed the cause of the *liberales* in Guatemala for more than a decade; the Central American Republic dream was dead for good. In recognition of its services, the Momosteco battalion that killed Regalado became the *garde-du-corps* of Estrada Cabrera for the rest of his life; in fact, *el señor presidente* would rule 14 years more, partly because of him being successfully defended by the Momostecos from numerous *coups d'état*: “As a result of the victory, the Momostecans were received as national heroes in Guatemala City and were further honoured by being selected as the elite guard for President Estrada Cabrera. Some five hundred Momostecan soldiers served in this capacity at La Palma, the presidential residence in Guatemala City, successfully defending Cabrera during many attempted coups until he finally fell in 1920 (...) During

these duties in Guatemala City, Momostecan soldiers were given permission to construct outdoor pottery and stone shrines on the grounds of La Palma” (Tedlock 1992: 21; see Figure 54), that is, they build *awas* altars, just as those that this ethnography have dealt with time after time. In fact, four calendric priests from the town were elected as “military priests” for this regiment, providing religious support for the soldiers by burning copal for them at certain special days of the K’iche’ calendar (Carmack [1979] 2001: 312). Because of his closeness to native religion and practices, rumours started to surround Cabrera’s success. As Cardoza y Aragón (1984) puts it: “*brujos y soldados de Momostenango lo guardaban*” (“sorcerers and soldiers from Momostenango protected him”). Thus, Estrada’s Momosteco protection was rumoured to be not only military, but supernatural too.

But *el Santo Mundo* would eventually abandon Estrada Cabrera. In 1917, an earthquake destroyed Guatemala City. The reconstruction failed, partly due to the corruption of his regime. Popular indignation grew. Resistance against him was in hands of a new political party, the Unionista party, different from the delegitimized Liberal party of the past. In March 11 1920, a considerable pacific demonstration against his government arose. Estrada committed then his last mistake: he ordered his army to fire against the demonstrators, rising popular anger. According to his biographer, Arévalo Martínez, that night, during his plea, he called some calendrical priests from Momostenango to assess his future through divination: “(Estrada Cabrera) locked in with some Momosteco sorcerers to divine for him his fortune in the war luck with the *unionistas*” (Arévalo Martínez 1945: 560). According to the testimony of his close friend, general José María Letona: “He spent hours in the chapel at La Palma, kneeling

before catholic images, praying with fervour with his head between his hands. He then consulted with the Indian witches who he ordered to come from Momostenango and Totonicapan, and lock with them to practice sorcery” (Wyld Ospina 1929: 185). But the divination came out wrong. Protective rituals were in order: “All night, in the piece where the shamans of Momostenango were locked with the most excellent *señor licenciado* and the most excellent *señor presidente*, whispers were heard, lamentations, invocations in the indigenous language... a persistent smell of incense came out from the locks of the doors... Don Manuel felt lost... the demonstration of the 11<sup>th</sup> had scared him” (Hübner 1992: 459).



51. Presidential residence of La Palma. Momosteco soldiers were granted permission to build indigenous altars there (cfr. Tedlock 1992: 21); in this place, Cabrera had indigenous priests conduct ceremonies on his behalf.

But Cabrera didn't last long: through violent repression, he precipitated his own downfall. The National Assembly of Guatemala declared the tyrant unfit to rule. Estrada Cabrera resisted, and fought from his residence at La Palma, but by that time he had lost support of key sectors of the army. He surrendered on April 14,

1920: his regime had ended. Before the downfall, Cifuentes had betrayed Estrada Cabrera too, choosing to back the *unionistas* against him. Nonetheless, the Momosteco soldiers hesitated to follow his orders, for they knew that Ladino tyranny would intensify with the *unionista* victory; in the end, though, they abided (Carmack 1979: 297). One of the defining moments of Estrada's loss of power occurred when he was moved to a military academy after being deposed. There, the Momostecos saluted him with their weapons as usual when he arrived, but they lowered their rifles after some orders from Rogelio Flores, a moment dramatically narrated by Arévalo Martínez.<sup>5</sup> Estrada Cabrera had lost all his remaining power. But he didn't flee: he faced prosecution, still convinced of his righteousness. He remained in house arrest at La Palma during the rest of his life, while preparing his legal defence (Figure 52), finally dying from pneumonia in 1924. Momostenango's military fame remained recognized though, and its soldiers enjoyed the privilege of being elite presidential guards during the government of the dictator Jorge Ubico (1931-1944).



52. Manuel Estrada Cabrera at La Palma after he lost power.

The memory of some of these events is still alive at Momostenango. Certainly, the historical influence of Teodoro Cifuentes is still present, as well as being disputed: his descendants pride on his military achievements, but other voices say that his was a bad time for the indigenous people; forced labour was used to build the barracks and the new church, while Momosteco soldiers were badly paid to the point of being exploited, and corporal punishments were harsh (Historia de Momostenango Blog 2008); meanwhile, Ladino oppression against the indigenous was rampant during the period (Carmack [1979] 2001: 306). While they earned a newfound national respect, conditions were hard for Momosteco soldiers in terms of payment and living conditions; understandably, they didn't concern themselves much with Estrada Cabrera after his downfall.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, for Momostecos today, the key event is the victory against El Salvador. And for them, while brave, their soldiers didn't win that war alone. Once, while discussing the story of the war, Abraham the schoolteacher told me that one of his friends, a man who lives near the Pak'lom hill (near the town centre) and served in the army, told him some of the lore surrounding the Salvadorean war.

His grandparents told him that, during the war between Momostenango and El Salvador (...) not only soldiers fought, but also calendric priests (*chuchqajaw*) in the burning altars did, the people claim that they had power, that they had a great significance, that during that war people made offerings because Momostenango is the place of those who burn offerings (...) most of the people that live here did, they helped the soldiers, they protected them and the war was won, for most of us are indigenous, that is what my friend told me (...) those who burned offerings

fought too, for it was thanks to the burning-place shrines (*quemadero*) that the war was won.

The testimony refers not only to the personal altars of the people, but especially to the ones built by Cifuentes near his newly founded barracks, among which there is one particular altar to which this victory is attributed. It is not only the focal point of this lore, but also corresponds to the summit of the ritual hierarchy of the town to this day: the *awas rech tinamit*, the main calendrical altar at Momostenango. Its lore, which transports us from the plane of history to that of rumour and legend, can also mark the transition in this chapter from “history” to “structure”. The relation between the two will be explored with more depth in the discussion section, but more about the case must be exposed first.

### **3. An altar and its lore: The *awas rech tinamit* or town shrine**

As explained in earlier chapters, the altars of the Momostecos have a hierarchy which mirrors the political hierarchy of the town. At its base are the patrilineage altars; then, the altars at local *auxiliaturas*; at the top of this hierarchy is the *awas rech tinamit*, the town shrine. As in a domestic unit, there are two of them: a *warab'al ja* for the ancestors of the community (dead diviners and political leaders), and a *meb'il* for the increase of wealth. These altars are tended by the *chuchqajaw rech tinamit*, the highest-ranking calendric priest of the community; he is officially the calendric priest of the town *auxiliatura* as well as the *Corporación Municipal* or *alcaldes'* corporation, and thus is concerned with protecting both the whole town and the town political officers, at least nominally. As it was the case with the altars of the patrilineages, some of the deeper

meanings of this place, both in lore and in reality, have eluded the enquiry of anthropologists; my own approach to the subject was gradual, being somewhat covered by a net of rumours and hearsay.

I am drinking a beer at the tavern of Doña Bertha, an older and green-eyed lady of Ladino origins who owns a local in a street to the left of the main church of Momostenango, a block or so away from the entrance to the main market of the town. She knows quite a bit about the town: she has witnessed the development of Momosteco tradition from the mid of the twentieth century at least. She still remembers Robert Carmack, too. She is well liked and respected at the town. She likewise respects indigenous traditions, although she personally aligns with neo-Catholicism, rejecting indigenous elements (like *patrón* Santiago, to quote one example). Her tavern is favoured as a place to take a refreshing beer by many of the Momosteco workers before they head to their homes in the northern mountains via the numerous pick-ups or *fletes* outside.

It was in that unlikely place that I first heard the strange rumour that persist in town regarding the *quemadero de la Muni* (“burning place of the municipal building”), one of the informal names of the towns’ altar or *awas rech tinamit* (Figure 7). Some further historical context regarding this piece of lore is needed. The remains of Tomás Regalado, currently in the General Cemetery of Santa Isabel, are a subject of controversy to this day. It seems that Regalado’s body was very damaged by the bullet barrage that killed him; furthermore, it was kept for a whole month in the possession of the Guatemalan army at the fortress of El Jícaro, although it seems it was embalmed. Popular rumours, which persist until today, affirm that the Guatemalans didn’t give back his real body to El Salvador. Historians consider these rumours to be unfounded, since the body was

recognized by international observers at the time; however, DNA analysis has been forbidden by the family (Marroquín Gálvez 2014). In any case, for the Momostecos, as Bertha explained to me, this suspicion is replaced by an unsettling certainty. When I asked her about the town's shrine, Bertha gave me a strange reply involving Tomas Regalado himself:

“They cut his head off. They gave a false body to the Salvadorians. Then, they buried the head here in Momostenango. There, in the altar of the Municipal Building. Under the burning-place for offerings. Because the head is the oracle of the Indians (*sic*).”<sup>7</sup>”

Versions of this story run inside the town, not only among Ladinos like Barbara. I gathered another one in K'iche', by the mouth of a direct descendant of Teodoro Cifuentes, Rodrigo Mazariegos Cifuentes. Rodrigo, who despite being related to this powerful character leads a modest life as a merchant, frequently heard the stories about his great-grandfather military prowess, and even mentioned that there is a “blue book” with some of the oral tradition of Momostenango, where this episode is consigned:

My great-grandfather is the general Teodoro Cifuentes, he was a landowner and owned many houses. But I have no land, for he had many women, and they squabbled among themselves, and thus my grandfather sold his land (...) My great grandfather had military comrades, and when he fought alongside them, they took the head of the captain of the army of El Salvador. My great grandfather cut his head and they brought it to town: (they said) here it is, the head of



our enemy! And the head is buried in the *portal de comercio*. The place is always closed because the head is buried there, where the altar of the town is. Tomás Regalado was the name of the leader of the army of El Salvador. This story is in the “blue book”, many stories about the town are there, but I don't know where is it and where the book is, there are lots of stories about Tomás Regalado there.<sup>8</sup>

I was able to gather a bit more on the lore regarding this episode during my stay in the town. According to another indigenous informant, a very cultured and knowledgeable middle-class man living at the town centre, there are two altars, one at the *local de comercio* (something well known), and another one inside the municipal corporation building, which was originally the barracks of Cifuentes. It seems that the altar at “La Muni” (the nickname of the building) served originally as a war altar of sorts. The calendric priests would perform war divination for Cifuentes there, blessing his troops through calendric rituals and, even more, they would elect young people for forced conscription through calendrical divination. He repeated the same information told to me by Miguel Ángel (see last chapter) regarding the sacred days that were used for war magic in Momostenango, but added something else: “They burned for the soldiers in Tijax and Imox. Tijax to bless their weapons. They blessed the rifles presenting them before the *quemadero*. Imox to make them invisible. And they burned in Ajpu, the blowgunner, the hunter of *El Santo Mundo* (*el cazador del Santo Mundo*). For the hunter guided them in battle, but if others had burned in his behalf, he could have betrayed them and led them astray”. This testimony is interesting because it links a more native divinity to the war; Tedlock had only mentioned that Santiago, the patron of the town, had lend its supernatural protection to the soldiers (Tedlock

1992: 21). Finally, this informant said that it was the power of these rituals which allowed the Momostecos to “become invisible” and undetected during the ambush that ended Regalado’s life. I asked him about the idea of Regalado’s head being there. He knew about it too. “It is the oracle of the mountain”, he said. “When there is an omen for the town, the head talks to the guide of the people, the *chuchqajaw rech tinamit*.” He then pointed at the door where the altar is, clearly visible from the room where we were sitting at La Muni during our interview. “See that charred door over there? That is where the town guide burns offerings. It is never opened to the public” (Figure 53).



53. Left: political authorities gathered in front of the town shrine (located behind the roller door to the left of the picture; note the charred upper part; photograph by the author). Right: former town calendric priest Gabriel Xiloj inside the *awas rech tinamit* (Zapeta García 2006: 75).

Thus, for the Momostecos the victory over El Salvador was a miracle of *El Santo Mundo*, but it is also a miracle associated with the reformation of the town, and with its history. Thus, it is eerily fitting that Regalado’s remains became (or are rumoured to have become) a trophy/vessel for that divinity. Furthermore, Cifuentes reorganized and reinforced the role of *costumbrismo* in the town, for it

helped him to further his military vision. But there is another mythical background which is important to mention for the sake of our argument. According to Robert Carmack, at the towns' main altar, powerful historical figures are adored as earth gods or *mundos* themselves: "Important political figures of the past (such as cacique Diego Vicente and presidents Rafael Carrera and Jorge Ubico) (...) are propitiated by the town priests [there]." (1998: 343). I myself heard in some occasion that the spirit of Tekum Umam, the last K'iche' king defeated by Alvarado, was there. In fact, all these characters have a name: they are called *los principales del Mundo*; actually, the indigenous term is *ajawib' rech ri Mundo*, "the lords of the earth". According to Garrett Cook, they are a mixture between military men and characters from the *Danza de la Conquista* (Conquest Dance), which commemorates the defeat of the K'iche' king, Tekum Uman and his noblemen and diviners (*ajitz*) before the Conquistador Pedro de Alvarado.

The *principales del Mundo* consist of a number of military men: captains, colonels, sergeants, corporals, sublieutenants and a band of soldiers who, all together, are the guards of *Dios Mundo*, and behind these soldiers come *tzitzimites* (diviners), the Rey Quiché and Tecum, all of whom are characters in the Conquest Dance. Tecum is said to be the Mundo, and it is he who speaks for the group. It should be pointed out that the narrator of this tale, and in fact most of the powerful indigenous families from Momostenango proper, that is, the cabecera, have family histories of militarism. Thus, these soldiers of Dios Mundo have very strong

prototypical connotations in Momostecan culture and may perhaps be ancestral figures” (Cook 1981: 377-378).

In fact, as Cook remarks, this information comes from a myth recalled by a man whose father was a captain, presumably in the war against El Salvador and who performed *costumbre* himself, “to defend the soldiers” (1981: 654). He says that, in fact, the good fortune and survival of the Momostecos in war is related to the origin of *costumbre*. According to him, in the primordial time people started disappearing: they were being eaten by the animals of *El Mundo*. In their plight, people find the *kaq k'oxol*, a small red god with an axe who is the patron of all diviners. He taught *costumbre* to the first town elders, and explained the calendar. Then, he introduced them to the *principales del Mundo*, who created the appointment of the town priest or *chuchqajaw rech tinamit*. They also created the barrios or *calpules*, and bestowed the elders the two main images of the town: San Antonio Mundo, and *Patrón* Santiago. Furthermore, this author suspects that the myth gathered by him is closely related to the influence of Cifuentes in the town:

“As patron saint, Santiago is for some Momostecans the paramount deity, and his fiesta is today the most lavish public ritual. His prominence though seems recent, and while now supported by Momostecan tradition was possibly the result of what might today be called Ladinoization in the time of General Cifuentes, that is, the early twentieth century. When Cifuentes ruled Momostenango as caudillo, Santiago became a patron saint in the

Spanish Catholic sense. The *Patrón* is seen by Momostecans as a cacique and a war captain, and Momostenango has a history of domination by allied Ladino and local indigenous militarists. In pre-Cifuentes days the *Patrón* appears to have a *parcialidad* image maintained on behalf of the *pueblo*, rather than the property of the *pueblo* maintained by a *cofradía*" (Cook 1981: 400).

Thus, we have a clearer image now. It seems that the whole office of the *chuchqajaw rech tinamit* or town priest is tied to a history of militarism and its corresponding mythology, being created by the *guardia del Mundo*, the indigenous lords of the court of the last K'iche' king at which helm is the *rey del Mundo* ("king of the Earth"), as Tekum Umam is also called in the myth (Cook 1981: 664). But there is ambiguity: as Garrett Cook recounts, the raconteur vacillates whether to include Pedro de Alvarado himself there, and probably that is the reason why Ladino presidents sympathetic to the town like Rafael Carrera and Jorge Ubico are reported to be worshiped at the town altar. With this context in mind, we can turn to the more ethnographic question: what is the actual significance of this place for the present life of the town? While only glimpsed through the brief moments I shared with both the old and the new calendric priest of the town, things are indeed interesting, for they show that the entanglement of history and cosmology is even more complex than we have expected.

#### 4. The Death of a calendric priest

During the first part of my stay in Momostenango I concentrated in working with my closest informants, and didn't pay much attention to the main calendric priest of the town, which at the time was José Itzep Herrera. Itzep was very old already, and was rarely seen to be seen in town. The first time I met him was after 1 January 2018, during the ceremony in which the town's major gives the new alcaldes for the year their authority staffs. In that occasion, the main political officers of the town departed from the Majors house to the town centre, stopping right in front of the shrine of the town. Itzep censed the way for the political authorities. After the ceremony, I managed to interview him at the Municipal building (Figure 54). Visibly tired, Itzep didn't show much interest in the interview and only alluded to to his duty to make offerings to protect the town so "everyone's lives were peaceful", praying for good agriculture, good weather, rain and political harmony. The same day in town, someone told me that Itzep was very ill by then, and relied on others for his ritual duties, which include burning offerings at faraway altars. And it was indeed true: mere weeks after I interviewed him, Itzep had died.





54. Former *chuchqajaw rech tinamit*, José Itzep Herrera.

Soon after Itzeps' passing away, a commission was made in order to prepare the election of a new town calendric priest. The second town manager or *síndico segundo* and a council of calendric priests made their preparations, and asked each of the communities to send a representative for the election. The election is a very peculiar procedure, for it involves a public divination séance, in which several candidates are "examined" before the *dioses mundo* and the spirits of the dead town diviners. The process in fact somewhat replicates the traditional election of a patrilineage head priest, described by Carmack (1995: 335-336). When the headman of a patrilineage dies, his successor must be elected by calendric divination. A council of priest-shamans meet and perform divination, examining each of the able men of the patrilineage by casting seeds before them. In the end, all the diviners must agree upon a successor. The decision is considered to be made by the earth gods and the ancestors, and it is definitive and inflexible, for it is impossible to oust an elected headman and the appointment is for life. Interestingly, at least in theory, the experience of a

potential candidate is not considered at an election, and the will of the ancestors must be respected regardless any lack of qualification. Thus, the election is always potentially disruptive and tense, since in theory it is not based on ritual/social merits, although in practice it is not like this, at least not in this occasion.

As we shall see, similar problems did beset the succession of Itzep, since the latter was perceived to be unprepared and unqualified for his job at the time of his appointment, which made him unpopular. He wasn't liked by any of my key informants (who didn't knew each other). For some of the Ancestrales, he did nothing to protect the towns' interests during the mining crisis. They even considered him to be a puppet of the *alcalde* and his council, which tried to sell out to the mining companies. He was even blamed the strong rains and bad weather during the last year (6 Iq' or "Wind") on his inability to control the earth spirits: "he is too weak, he cannot control the Mam", some complained. Other informants were equally unkind. One even told me after he died that "the ancestors claimed his life, for he had become negligent in his duties"; of course, the truth is that Itzep was already very old and infirm, and he stayed a decade in power, much less than his predecessor Gabriel Xiloj (who served for four decades), but still quite a long time for his age. Ritual power is perceived in Momostenango as being not only physically demanding, but life threatening, for it is always a bargain with the powers of the earth. In any case, as we will see, the result of Itzep's tenure brought about the opposite: allegations that, in the next elections, things were rigged so a more experienced and connected candidate would win.



## **5. The elections of the *Santo Mundo***

A couple of months after the death of Itzep, the election of a new town calendric priest was arranged. The event took place at the Municipal Salon of Momostenango, a place for political gatherings (it was there that the main reunions for the anti-mining referendum took place, for example) on March 12, 2018, or 13 Kiej in the Maya Calendar. The main political authorities of the town, that is, the major and his associates, and the alcaldes of the four wards, were there. Calendrical priests from most of the hamlets were there, though the “selection” was not comprehensive (Chunimatux, the town I worked in, didn’t figure in it, for example). People from the local television broadcasting station, MOMOS TV 98, and some external observers (like young academics from Guatemalan universities) were there too; after some political speeches and preliminary rites, the divination procedure began.

As explained in the introduction and with more detail by Bunzel (1952) and Tedlock (1992), K’iche’ divination involves the sorting and counting of seeds, each of which represent one of the regent deities of the days of the calendar. Crystals of different sizes placed before the diviner represent the supernatural hierarchy of the earth gods. A random number of seeds is taken from the diviners’ bundle and placed in groups of four. The diviner starts counting days from the current date and stops at certain points of his counting according to the “lightning” in his blood, ‘interrogating’ the regent deity of that day; since the number of seeds is random, the final cluster of seeds has a different remainder each time, and also the day represented by the last seed (the most important in a divination) is random.

In the case of the election of the town's priest-shaman, this kind of divination is performed too, but with some variants. Up to thirteen diviners are called (Zapeta García 2006: 62); they all sit on a table divided in four groups, one for each side (Figure 55).<sup>9</sup> The diviners had sheets with eight tables, each with the name of each of the candidates on top, 3 columns and four rows below. The rows represented the four diviners. The first column records the number of remaining seeds during the divination; the second and the third, the coefficient and name of the sacred day at which the counting ended. The ideal result for a candidate would be a Kiej day (associated with political power) with a high coefficient (9 to 13) and four remaining seeds for all the diviners. This is a rather difficult result to achieve, it took five hours of continuous divination to know the result.





55. The election of the new town calendrical priest or *chuchqajaw rech tinamit* in 2018.

As mentioned before, the event was somewhat polemical. None of the candidates from the rural hamlets was elected, confirming Carmacks' observations that it is always the same patriclans and cantons who win the appointment (see note 3). After this, the diviners that were observers of the procedure were examined, again with no favourable results. This implied that one of the diviners on the table had to be elected. A quarrel ensued: some alleged that the procedure was rigged from the start; others used to occasion to advance a motion to elect an official assistant to aid the future winner in his duties (a secretary of sorts), which was denied. Finally, after a final divination, the winner was announced: Miguel Vicente. As explained elsewhere, the Vicentes are a very powerful family, descendants of the founder of the town, the XVIIth century cacique Diego Vicente, and in a way the last representatives of the pre-Hispanic indigenous nobility (Carmack [1979] 2001: 310). Miguel Vicente lives in Barrio Santa Ana, perhaps the most important of the main four wards of Momostenango, and is an experienced and powerful divining priest (Figure 56). Furthermore, in the speech

made by the alcalde after the election, he said they were friends. Vicente then made a prayer in memory of José Itzep, as well as all the former diviners, calling them *oxlajuj may* (“thirteen ranks of the dead”) the traditional appellative for dead and divinized ancestors.



56. Miguel Vicente with a bouquet of flowers, representing his authority .

After the divination, Vicente offered a reception at his home in which he burned offerings and made a prayer at his family altar. He was congratulated by the political hierarchy of the town and admonished by the highest-ranking divining priests. This exchange, made in K'iche', was rather interesting. The most respected elder reminded Vicente that they were in the presence of the dead ancestors, and offered him three bundles of flowers. The flowers represent the power of the dead ancestors (they are called “flowers of the graveyard”) and are means of ritual purification: one to “pay the debts” contracted with the earth gods, another for his ritual cleansing, another for the consecration of his office.

The elder instructed Vicente in the realization of the following rituals, which involved the presentation of three burning candles, one for each of these flowers and their associated meanings. He reminded him of the lack of experience of his predecessor and the troubles that this brought to the council. He told him that this time the office holder would be carefully guided by an instructor (*ajtij*), recited the names of his predecessors, and told him that a book with the appropriate rituals and the names of the keepers of the office was kept by the community. He reminded him too that his election was not made by the elders alone, but “by the hand” of the dead diviners, and told that he and other 5 calendric priests had performed rituals at the graveyard at the date 6 Ajpu, seeking the blessing of the deceased Itzep for his succession. Another elder then reminded him of the places and dates of the appropriate following rituals.<sup>10</sup> After a ritual cycle of 260 days after his election with all the rituals performed, the new town priest can be invested.

## **6. The Cosmology of the Town Shrine: Meeting Miguel Vicente**

A while after his election, in the interregnum period between his appointment and his investment, I managed to arrange an interview with Vicente, thanks to my friend Miguel Angel Pelicó, whose career was the subject of the former chapter. As a confirmation of his prestige and his authoritative character, mentioned in the earlier chapter, a phone call from him sufficed to arrange the interview, something which impressed me and which he bragged about too. The interview, made in K'iche' with the help of Miguel Angel at Vicente's home (Figure 57), was long and conferred a wealth of details regarding rituals and dates associated with Vicente's future appointment. However, the readers of this



chapter would wonder, as I did, what did he had to say about the Tomás Regalado story. The answer was somewhat disappointing: Vicente didn't either confirm nor deny the whole story, although he indeed mentioned that Regalado's head was cut (*xqupix ri ujolom*) and taken by his captors; instead, he went into a somewhat long and unrelated rant about the recent loss of the prestige of traditional religion. My translator was of the opinion that Vicente politely changed the subject, and I didn't press on the matter so, sadly, I could obtain no confirmation for this piece of lore by Vicente himself.



57. Miguel Vicente at his home, in the Santa Isabel ward of Momostenango .

However, Vicente offered a crucial piece of information regarding the cosmology associated with this altar, a piece of information with great implications for this work. The town shrine, just as the altars of the patrilineages, is itself, just like the other altars mentioned in this work, a “corral” where the soul-essences (*nawales*) of all the inhabitants of the town are contained. Thus, the main function of this

altar was to protect the town and communities from the actions of outsiders with evil intentions or “people that come to cause harm”, which again are identified with wild animals like coyotes and snakes. The 32 communities of Momostenango must pay a contribution (*pajo'm*) or face being expelled of the altar by being omitted from the prayers of the town calendric priest, something which will bring them trouble and harm.

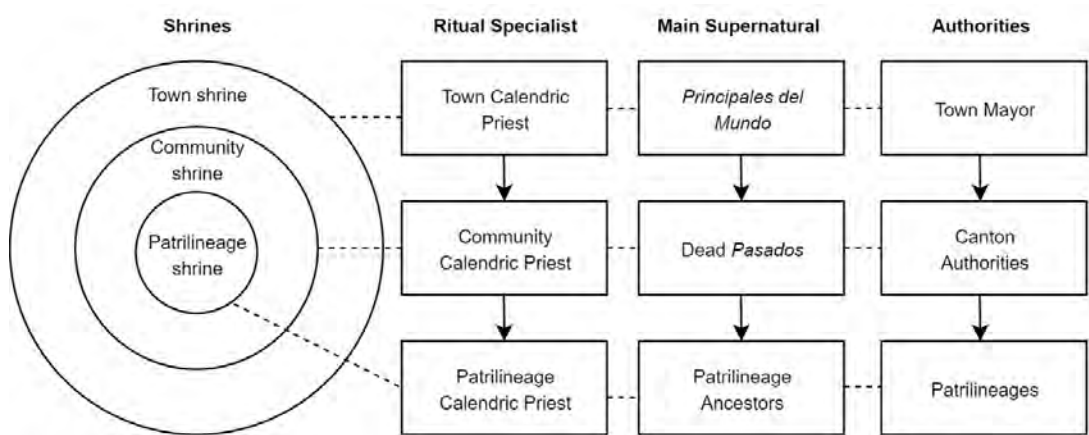
“The town shrine is like a corral, all people are there, all Momostenango is inside of it, and those who are outside, it is as if a coyote arrives and eat them, they have problems (...) The 32 cantons are invited to give their contribution (*pajo'm*), their help.<sup>11</sup> These are those whose names are there (inside the altar), that is the reason why they are inside the corral, they are inside, not outside, and those who won't help, are outside of it, for they won't help the earth gods, the earth and the ancestors.”<sup>12</sup>

Vicente made sure to repeat his explanation in Spanish and left little doubt that the corral cosmology that exists at the base of the social structure is clearly replicated at the top of it, for he would use the expression *corral del pueblo* (town's corral) to refer to the shrine itself.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Vicente said that the “corral” can be understood to be a “circle” (*sipaniq*) or even a “box” or place for safekeeping (*kolib'al*) souls, for it is nothing more than “our house” (*qachoch*), the supernatural house where the animal souls of the whole community live. Thus, cosmology seen from the perspective of this altar is like a ring of concentric circles, where shaman-priests at the bottom of the hierarchy protect their own families, those who are associated with particular towns do the same for their

local alcaldes and communities, and the town priest does the same for both the mayor of the town, the political hierarchy and the 32 communities that conform the town. In this fashion, the answer to the problem of whether the hierarchy of shaman-priests is simply political, as Carmack considered (1998: 342), or ritual, as was the opinion of Tedlock (1992: 35), is that it is actually both. The ranking of the Momosteco shamans is defined by socio-political hierarchies, going from the lowest level (the patrilineage) to the highest (the towns' government), but it is wholly ritual too, since the highest-ranking altar "contains" the ones that are beneath it ("all Momostenango is inside there"). Rudy told me, when asked about the town priest "the people don't know, but he binds us all, everyone is bound by him" (*la gente no sabe, pero él nos amarra a todos, todos están amarrados por él*). At the time, I didn't really understand much about cosmology in Momostenango, so I didn't know what did this "binding" referred to. But after talking with Vicente it became clear: the town's calendric priest is just like a patrilineage priest, but he has a direct link with the ancestors of the whole town (*oxlajuj may*, "the thirteen ranks of the dead") as well as dead political figures of the past, the *principales del mundo* mentioned before (the last K'iche' king, Tekum Umam, the K'iche' elders of the past and Guatemalan presidents), and he can decide which community is "inside" and "outside" the "corral", leaving their spirit essences open to the attacks of the forces of the underworld. As the reader can see, this protection is ambiguous; in fact, it duplicates the protection offered by the *principales del Mundo* to the first human elders, as described in the myth narrated by Cook (cfr. 1981: 656-657; 674). In fact, one of the first things I heard when I arrived to the town regarding the altar at "La Muni" was that offerings of two types were made at the place: ones, regarding rains, so the rain will be gentle



and not kill people. The other, offerings for political order, “so the people will not raise against the government”. Thus, in the vein of classic anthropology, a scheme of how cosmology in Momostenango looks from the perspective of this main altar could be done, of course, just as an old-fashioned exercise in anthropological diagramming, which of course must not be taken as my conception of cosmology but which is nonetheless useful to visualize these hierarchies (Figure 58).

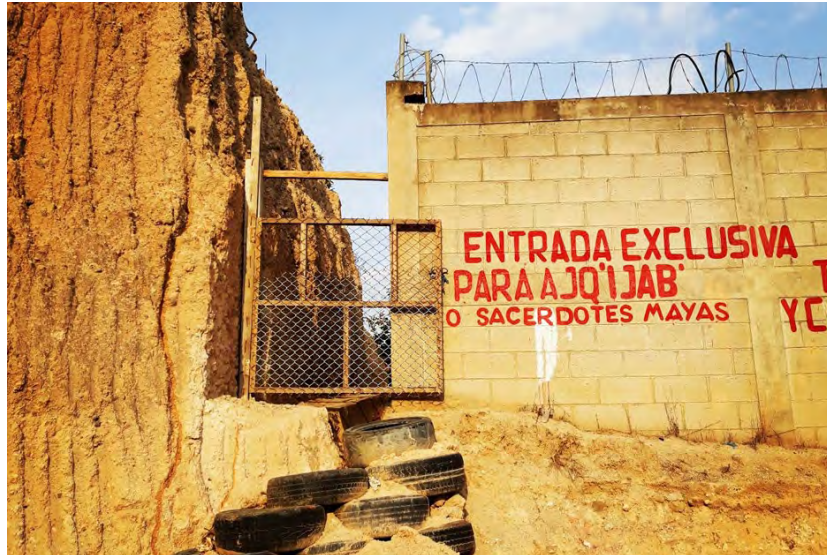


58. Ritual and political hierarchies of Momostenango from the perspective of the town’s main altar.

Thus, the “binding” action of the town priest, mentioned before, is cosmological too, for the cosmology of the town is like a series of *corrales* or sacred underworld spaces where the animal co-essences of the people are held, much like in Evons’ Vogt account of Zinacantan, discussed earlier (Vogt 1969: 384). However, instead of a single sacred mountain which controls these essences, as in Zinacantan, it seems that in Momostenango this dynamic is “replicated” from the bottom to the top. This would constitute an even stronger example of the principle of “structural replication” that Vogt proposed for the Zinacantecos and the Maya in general (1965), since this replication is perfect in each level and is both political

and ritual, not only ritual, as he described in Zinacantan. Furthermore, curious is the fact that the word *pet* “to embrace or encircle” is used by the Tzotzil to describe these structures as Vogt described (1990 [1970]: 130), while the K’iche’ use the word “circle” (*sipanik*). Even more, the Tzeltal describe the inner space where the “bird of the soul” is within the human heart as a “box” (Figuerola Pujol 2010: 43), same as the K’iche’ describe the corral space within their altars; thus, the micro-cosmical space of the body/soul is replicated in the macro-cosmical space of the social, too. However, of course, this analysis remains too tied to the conceptions of classical social anthropology and it is offered for the reader as a way to understand better what will be said about cosmology and history in the analysis section.

After Vicente’s election, I was only able to spend a single day with him, but his ritual agenda was so hectic that it was representative of the numerous obligations that a calendric priest accumulates during his life in the ritual hierarchy. In the morning of that day, at 9am, he made a prayer for the *nawal* of a man at the San Antonio Mundo hill. The hill is located next to Abrahams’ school, as mentioned in chapter two, the altar whose *rajawal* (owner) was a snake according to Abraham’s father. The view is now desolate, since excavators are working right next to the hill in new developments (Abraham told me they were extracting dirt that will serve as ballast for new roads); the sacred place is now protected by a wall that has a curious sign: “Exclusive entrance for *ajq’ijab’* or Maya priests” (*Entrada exclusiva para ajq’ijab’ o sacerdotes mayas*), and a staircase made of rubber tires piled on a dirt slope; a sad reminder of the more and more frequent clashes between “development” and sacred Indigenous landscapes (Figure 58).



58. Industrial devastation around the San Antonio Mundo hill.

I arrived very early that day. Vicente was not there yet; instead, there were two apprentices of his waiting. The apprentices, young men, had a somewhat questioning attitude towards my presence from the start. In contrast, Vicente was very accessible, insisting that I participated in the ritual by cleaning, laying candles and materials. The situation was weird throughout the day, and it was only made worse by the fact that there was constant drinking between the rituals and during all day long, which contrasted sharply with Virgilio, Rudy or Miguel

Ángel's style. The first ritual was in the traditional style I have described many times here: a prayer of supplication to the *dioses mundo* that inhabit the shrine in question (they ones that inhabit that particular place are called "the sixty-eight *nawal*"; San Antonio Mundo is related to the hill, but it is not its only "master"). We burned offerings at the multiple altars in the place, while Vicente recited his prayers (Figure 59). The ritual was of an urgent kind: both black and white candles were used, an array suggestive of counter-witchcraft. At the end of the ceremony, Vicente spoke with his apprentices. They remarked about the industrial devastation before our very eyes. Vicente sentenced that those involved would pay the price for angering the earth: "Surely, one of them will pay the price. He shall fall headfirst and die". Other authors have remarked how among modern day K'iche' there is a hungering, wild dimension to the earth, which becomes especially dangerous in regards to certain landscape features, which can become irate and kill people as a form of retribution for an offense, for example, the destruction brought by the bulldozing a mountain to build a road, or to erect a building.<sup>14</sup>



59. Miguel Vicente performing a ceremony in behalf of the soul of a man at the San Antonio Mundo or 68 *nawales* hill.

Then, some people from Aldea Santa Ana began arriving to the hill and sitting nearby some benches installed at the site. A religious pilgrimage arrived on a with the towns' image of San Antonio Mundo (as explained, a native saint with the shape of a child), since the image was on its way to its main festivity in Pologua; some musicians (violin, guitar and a bass) arrived with them too, and started to play. Things got weirder when a soldier (who seem to had been guarding the heavy machinery of the Municipio) arrived, had a sit and asked questions about the ritual in a cordial way to Miguel. He sat with his heavy rifle and contemplated the scene too, although he left soon. Miguel Vicente and the principals started dancing in front of the image (Figure 60), made me dance too and, at some point, he even tried to convince the members of the *cofradía* to let me carry the image of San Antonio Mundo on my back and dance with it, as it is sometimes done. Luckily for me (given the social and ritual consequences of any possible mishandling of the image), they refused.







60. People from Aldea Santa Ana venerate San Antonio Mundo.

Finally, after the ritual dance and music, the pilgrims took the image and started going their way to the Santa Ana ward. I took a pickup with the musicians to join them. Miguel performed another ritual there, in behalf of the members of the local *alcaldía* government. The ritual was very similar to that carried by Virgilio at Chunimatux (see chapter 3): members of the *alcaldía* knelt before San Antonio Mundo while being blessed with a sacred bundle carried by the local *chuchqajaw* at the *alcaldía*. However, in parallel, a ritual of burning of offerings was carried at an *awas* altar right next to them (Figure 61). As in the ritual described in chapter 3, the *alcaldes* were censed, and the ritual had a similar meaning to that performed by Virgilio: to bless the *alcaldes* and strengthen their authority, especially regarding witchcraft carried against them. The *may* ancestors were invoked, being called “thirteen divisions of the land, thirteen families”, a division that doesn’t hold an actual correlation with geography, being more of a calendrical and ritual one.







61. Rituals performed by Miguel Vicente at the local *alcaldía* of Aldea Santa Ana.

At the end of the day, a party was celebrated at the community, just as it happened with the celebration of Santiago at Chunitux. But the *chuchqajaw rech tinamit*, who is not the official *chuchqajaw* at Santa Ana, is tired and we instead decided to hit the road and have some drinks. We all ran out of money at some point, but Vicente managed to ask for some credit at a local bar. Finally, me and the apprentices take Vicente to his home, and we parted ways late at night, after an exhausting day of rituals and drinking.

## **7. Discussion: on the antinomy between “history” and “structure” and a different perspective**

As the reader could no doubt notice, this chapter has read like a disparate collage: the surreal national history of Guatemala, which inspired *realismo mágico* literature and reads like an example of it; the local lore of Momostenango;



politico-religious machinations and a deep cosmology, weaved with ethnographic experiences. While this panorama seems disperse, it can be said that the antinomies mentioned at the beginning of this chapter remain at the core of all these testimonies: history and anthropology, diachrony and synchrony, past and present. As I shall argue in this conclusion, the material presented in this chapter can make for a new argument, one that doesn't really seek a synthesis or solution like that proposed by Sahlins, but is still informed by his perspective.

We can sense some analogies with the Sahlinsian retelling of the death of Captain Cook here, but the analogy breaks in other senses. While Sahlins' analysis is deeply informed by present and past ethnographies of Hawaiian societies, he couldn't directly interrogate anyone on how captains' Cook death was integrated into native political/ritual structures and oral memory: he had to work with historical testimonies alone. In my case, the problem is perhaps that history becomes at some point lore and legend: Regalado's story, while true to the point of his death, becomes apocryphal when dealing with him becoming a war trophy, supposedly buried in the main altar of Momostenango, a fact that I couldn't prove nor disprove. Thus, in Sahlins' example, captain Cooks' death is historical, but the "interpretation" or "symbolism" is contested by his critics (Obeyesekere 1992); while in mine, the "symbolisms" are clearly articulated by the informants, while the actual "event" is doubtful.

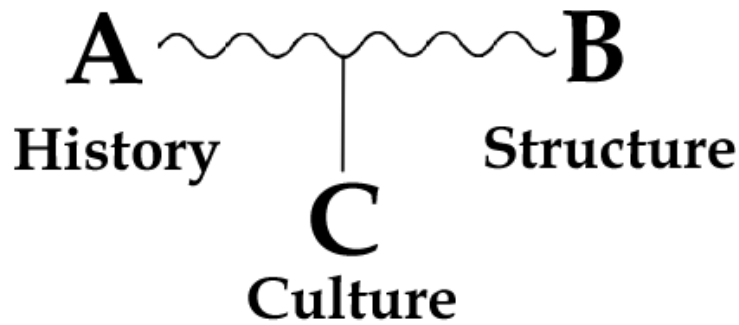
But beyond the conventional level of historical events, the main problem is theoretical, and this is where the thoroughness of the material presented, in terms of both the historical and the 'structural' side of the dichotomy, can make a difference. In Sahlins, culture is used to break the antinomy of structure and

history, positing a world of culturally determined “categories in action” where human experience is refracted and appropriated by “cultural concepts”:

The problem comes down to the relation of cultural concepts to human experience, or the problem of symbolic reference: of how cultural concepts are actively used to engage the world. Ultimately at issue is the being of structure in history and as history (...) Human social experience is the appropriation of specific percepts by general concepts: an ordering of men and the objects of their existence according to a scheme of cultural categories which is never the only one possible, but in that sense is arbitrary and historical (Sahlins 1985:145).

Captains' Cook death is posited by Sahlins as an example of cultural categories informing “symbolic action”, the latter conceived as a means of escaping the antinomies of history and society by achieving a new synthesis. The lasting contribution of Sahlins' work was to show that, at some point, the dichotomies posited by classic structural-functionalism break: “what is functional, in this sense of instrumental, must be structural” (1999: 408). However, culture remained a somewhat reductionist anchor for his new synthesis: “Desires depend on historical contexts of values, on existing or potential relationships of the culture, not only for their content but for their possible realizations” (1998: 408); thus, for Sahlins, history was determined by symbolic actions informed by culture; encounters like those between the Hawaiians and Cook being instances of “a highly dynamic form of cultural scripting, dialectically active as a moment of conjuncture between existing terms of reference and the novelty of what is

experienced at the moment when those perceptions are deployed” (Bayly 2018: 119). Thus, the Sahlinsian synthesis was that of history and structure within culture (Figure 62).



#### 62. Sahlinsian synthesis.

Thus, while Sahlins’ contribution is of an enduring value, I would like to offer here a different version of what is perhaps, in the end, the same idea. As I have mentioned, the most important thing to have in mind is that, for the people of Momostenango, it was not soldiers alone who won the war, but the altars (*quemaderos*). Of course, this means that the ritual, and therefore the cosmological action of the collective, had a decisive influence in the outcome of the war. Having achieved this victory, the outcome of the war itself changed the ritual organization of the town, impacting its ‘structure’: the war altar became the main altar of the town, and the place where the head of the enemy is supposed to lie, became the main altar in Momostenango. Thus, if we were to categorize this, we would have a sort of loop: structure impacts history, history impacts structure. So far, so good, but nothing too different from our prior understanding.

Now, if we were to express this dichotomy in the terms proposed by this thesis, that is, of the non-reductionist notion of ‘downward causation’, this dichotomy could look like this: cosmology, an emergent property of a ‘social

system', seems to have an impact on 'history', which would be one of its constituent parts ("low level phenomenon"). Thus, as other forms of causality examined in this thesis, history can be regarded as the normal, expected flow of cause and effect that seems to be put under the domain of that emergent entity we call cosmology in order to acquire a full sense for the people living and making it. However, the truth is that this analysis would be only correct in the Western perspective. In reality, from the point of view of the other, things are different. The truth is that there is no real difference between 'history' and the flow of causality foreordained by the gods. History happens because the gods make it happen. But then, what could be the possible meaning of cosmological action?

This is when things become complex, as in many other places in this thesis, but it feels important to anticipate now the argument developed in the conclusions. The truth is that, in a way, from the point of view of the other, cosmology is at the 'base' level. What people do is to manipulate cosmological causality in order to achieve their desired historical outcomes. However, this is not symbolic at all, that is, cosmology is not being manipulated as a set of symbols: this is real, that is, cosmology in non-Western cultures is *the actual flow of cause and effect*. Thus, making a ritual has a different consequence than in our culture: it is actually impacting the 'fabric of reality', so to speak. We have seen this time after time in this thesis, of course. The main difference between the ritual actions examined in prior chapters, and this, is that the ritual actions performed to win the war against El Salvador were not individual, but *collective*. This is what makes these ritual actions historical actions, rather than just social actions. Thus, from the point of view of the other, the opposite is true: people as a collective performed actions in order to impact the cosmological flow of

causality, of which what we call 'history' is merely a part, in order to *win* the war. However, we can see that this form of action is not direct, but rather a 'constraining' action in order to 'channel' the outcome of the war to a desired outcome, since people clearly know that soldiers are the ones acting: they are just 'channelling' the actions into a desired outcome.<sup>15</sup>

What I suggest is that Sahlin's was always correct: historical action in non-Western worlds is always 'cultural'. However, what I suggest is that the interpretivist vision of 'culture' is perhaps, ironically, too tied to our own perspectives, and must be more informed even more by the point of view of the other. Wagner's now famous proposal in *The Invention of Culture* ([1975] 2016) is, of course, a good start to achieve this. The main idea of Wagner is that 'culture' is very different for non-Western people. As it is well known, he characterizes it as 'invention', rather than convention. I will return to a more engaged analysis of Wagner's proposal in my conclusions, but for now this can be said: when non-Western cultures speak of things in terms of what we perceive as 'cultural' categories, they don't speak about them as mere symbols, or as items in a set of interpretive categories *only*. Instead, since culture in non-Western world is invention, they do this to engage in a creative and unconventional relationship which seeks to impinge on conventions and become powerful by doing so, as Wagner suggests:

If Americans and other Westerners create the incidental world by constantly trying to predict, rationalize, and order it, then tribal, religious, and peasant peoples create their universe of innate convention by constantly trying to change, readjust, and impinge upon it. Our concern is that of bringing things into an ordered and consistent relation—whether one of logically organized "knowledge" or practically organized "application" — and we call the summation of our efforts *culture*. Their

concern might be thought of as an effort to "knock the conventional off balance," and so make themselves powerful and unique in relation to it. If we understand "power" to represent invention, an individual force or element that impinges upon the collectivities of society, then the urban Westerner "is" power (in the sense of his "innate" individuality and special gifts and talents) and "does" morality (his "performance"), whereas the religious or tribal person "does" or "follows" power (special roles, guiding magic, or spiritual helpers) and "is" moral (Wagner [1975] 2016: 88).

We have seen that, in the case of Momostenango at the beginning of the XXth century, the vision of war as something cosmologically informed, rather than just 'historically' informed, was actually not a way to interpret the present events, but a way to *influence* them, to achieve victory, or to *invent* them. What I suspect is that a similar logic permeates all cases of controversial encounters between the West and non-Western cultures. If the reader would excuse my daring in suggesting this, what I would say is this: it is not that Polynesians attributed divinity to Captain Cook, for example, in order to put him into a familiar set of categories to make him understandable for their culture, or to interpret him. They did it in order to have power over him, to *invent* him, just as the Momostecos ended up 'divinizing' the relics of their enemy, Regalado, *in order to control others like him* through rituals, as the testimony of the priest of the town implies. I believe this can be predicated from many controversial 'encounter' situations, like the divinization of the Spaniards by the Aztec.<sup>16</sup> Of course, the first one to propose this was Wagner himself, with his analysis of the cargo cult as an "an interpretive counterpart of anthropology" ([1975] 2016: 34). Thus, for example, the divinization and death of Captain Cook can be seen as his 'invention' by the Polynesians, the cargo cult can be interpreted as the 'invention' of World War II technology by the Melanesians, the divinization of the Spaniards as the

'invention' of Europeans by the Aztec, and so on. Since for us, culture is a fixed *convention*, the idea of having someone become a god becomes almost unthinkable, to the point that, for example, in the case of the Aztecs the idea has been denied as a myth by contemporary historians (Towsend 2003). But, as we have seen, cosmology in non-Western worlds, and gods within it, can be ritually controlled or constrained: it is inventive, and so is the world, history included. 'Downward causation' can be exerted from humans towards cosmology and the gods, who are not something above, but below, the 'basis' of reality, rather than merely their overlords. Therefore, if you put someone in such a definite place within this cosmology, he is not a 'symbol': he becomes controlled in virtue of his inclusion in the cosmological order, which can be constrained by the ingenious ritual actions of humans. As I will argue in my conclusion, this is because what is emergent in non-Western worlds is not cosmology: it is humans themselves. Let us then pass on to the conclusion, and develop this idea in full.

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## Notes

1 Asturias, who makes a fictionalized and not a historical account, only referred to this episode in his novel with a passing remark about "the pagan indigenous witches that dance at his home (the president's)" (Asturias [1946] 2000: 310).

2 This account of the War of Totoposte is based mainly on Rendón 1988: 183-196, as well as Flores Escalante and Kuny Mena 2004. The word *totoposte* is of Nahuatl origin, referring to the toasted tortilla that was the staple food of the army (Rendón 1988: 183).

3 Following the procedure of using pseudonyms for key characters and informants usual in anthropology, Carmack refers to Cifuentes as “Cienfuegos” in his book on K’iche’ social history (1979), a somewhat useless precaution given the fact that the historical relevance of Cifuentes makes him unmistakable.

4 Arevalo Martínez book is an example of the racial prejudices of the *unionistas* and the *liberales*, as recent studies have shown (Aburto Delgado 2019). One of the accusations made by *liberales* against Cabrera and his XIXth century predecessor, the dictator José Rafael Carrera Turcios, was that of the “scandal” of being ruled by a non-white *caudillo* (Woodward 1993). In the case of Carrera Turcios, he is even acknowledged as “having taken the interests of Guatemala's Indian majority to heart” (Adas, Stearns and Schwarz 2009: 77). Estrada Cabrera was more of a personality-cult inclined authoritarian with less redeeming features, despite his meritocratic inclinations, nonetheless, Ladinos deeply resented his authority on the basis of his non-whiteness.

5 “Having arrived before the two ranks of Momostecos, general Enrique Arís ordered:

-For El Presidente, present your weapons!

-Do not! —Interrupted Rogelio Flores—Here goes no president of us: just a prisoner of the people.” (Arévalo Martínez 1945: 588).

6 Ubico, equally despotic, had a better reputation; he was called *tatanol* (great father”) and was considered a “protector” of the indigenous people (Carmack [1979] 2001: 306).

7 *Le cortaron la cabeza. Le dieron un cuerpo falso a los de El Salvador. Enterraron la cabeza aquí en Momostenango. Ahí está en el altar de la Muni. Porque esa cabeza es el oráculo de los indios.*



8 In the K'iche' original: *Nu mam ri' general Teodoro Cifuentes, sib'ilak nim ru rulew, sib'ilak e k'i ri rachoch, xa're k'u ri in mak'ota wulew. Xa rumal ri nu mam ek'ii ri e rixoqil, tek'uri xu'k ra taa ch'o'j rumal k'uri ri nu mam xa chomak xu k'iyij ri rulew (...) Ri nu mam ek'o rachil ri ajch'o'jab' eretaq xe' ch'o'jonik kuk' re' rachil xe' kuinik xkesaj ri jolom ri ki nimal ri ajch'o'jab re ri Salvador. Ri nu mam xe' kuinik xuqu xkik'ut cho ri tinimit ri xe' cha' wa ujolom ri qak'ulel xuqu ri jun jolomaj muqul pa la portal del comercio, xa qi tz'apil wi xa rumal muqul jum jolom chila' jawije' k'owi la porob'al rech ri tinimit. Tomás Regalado ub'i ri kinimal ri ajch'o'jab' rech ri Salvador. K'ola pa jun wuj rax sib'ilaj ri ojer tzij rech wa tinimit, ra' re k'u ma reta'mtaj jawi xkanajwi, chin ruk' k'o wi ri wuj xane sib'ilaj ri historia rech ri Tomás Regalado kacha...*

9 Eight calendric priests were officially appointed this time to perform the divination: Julio Pelicó, Juan Kalel, Miguel Vicente, Silverio Baten, Victoria Kej, Santos Guox, Antonio Ixcoy and Juan Vicente Torres; however, there were four more representatives of the four wards at the table. According to Carmack (1998: 342) these diviners always come from Pueblo Viejo and Los Cipreses; indeed, one of them was the calendric priest from Los Cipreses, who has some important ritual obligations, however, some of them didn't hail from these communities. Carmack considered the position of town calendric priest to be hereditary, for the same clans and cantons were always elected; the observation carries some truth, since the surviving list shows how the Vicente patriclan, the most powerful among those recognized as being *caciques* since the XVIth century by the Spanish authorities (Chaclán Díaz 1998: 142), has almost monopolized the position, and indeed the newly elected town calendric priest was a Vicente yet again. Nonetheless, notable variations in surnames feature in the list of prior authorities

gathered by Zapeta García (2006: 81), which indicates that the election is more democratic than Carmack implies.

10 The shaman-priest must burn offerings on 11 Kiej at the mountain of Kilaja, on 11 Ajpu at Pasokop, on 11 Aj at Tamanku and on 11 Kame at Pipil. Secondary rituals are carried on 12 Kiej at Los Cipreses. On the dates 13 Kiej, 13 Aj, 13 Ajpu and 13 Kame he must make offerings at the following locations: the town shrine (Portal Municipal), the Pak'lom hill, the Uja'l Pak'lom altar, the *kokoch* altar in front of the main church of Momostenango, and finally inside the main church of Momostenango (cfr. Zapeta García 2006: 65-66).

11 The word *pajo'm* comes from *pajik*, "to weigh", and in this context alludes to the benefices given to the town calendrical priest in order to ensure he can do his job (mainly money and ritual materials like incense and candles); however, as Carmack mentions, regarding their own living expenses these priests are wholly self-sufficient (Carmack 1998a: 341).

12 *Ri awas rech tinamit xajunam ruk' ri jun korral, konojel ri winaq e nimom chipam, ronojel ri Chwitz'aq e nimom chupam, a'retaq ku ri e k'o chirik, jape jun utiw k'u tijo, ku riq k'ax. Ke' ch'ab'ex ri 32 komun, are k'u pajo'm ri', are' xane rumal etob'inaq che. Are k'u ri' kab'e kibi' xane rumal ri' ek'o pa ri jun korral, ek'o chupam ma ek'ota chirij. Are k'u ri ma katob'taj, k'o ri' chirij ri korral, makatob'taj che ri ajawob' ri uwachulew, chike ri mam ati't.*

13 *Awas del pueblo significa que todo el pueblo de Momostenango está metido en un corral, está adentro para que no pase todo lo que está afuera del corral, fácil lo lleva un coyote, lo lleva cualquier cosa, va a pasar algo, problema, eso significa el corral del pueblo.*

“The town altar means that all of Momostenango is inside of an altar, it is inside so none of what is outside the corral enters inside, for easily a coyote takes someone out, anything can take you, something happens, a problem, that is the meaning of the corral of the town.”

14 “Some Maya have perceived acts of construction, such as changing the course of a river or building a highway, as violent disturbances to the earth, and believe that the Owner needs sacrifices to be compensated for the injury. Further, they believe that to accomplish good works, for construction projects to be stable, ‘the sacred earth, the sacred place, needs a present.’ Residents of local communities narrate stories of architectural structures which were sites of human sacrifice in the 1910s–1940s. Rafael, of San Pedro de Laguna, shares how his grandfather told him that in the construction of the Bridge of Belize, now called the Medici Bridge, they planted a human head in each of the columns to stabilize the project. Martín Poz explains, ‘In Nahuala, several people were sacrificed in the construction of the two bridges for the Pan American highway that passes through the town. Twenty people were sacrificed during the construction of the tunnel outside Zunil; people were sacrificed at the dam at Santa María de Jesús to stabilize the structure.’” (Molesky-Poz 2006: 104).

15 This aspect of ‘constraining or channelling’ rather than direct action will be developed in depth in my conclusion.

16 Curiously, comparative analysis of such situations has been rare. A recent example is that of Lucie Johnson (2005), who compares the Polynesian and the Aztec examples, stressing the cultural importance of these conceptions for both groups, despite the denialist’s revisionist arguments.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Cosmology and the Invention of Man**

We have finally reached the conclusion of this thesis. Until now, in my account has remained heterogeneous, dealing with all sorts of cosmological topics: ancestors, souls, time, sorcery, power, history and legend. How to bring all of them together under a single principle? This thesis started with the premise that a non-reductive, yet holistic understanding of cosmological action was necessary and desirable in anthropology, and thus proposed, as a sort of starting point towards achieving this objective, the notion of 'downward causation', or causation exerted by an emergent, high-level entity towards entities in a lower level. However, at the same time, we have found many paradoxical instances that make difficult to just flatly apply this model to my ethnography. Concretely: cosmology seems to have a causal influence on society, but, at the same time, it is not cosmology itself, but rather individuals who seem to be the ones behind the workings of cosmology in actual social life. How to solve this dilemma without resorting to the explanations of old, which tended to subordinate the cosmologies of others to our own cosmologies of the social? Throughout this thesis, I have tried not to deepen too much in this issue, alluding to a more adequate analysis which could solve the multiple complexities and contradictions found along the way: not it is time to develop this analysis in full.

#### **7.1 Turning downward causation on its head**

As mentioned before, the sociological application of the idea of downward causation implies postulating the existence of emergent social entities which

constrain or pattern the actions of social agents (cfr. Elder Vass 2012). While the idea, to my notice, has never been explicitly applied in anthropology, in my introduction I have shown, following Holbraad and Abramson (2014), how in general anthropologists were also predisposed to postulate holistic entities of their own acting upon societies. Indeed, as social anthropologists, we are predisposed to see holisms in action: when we are told by our informants of cosmological forces acting in their lives, we naturally conclude that what people strive to do is to posit their own social actions as being brought upon by cosmological powers, as being caused by an instance higher than themselves, and then we seek to abstract these systems by identifying them with systems of our own making.

Thus, thinking from our perspective, it could be said that, in general, cosmological downward causation works as a result of an emergent system conformed by symbols or representations (that of cosmology, in this case) constraining and directing social action: in this perspective, causality seems to flow from cosmology down to social agents. However, despite it being a reasonable hypothesis, re-framing cosmology as a “constraining condition” for individuals does little to avoid an impression of reductionism, because in the end, although we recognize the non-reductive interaction of the upward flow of individuals with the downward flow of cosmological systems, we still posit a certain lack of agency of people: cosmology imposing itself over individuals, ‘symbols make men’, etc. Similarly, we are just subordinating the cosmologies of others to our own vision, positing them as mere instances of our own epistemological devices, while we remain ‘out of the picture’ in a way. But I think this impression is inescapable, as long as we remain within our own point of

view: in our own perspective, individuals are “low level” or constituents of sociological wholes, while symbolic systems are “high level” phenomena, that is, symbols are entities brought about by individuals, not the other way around.

However, if we think about the point of view of the other, we can ‘flip upside down’ this perspective, following a similar line of reasoning to that presented by Roy Wagner in his work *The Invention of Culture* ([1975] 2016), that is, to question ourselves what is ‘culture’ and what is ‘nature’ in non-Western worlds, something that I have alluded to in the final chapter: now it is time to develop this more in-depth. In this respect, our main misunderstanding regarding non-Western cosmologies is that we consider that, in them, symbolic/cosmological entities are exactly what they are in our culture, that is, high level phenomena brought upon by the activity of the human mind. However, instead, in non-Western cosmologies, the phenomena we consider as symbols, gods, calendrical ‘forces’ and so on, are perhaps not high-level entities, but rather *low-level entities*, occupying a similar place to that which particles occupy in our own scientific outlook. Thus, they are the underlying cause of things: they are the ‘building blocks’ of reality. Then, what is the high-level phenomenon here? As it is the case with the Western example of the scientist explained in my introduction, it is not gods or ancestors, but *people themselves*, which are constituted not by molecules or particles like in Western thought, but by cosmological and ancestral forces, sacred symbols and the actions of gods. Like the scientist who exerts some sort of causality on the low level entities (molecules, particles, etc.) through experiments in order to understand these phenomena and exert some sort of control over them, what non-Western people do through rituals is actually exert a causal influence over their own cosmological

constituents, with a similar objective, to harness these forces and achieve some influence in their surrounding reality.

This is what, in a way, happens in rituals. As Michael Houseman and Carlo Severi have recently argued, inspired by the work of Gregory Bateson, *Naven* (1958), rituals are not merely functional endeavours of social legitimation nor only seek to merely assert or reinforce the influence of cosmological entities over people's lives, but to impinge on these relationships and assert their complexity (cfr. 1998: 165-202). Indeed, in non-Western cosmologies, people are supposed to be controlled by cosmological entities all the time: why would rituals be performed to assert this banality? What I propose is that what rituals try to do is not to re-assert the flow of causality from gods to people, which exists all the time as a given fact, but to *reverse it* and put it within the "constraining conditions" set by people themselves *in rituals*. Again, Wagner's theoretical developments in *The Invention of Culture* (1981), based on his original account of the *habu* ritual of the Daribi (1972), are crucial here. In non-naturalistic cosmologies, symbols and gods are not items of "culture": they are what we would call nature, the actual *given* world, the background of reality. What Daribi people did when disguising as the spirits of illnesses was to acquire agency over these spirits by disguising as them in the *habu* ceremony (2016 [1981]: 92-93). In a way, it is the equivalent as a doctor which seeks to cure a virus by studying it, manipulating it and ultimately inoculating it (downward causation of an individual trying to constrain low level phenomena through scientific means), but the Daribi rituals occur in a world where illnesses are ghosts and spirits instead of assemblages of proteins. In that world, people 'become' illnesses themselves, but they do so in order to achieve the same objective: reverse the flow of causality from upwards

into downwards, from spirits/illnesses acting upon people, to people acting upon spirits/illnesses, constraining their behaviour. In our world, science seeks to constrain viruses for our own sake; for the Daribi, powerful cosmological spirits of illnesses are constrained by ritual actions, for reasons that are similar in the end.

Finally, a clarification on what kind of ‘downward causation’ we are dealing with here becomes necessary now. In my introduction, I have mentioned three versions of the idea: strong, mid, and weak. Strong downward causation is direct causation. Medium downward causation understands high-level entities as ‘constraining conditions’ and the causation brought by them as constraining low level phenomena rather than directly causing them, while weak downward causation simply conceives them as “patterns” or organizing principles for low level entities (cfr. Emmeche, Køppe and Stjernfelt 2000: 18-31). After all the examples examined in this thesis, I think it would be a reasonable hypothesis to assert that we are dealing with a medium downward causation rather than with a strong or weak one. Rituals don’t create things *ex-nihilo*: what they seek to do is to direct things into a desired outcome. They seemingly do this by exerting downward causation on the organizing principles of things, but this influence is never completely direct, it is more or less “constraining”, directing things into a desired result rather than creating actions by themselves. That is, the gods and cosmological forces always remain as the true actors: they are just compelled towards a certain outcome.

I will exemplify this in a more concrete way in the next section, but what I think is that this is the difference between the *how* and the *why* logic mentioned in regards to Holbraad’s re-analysis of Pritchard (2020). Thus, in rituals people



do not seek to create actions in a *how* logic, for they know that things happen because of the normal flow of causality, which they have even set upon, as in many cases in this ethnography; instead, they seek to influence them in a *why* sort of way. As mentioned in chapter 3 in regards to time rituals, perhaps a way to explain this would be to resort to the famous Malinowskian notion of magic. As it is well known, Malinowski said that, in Kiriwina, people don't use magic as a substitution for technology, which would be the (sorely mistaken) Frazerian notion of magic. Indeed, people use magic not to make boats float, or to make gardens grow, for they know *how* to do this, instead, they use magic to make boats go faster and sail smoother than boats of a similar quality, and to make gardens grow more beautiful than gardens built with the same techniques (cfr. Malinowski 2002 [1922]: 76, 125). This intangible quality, this *je ne sais quoi* sort of surplus is the *why*: *why* do some gardens at Omarakana grow so big and beautiful, or *why* the boat of someone won in a race where all the boats were crafted with equal skill. This is what magic is: rather than creation or direct influence, the happening of things in according to a purpose beyond direct action.

### **7.3 Re-assessing this thesis**

Now, with this perspective set on, we can reassess the chapters of this thesis on an individual basis. In chapter 1, I have asserted something rather simple: that for the K'iche', cosmology is social and society is cosmological. Prior ethnological studies on the town kept both aspects separate, and thus failed to integrate a truly anthropological perspective. Thus, a holistic perspective must necessarily account for the social, and not only for 'symbols' (and viceversa) something that, of course, anthropology already knows, but that was definitively forgotten in

local ethnology, and tends to remain so even today. Effectively, I must say that some more ethnological contemporary ontological perspectives, which emphasize ontological differences as the main feature of indigenous thought *vis-à-vis* the West, sometimes fall again into similar positions to those of the ethnology of the past, by failing to account for the ways in which cosmology makes society, and how people in society also make cosmology. Thus, I must assert again, in agreement with the anthropological tradition, that holism remains a theoretical imperative rather than just a perspective among others.

In chapter 2, I have suggested that in K'iche' cosmology, men are emergent in relationship to gods, and that the K'iche' universe is self-inclusive in nature. Regarding the first point, which I will develop a bit more in the final portion of this conclusion, what I could propose is that men *invented* themselves by inventing rituals. K'iche' cosmology describes a world where men 'emerged' out of a prior state of total subordination to the gods, where they had no rituals. Rituality created a way for men to somewhat control the power of the gods, although not directly. This act gave rise to a new cosmology, one that is self-contained, for in it there are certain places which contain the other world, that of the gods, the *Santo Mundo*. Thus, there is some sort of relationship between the emergence of man against the cosmological background and the self-inclusion of cosmology within itself.

Effectively, regarding the second point, I have tried to relate the self-contained structure of the K'iche' cosmos, which I have characterized as being a 'tangled hierarchy' in the sense of Hofstadter, to the idea of *undecidability* and *incompleteness*, that is, the possibility of systems contemplating statements that are both statements within the system and statements about the system. For me,

this property of cosmologies is what makes cosmological assertions possible, although, admittedly, I didn't demonstrate this point in full. What I argue is that, essentially, cosmologies are "incomplete", that is, they can be regarded as totalities which admit undecidable statements or paradoxes. I also think that this logical paradox could be related to the idea of emergence of men within cosmologies, as a sort of "malicious" agent that is capable of "undermining" the system by creating actions within cosmology that are statements about cosmology (*rituals*). However, to consider this as more than a vague hypothesis would be premature, but I wanted to advance the suggestion here.

Regarding anthropological theory, what I think is that attempts like that of Dumont (1988 [1970]) were right to consider encompassment as the fundamental principle of all cosmological thought, but by insisting in defending closed and fixed hierarchies, he missed out the point on the most important thing about cosmology: that men can act as gods, that hierarchies can be tangled, and things can be turned 'upside down'. In summary: all sets that encompass 'everything' (cosmology being one of them) are susceptible to 'Russellian' paradoxes of sorts. Thus, my objective is not to reassess whether thinking about hierarchies in terms of 'sets' and 'subsets' is still valid, but to rethink our anthropological ideas of 'sets' in terms of what has already been achieved in other disciplines.

In chapter 3, I have described the most complex attempt to influence causality that I did find during my fieldwork. This attempt includes an interaction with time, but my proposed understanding of it must remain for now as more of a sketch than as an actual solution. What I tried to suggest was that in that particular ritual, people seem to be trying to influence the temporal

manifestation of a dimension which cannot be understood as being temporal in our sense of the world, the world of ancestors and gods, where “all is decided”, and where all future is already past. I have tried to link this world to the notion of a C-series in the thought of McTaggart, who, as it should be reminded, was a thinker of the unreality of time, rather than a thinker on temporality. To the analyses made in that chapter, I would add that people perhaps are not really creating the actions of the gods in the ritual, but framing them or constraining them into a desired outcome, although this implies a very complex paradox: how can causal influence be exerted on a world where temporality doesn't exist? Thus, the final paradox is that time tries to influence timelessness, to then be re-defined by it in a way: a sort of active “eternal return”, rather than “cyclical time”: the return of the “same” in function of ritual “will”, to say it in Nietzschean terms.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are a bit less metaphysical. In chapter 4, I have shown how downward causation can be extended to witchcraft. What I think is that, in witchcraft, causality is somehow ‘usurped’ by sorcerers, who try to transform negative events that happen to people into ‘workings’ of their own. Thus, as I have tried to argue in the preceding section, it is not necessary that sorcerers directly cause these events, although, as we have seen, they boast about it. What is more crucial, considering the social whole of sorcery, is that sorcerers redirect and constrain the flow of causality, so causal events occurring to their victims appear as emerging out of their malicious actions, rather than as from the normal flow of cause and event, or, in terms of Holbraad, they appear as ‘why-logic’ events rather than ‘how-logic’ events. Remember, for example, in the idea of downward causation, a scientist which inoculates a virus doesn't really make it work as he wants: he creates conditions to constrain its acting towards a desired outcome.

The curious thing is that this reversion is sometimes achieved by the suspicions of people themselves, their own *why* questions emerging out of their own life experience. However, this is only deceitful from our point of view as anthropologists: actually, it makes perfect sense, when we consider a world where this sort of cosmological causation is as real as science is in ours.

In chapter 5, I have tried to show how, for K'iche' activists against contemporary Western extractivism, political power is cosmological power. Cosmological power is not a reality belonging to the past nor only to the communitarian level of indigenous life, but a power that deals with the situations of our contemporary geopolitical conundrums, a power that the community projects to the exterior, and to the future. Unlike some recent perspectives which sometimes emphasize ontological difference at the expense of indigenous agency, what I have shown is that indigenous agents don't only want to protect "nature" or to pay cult to "earth beings": their aim is to become cosmological powers themselves, earth lords (*dioses mundo*) themselves.

The topic of chapter 6 was cosmological causation in history. Reconsidering all the testimonies dealing with history and cosmological action in that chapter, I can formulate a more definite analysis now. What I think is that people know that "history" is a sequence of cause and effect, and thus act accordingly: for example, despite saying that rituals won the war, they didn't just fight the war only through ritual actions, but through real military might. However, the purpose of their cosmological action was to constrain the flow of causality in order to achieve a desired outcome. Thus, again, there is a difference between *how* the war was fought, and *why* it was won. The war was *fought* by the soldiers (*how*), who could either win or lose, but it was *won* because of the altars

(*why*). In my point of view, this is the difference between non-cosmological causation, that which remains within the usual flow of cause and effect, and cosmological causation, which is downward, redirected towards the cosmological forces that constitute reality, but only constraining causality rather than directly 'causing' things.

I also propose in regards to the classical Sahlinsian topic of history vs anthropology, that this difference between *how* and *why* is the difference between Western and non-Western visions of history. The Western vision of history remains trapped in the *how*, while the non-Western also concerns itself with the *why*. The key, perhaps, is to consider these events as forming part of the non-Western 'riddle of invention', so to speak. People in non-Western cultures are interested in attributing divinity to others because in their cosmologies gods are not *only* overlords, but something similar to atoms, particles or molecules: "building blocks" of what reality is, and they can be constrained by actions we regard as cultural or symbolic, simply because those actions are not symbolic at all. Thus, history can be influenced in a "why" sort of way, and not only in a "how" one, it can be cosmological, while not ceasing at any point from being social.

Finally, summarizing, what I suggested in the first part of this conclusion is that different points of view can be reached regarding the phenomenon of downward causation in cosmology. The point of view of the social scientist could see cosmologies as holistic totalities comprised by high-level fictions which constrain social action, giving regular 'patterns of meaning' to social life. While this is risky to assert, what I think is that many anthropological theories of cosmology actually remained wholly sociological throughout history, as long as they didn't escape this basic assumption. What I suggest is that the point of view

of the anthropologist, which must be informed by the point of view of the other, should posit that in non-Western worlds, people are emergent in relationship to cosmology, and thus they are the high-level entities, while cosmology is actually the 'low-level', *ontological* constituents of reality rather than just symbols. Rituals seek to constrain the action of these elements by directing the emergent agency of mankind towards influencing their own constituents: downward causation of mankind towards the cosmos, which then will work upward to change reality. But if so, the final question remains: what consequence does assuming this point of view has to our understanding?

## **7. On the invention of man: final considerations on the meaning of cosmology**

I would like to finalize this thesis with a hypothesis that is perhaps worthy of further consideration. I would like to suggest that emergence and downward causation could be related to two features of the cosmological system studied in this thesis: the actual emergence myth in K'iche' cosmology, and the entanglement of hierarchies, of the 'above' and the 'below'. In the K'iche' myth retold in chapter 2, men didn't create rituals just to save themselves from the wrath of the gods: they created themselves as men, and even as prospective gods, through them. The rest of people who didn't develop rituals became animals, according to the myth. This sort of emergence of mankind from a former cosmological background is what could be regarded as a sort of 'invention of man'. Accounts of "emergence" are rather well known in different mythologies of the indigenous Americas, as the example of the Hopi (Vecsey 1983) and Huichol (Neurath 2008) show, however, what I would argue is that this kind of emergence

is not only tied to a regional 'emergence mythology', but is also generally implied in the way in which people in many societies relate to cosmological forces and "symbols".

In general, what is intriguing is this: the world of man is created as something always determined by, but clearly irreducible to, the actions of the gods, as something that can exert some power on the cosmological background from which it sprang in order to *change himself*. It is in that sense that man is emergent. Therefore, perhaps the whole paradoxical and self-contained character of the K'ich'e cosmos is related to the irreducibility which characterizes emergence (an emergent entity is non-reducible to its precedent), and this characteristic of emergence in cosmology could give a key to the duplication of realities that pervades so many cosmological arrangements, the fact that cosmologies are never truly 'closed'. In this, I am following the suggestions developed by Hofstadter, who asserted that downward causality is somewhat related to Gödel's theorem, for both are related to the idea of flipping systems 'upside down' (cfr. 1999: 163-176).

Thus, man doesn't only belong to the cosmos, he upsets it, but upsets it while emerging from it, while *inventing himself out of it*. Again, our main mistake while assessing cosmologies is that we assume them to be a superior structure, rather than a background. In this respect, the perspective set by the ontological turn is decisive for me: as I have stated since the beginning, this idea is only possible when we take the conceptual worlds of the others seriously (cfr. Holbraad 2017: 184-194). The result is an image of man creating himself out of the background of his own thoughts and "symbols", rather than emerging out of nature. Of course, in this sense, "symbols" are not symbols, but rather ontological



backgrounds of emergence. For me, assuming this inversion that is proper point of view of the other implies recognizing that the non-Western perspective is, fundamentally, always the correct one, while our perspective is just more or less derivative of it, secondary. We do not act only in a direct fashion only, nor only use symbols directly, instead, our action is rebounding and looping: we manipulate symbols while being “born out of them” too, redefining ourselves while manipulating them. Whether everything exists in accordance to a more or less divine symbol that we need to ascertain and compel through rituals in order to remain human (as in the K’iche’ example), or whether there is a world outside meaning and thought that remains unknown and unexplored by our epistemological structures, which are to be changed and modified in order to incorporate such realities and thus continuously invent us as men (as in the Western world), is a mere difference of detail which vanishes at an appropriate distance. In the end, the difference between the West and its others disappears in this perspective: *man is, and will always remain, invention*. It is in that sense, that the point of view of the other on cosmology in general always was truthful, and our Western assumptions about his ideas, a misunderstanding.

## Glossary

*Ajaw ri uwachulew* (“lord of the face of the world”): A ritual term denoting ancestors and gods. The spirits that rule over the forces of nature are also called *rajawal* or *dueños* (‘owners’).

*Ajitz*: Witch or sorcerer, he who performs *itzinel* or witchcraft. See also *win*.

*Ajq’ij* (“he of the day”): A calendrical diviner, not necessarily the head of a patrilineage.

*Alaxik* (“birth”): A k’iche’ patrilineage.

*Auxiliatura*: The seat of the local traditional government, elected by its former members or *pasados*. There are local *auxiliaturas* and a town *auxiliatura* or indigenous *alcaldía*. It is usually formed by a major, a secretary, a treasurer and their replacements, as well as different assistants.

*Awas* (“taboo”): A word denoting sacred objects, things that cannot be named directly and ritual transgressions. Usually it denotes the sacred shrines made of piles of stones and potsherds where offerings are burned to honour earth gods and ancestors. Altars dedicated to ancestors form a hierarchy of sorts, similar to that of ritual specialists or *chuchqajaw*: there are *awas rech alaxik* or patrilineage shrines, *awas rech kanton* or community shrines, and the *awas rech tinamit*, the town shrine. Also known as *porob’al* or *quemadero* in Spanish (“burning places”).

*Awajmundo* (“earth god animal”): The animal spirits under the command of the earth gods, and the animal guise of the earth gods themselves.

*Chuchqajaw*: The head of a *costumbrista* patrilineage, responsible for both familiar and ritual functions, but also a name for indigenous ritual specialists in charge of an altar or *awas*. There is a ritual hierarchy of sorts among them: there

are *chuchqajaw* for a patrilineage, for a locality and for the whole town. Being highly honorific, the preferred term now is *kamal b'e* ("guide of the road").

*Chikop* ("animal, bird"): one of the souls or co-essences of the person. It takes the form of a little bird. It is completely defenseless, and can be attacked by angry gods, ancestors and sorcerers. It is analogous to the "bird of the heart" of the Tzeltal and Tzotzil.

*Dioses mundo*: Earth gods. Also called *e rajawal* "owners". As a single entity they are called *Dios Mundo*.

*Juan No'j*: one of the patron gods of witches. He lives at the Santa María Volcano in Xela (Quezaltenango). Originally a sorcerer too, he became the lord of the volcano. He exploits souls in a supernatural hacienda which constantly burns. He is also the master of aggressive *awajmundo* who serve him.

*Katyonik* ("bark and bite"): Both the warning and the action of punishment that ancestors and gods perform on those who commit ritual transgressions.

*Kikel* ("Blood"): Besides being considered the seat of life, blood is said to be the vehicle of messages from the earth gods and the ancestors. This is called "the blood-speaks" (*kacha' ri kikel*. In Spanish people say *revibrar la sangre*, "the blood trembles". Also see *coyopa*.

*K'ij* ("sun" or "day"): The word alludes to the sun, a day in the K'iche' calendar and the notion of time itself. Nowadays the sun is not revered as a god, unlike the Moon. Nonetheless, he was called in the remote past *qakaw* "grandfather", just as the moon was called "grandmother".

*K'oxol*: A dwarf spirit, guardian of treasures, owner of game and the patron of divination. Often dressed in red and thus called *k'aki' k'oxol*.

*Koyopa* (“sheet lightning”): A tingle or feeling in the body of a diviner that relies a message, depending on its position.

*Mam* (“grandfather”): Earth spirits visualized as old men carrying the mountains with a tumpline. There are four chiefs among them, associated with four mountains to each of the cardinal points, as well as the calendrical signs that rule the solar year: Kiej (East, Kilaja mountain), E (South, Tamanku mountain), No’j (East, Sokop mountain) and Iq’ (North, Pipil Ab’aj mountain).

*Maximon*: An indigenous saint figure representing Judas, whose cult emerged in Santiago Atitlán. He is called “grandfather Simón”. A figure of his is revered and then discarded and burned during the Holy Week. In reality, an aged god of commerce, prosperity and wealth, very fond of smoking, drinking and women.

*May*: A calendrical period of 20 years. It also means the former generations or cohorts of the dead. They are said to be thirteen in total. In some prayers they are associated with 13 major patrilineages and 13 ideal divisions of the land. A synonymous expression is *le’* (“line, rank”).

*Meb’il*: One of the three kind of shrines that constitute the *awas*. It can be a stone with the form of an animal, or even a box with precious stones or crystals inside. Dedicated to financial success and wealth increase. Its associated day is Tzikin.

*Mo’x* (madman): A term which both refers to foreigners and insane people. It also alludes to telluric *dioses mundo*, who are said to be gringos themselves.

*Muni*: The Municipal government building, the former barracks of Teodoro Cifuentes, military strongman during the dictatorships of Estrada Cabrera and Jorge Ubico.

*Mesa*: A grouping of altars dedicated to the earth gods. Often shaped like dolmens or stone tables, sometimes featuring crosses. They don’t belong to particular

patrilineages, but have a ritual specialist in charge of them, the *aj mesa*. Its associated calendrical day is K'at.

*Nantat* ("mothers and fathers"): The deceased and often divinized ancestors of a patrilineage.

*Nawal*: One of the souls or "co-essences" of a person. It represents two things: the calendrical sign of a person, and a companion animal spirit which is said to live and die in parallel to the person. The term also refers to the power or agency of a person conceived as "heat-force" or *Q'aq'il*. Also called *wach uq'ijj* ("the visage of his day").

*Nawal Mesa*: A ritual specialist, often called "spiritualist" in the extant literature (Tedlock 1992: 74). He has a direct communication with the earth gods and ancestors and can be possessed by them, performing séances. There are three kinds among them: green, red and black. The black is the strongest and deals with "forgotten ancestors", as well as the hungriest and most aggressive among the earth gods.

*K'ux* ("heart"): One of the souls or "co-essences" of a person. It has a human form and it is the closest to the western idea of a soul or spirit. Also called *anima*.

*Qatit* ("our grandmother"): The Moon goddess. She controls fertility and the constitution of plants, animals, humans and even objects: anything planted, born or built during a full-moon is considered to be stronger. The Moon goddess is the patron of child-rearing. Her sacred day is Aj.

*San Antonio Mundo*: A *costumbrista* saint, the patron of rural patrilineages. He is called "the saint of the holy earth" and has the form of a child. Partly inspired by the catholic San Antonio de Padua, who in some images carries baby Jesus. San

Antonio Mundo is the protector of the animal spirits or *nawales* of families and therefore is also called “pastor of the holy earth”.

*Santiago*: The *costumbrista* patron saint of the town. He is called “captain of the holy earth” and is represented as a Guatemalan soldier of the nineteenth century on a horse, wielding a sabre. Partly inspired by Santiago Apóstol, patron saint of the conquistadors. Associated with the morning star, he controls the legions of the elements and is deeply related with political power.

*Santo Mundo* (‘Holy Earth’): This expression either’s designate the earth divinities conceived as a single being, or the cosmological underworld known as *Juyub’ Taq’aj* (‘mountain valley). However, the *Santo Mundo* also comprises the sky or *Kaj*, thus in it above and below are equivalent.

*Tew Kaqiq’* (“Cold and wind”): An expression synonymous with the “spiritual”. Ancestors and gods are said to be present *pa tew kaqiq’*, “in the cold and the wind” when rituals are performed in their honour. Somewhat synonymous with *uxlab’* or “breath”.

*Wachib’al* (“face-hood”): The image and bodily presence of a person, extending to any icon or symbol of it. It can have agency in the case of the images of saints.

*Warab’al ja* (“house of dreaming”): One of the three kinds of altars that constitute the *awas*. Dedicated to the cult of the ancestors. Its associated day is Aj.

*Wajxaqib B’atz*: The most important calendric celebration in Momostenango. It consists of a ritual circuit of offerings beginning in the altar at the Chuti Mesab’al hill, then Pa Ja’, then Uja’l Santiago, then Paklom Hill, then a prayer at the Main Church at Momostenango and finally at the Kokoch altar before the daybreak. The circuit culminates at the next day, at Nima Mesab’al.

*Win*: A hostile spirit used by a sorcerer to do harm against his victims. It can be animal or spectral, and they are usually carnivorous. The sorcerer can either send this spirit to people, or transform into it through different rituals. By extension, a sorcerer who can command this kind of spirits is called *win* too. A *win* sorcerer must be born on the day Tijax. Days associated with the *win* are Iq, Kan, Kame, Kiej, Toj, Kiej, Ix, depending on the form of the spirit called.

*Winel*: One of the three kind of altars that constitute the *awas*. Dedicated to the cult of fertility. Its associated day is Q'anil.

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