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Nature and Culture Among the Maya in Rural Belize

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Abstract

This thesis is about nature and culture relationships among the Maya, with special emphasis on the Q'eqchi' Maya of Belize. The theories of symbolism, animism, and totemism, help to explain how and why nature is so essential to the Maya way of life. Throughout this thesis, I will explore such intricacies ascribed to the Maya's worldview on nature and culture, as represented in the culture of the Q'eqchi' in Belize. The topics of Maya Health, Wellness, and Medicine; the Deer Dance; Religion and Totems; and Ecotourism will be developed along with the presentation of the findings of my fieldwork within the context of the ancient belief systems of the Maya.

Introduction

Ethnographic Context and Theoretical Framework

This thesis is about nature and culture relationships among the Maya, with special emphasis on the Q'eqchi' Maya of Belize. Topics will stem from research on the culture, as well as my findings from my fieldwork in Belize. In contrast to the recurring theme of nature among the Maya, one sees less and less of such practices in urban culture. The intriguing notion that people today could be so closely connected with nature inspired me to begin my research on the Maya. I have found much evidence to support my original thoughts that animals are central to the way of life of many indigenous cultures. To most rural Maya, nature is a source of life and cultural values. Central to the Maya belief system are the ideas that there is life in every organism surrounding humans, and each object has a place within the universe, and is not to be disturbed. The Maya identify with nature as a part of themselves, they are intertwined to become one with nature.

The Maya inhabit the lands of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. The term Maya refers to the speakers of the 31 dialects of the Mayan language. These people are the living Maya, descendants of the ancient Maya from pre-Hispanic times. My focus is on the Q'eqchi' Maya from Punta Gorda, Belize. (Fig. 2) This particular group lives in the southern most

point of the country above Guatemala. The environment in this region is that of a lowland tropical rainforest. The language spoken by this group is Q'eqchi'.

In the world of the Ancient Maya, animals were both eaten for survival and worshipped as deities. There are ritual dances to commemorate the importance of the animals, such as the Pig's Head dance and the Deer dance.

As people of the jungle, the Maya utilize many resources of their surroundings. Many have started cacao farms. (Fig. 3) The men plant and harvest the cacao, and the women labor to create chocolate products from the pods. Cocoa butter can be produced from this plant; chocolate paste is also a by-product. For the ancient Maya, cacao was of economic value, and was also used as currency. Farms today export cacao products to America and Canada as a lucrative source of income. (Fig. 4)

Milpa farms produce corn, which is the most important crop to the Maya. "Traced back to its Nahuatl origin the "*milpa*" is based on the word "*millipan*", "*milli*" means "to cultivate" and '*pan*' means 'place.'" Thus it is a cultivated place." (Ford 2015: 47). Farming was central to the Maya culture and remains a fundamental aspect of contemporary Maya society. "Harvest from the *milpa*, a cultivated corn field, fed the farmer's family and produced a surplus sold in the market. To be a *milpero* farmer was a source of honor and pride, and was part of an essential social identity of residents in Bullet Tree Falls. They have held on to their traditions of *milpa* farming, continuing to cultivate 180 *milpas*, while farmers in other villages have chosen to sell their land and become laborers traveling around the country in search of work." (Gordon 2017: 21).

The Maya practiced slash and burn agriculture, where each family was able to have their farm for two or three seasons. After this, the nutrients of the soil were depleted, and left to rest. "The ancient Maya are accused of having 'burned, cut, and eventually in some regions removed

large tracts of these wooded landscapes not long after they settled them.’ Our research has shown that traditional Maya milpa swidden results in the enrichment of woodlands with species useful to humans and significantly improves the ecosystem.” (Ford 2015: 44) Corn is still a staple in the daily lives of the Maya and slash and burn agriculture is still a current practice. (Fig. 5)

The Quiche Maya are a neighboring group to the Q’eqchi’, they live in the highlands of Guatemala. The environment in this region is a temperate rainforest. In *I, Rigoberta Menchu* a narrative of a Quiche woman living in Guatemala, Menchu describes a *fiesta* for planting crops, “The time we spend up in our village are happy times because we’re there to harvest the maize, and before we harvest the maize, we have a *fiesta*. The *fiesta* really starts months before when we ask for the earth’s permission to cultivate her. In that ceremony we burn incense, the elected leaders say prayers, and then the whole community prays.” (Burgos-Debray & Menchu 1995: 52). She went on to explain what corn means to them, “Maize is the centre of everything for us. It is our culture. The *milpa* is the maize field. *Maiz* is the grain.” (Burgos-Debray & Menchu 1995: 54).

The creation story of the Quiche, *Popul Vuh*, tells of humans being made of corn. This is the reason corn is of such high importance to the Quiche. “After they put into words: the making, the modeling of our first mother-father, with yellow corn, white corn alone for the flesh, food alone for the human legs and arms, for our first fathers, the four human works. It was staples alone that made up their flesh.” (Tedlock, 1996:145). The transition of this deep spiritual respect for maize is passed on through generations in many ways. In the Quiche culture of the Maya in Guatemala, when a child reaches forty days, the child is then recognized as a member of the community. The baby is given a baptism and important leaders of the village are invited to speak. A portion of the prayer that is used in the ceremony for the child states, “He is told that he will eat maize and that, naturally, he is already made of maize because his mother ate it while he was forming in her

stomach. He must respect the maize; even the grain of maize which has been thrown away, he must pick up.” (Burgos-Debray & Menchu 1995: 13).

In Claude Levi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind* (1966), nature was often described as a means of measuring time, before modern-day technologies existed. The Blackfoot Indians were able to foretell the oncoming of spring by the developmental stage of the fetus of the bison, which was extracted from the uterus of females killed during hunting. Another example given was an Osage ritual chant which makes an association between three natural elements; the Blazing Star flower, corn, and the bison. “It would be impossible to understand why they associate these things if an independent source did not bring to light the fact that the Omaha, who are closely related to the Osage, hunted bison during the summer until Blazing Stars were in flower in the plains; they then knew that the maize was ripe and returned to their villages for the harvest.” (Levi-Strauss 1966: 61). The Ojibwa, from the region of Lake Superior, closely observed meteorological data which also shows a connection between storms and birds. The average number of days with thunder begins with one in April, an increase to five in July, and a decline back to one in October. According to bird calendars, species which winter in the South appear in April, and disappear in October.

As Menchu mentions, in prayers that are recited by the Maya, “We say the names of birds and animals - cows, horses, dogs, cats. All these. We mention them all. We must respect the life of every single one of them.” (Burgos-Debray & Menchu 1995: 58). Levi-Strauss mentions that natives feel that they know an abundance of information about animals because in the past they married animals in myths. There is also mention of how a native would never pick a flower as a white man would, knowing that each plant has an importance.

Eduardo Kohn (2013) conducted research in Avila, located in Ecuador's Upper Amazon, to learn more about local practices acknowledging nature and culture. The jaguar seemed to be the animal that was of greatest importance. Jaguars are regarded as powerful in the way that they can mysteriously take family members away. Kohn speaks for instance, of a woman who lost a son to a jaguar and asked to be photographed with her daughter for memories' sake in case another jaguar was to come and take that child.

Because of the jaguar, the people of Avila sleep face-up; it is believed that a jaguar will leave you alone if it looks at you face to face. If you sleep face-down, you will be seen as prey. There is a group of people given the name Runa Puma, also referred to as Runa, who are people who can feel themselves being watched by jaguars as fellow predators. The Runa perceive their environment, "In fact, along with finitude, what we share with jaguars and other living selves-whether bacterial, floral, fungal, or animal- is the fact that how we represent the world around us is in some way or another constitutive of our being." (Kohn 2013: 6).

In the worldview of the Runa, a hierarchy which exists structures the communication in the biological world. The spirit realm is at the top of the chain, followed by humans, while animals fall at the bottom of the hierarchical order. Symbols come from a higher order, "These emergent hierarchical properties that make human language (based as it is on symbolic reference) a distinctive semiotic modality also structure the ways in which people in Avila differentiate between animal and human realms... Animal vocalizations, taken at face value as 'utterances', are at one level of significance, whereas the more general 'human' messages that these vocalizations might also emerge at another, higher level." (Kohn 2013: 171). The people of Avila know all of the sounds of the forest and were able to imitate bird calls when useful.

Among the Runa, the spot winged antbird call is used by humans when startled by jaguars. Humans can use this call to alert each other that there is a jaguar present. “Not surprisingly, then, relations between humans and spirits, like those between humans and animals, are structured by hierarchical properties inherent to semiosis. Here too there is a nested, increased ability to interpret as one moves up the hierarchy.” (Kohn 2013: 178). An example of this is that the Runa understand dog vocalizations, but dogs are believed to only understand human speech under hallucinogens. Humans similarly need hallucinogens to interpret forest masters, but forest masters easily understand humans. “Because the spirit master realm is, by definition, always inside form, the animals are always abundant there, even though we humans aren’t always able to see them. The wooly monkey troop we encountered while hunting one day that I, with my binoculars, diligently estimated as consisting at most of thirty individuals, Ascencio, a veteran hunter and careful observer of the beings of the forest, described as numbering in the hundreds.” (Kohn, 2013: 179) While the animals are present, the masters do not allow the humans to see them.

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro also studied the hierarchy of spiritual, human, and animal realms. His findings are published as a chapter in Michael Lambek’s *A Reader In The Anthropology of Religion* (2002). The chapter is titled “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism”, and in it de Castro states, “Typically, in normal conditions, humans see humans as humans, animals as animals and spirits (if they see them) as spirits; however animals (predators) and spirits see humans as spirits or as animals (predators). By the same token animals and spirits see themselves as humans: they perceive themselves as (or become) anthropomorphic beings when they are in their own houses or villages and they experience their own habitats and characteristics in the form of culture- they see their food as human food (jaguars blood as manioc beer, vultures see the maggots in rotting meat as grilled fish, etc.), they see their bodily attributes

(fur, feathers, claws, beaks etc.) as body decorations or cultural instruments, they see their social system as organized in the same way as human institutions are (with chiefs, shamans, ceremonies, exogamous moities, etc.)” (Lambek 2002: 308).

Thus, in Amerindian societies, there is a notion that there is not a vast separation or opposition between humans and animals. In mythology it is often seen that beings mix human and animal qualities. Animals have the same qualities and values as humans, with lives focused on hunting, fishing, feast, war, and disease. “Stating that all conceptualizations of non-human always refer to the social domain.” (Descola in Lambek, 2002: 310). Also in Mesoamerican mythology there is a guardian spirit referred to a Nagual, this is a shapeshifting human that takes on the form of a jaguar.

The theories of symbolism, animism, and totemism, help to explain how and why nature is so essential to the Maya way of life. In the following chapters, I will explore such intricacies ascribed to the Maya’s worldview on nature and culture, as represented in the culture of the Q’eqchi’ in Belize. The topics of Maya Health, Wellness, and Medicine; the Deer Dance; Religion and Totems; and Ecotourism will be developed in chapters which will present the findings of my fieldwork within the context of the ancient belief systems of the Maya.

In the following chapter Religion: Totemism and Animism, the tradition of totems in Amerindian culture introduces a method of attaching oneself to an object in nature, be it an animal, plant, or object. This is dually connected with a classification system of the plants and animals in their environment, which much detail is ascribed to. Animism is also established as a means of connecting people to nature. This act of giving human characteristics to animals, plants, and objects is a way of making sense of the surroundings of a society. There is not a separation between the natural world and the human world, they exist as one.

Chapter 1: Religion: Totemism and Animism

Totemism

In many small-scale indigenous societies, a plant or animal is paired with a person and the person lives by the rules of the assigned being. This practice is referred to as totemism, which is a structured network for marriage, hunting, and interaction among tribes. “It is the duty of each totemic group to provide the other groups with the plant or animal for whose ‘production’ it is specifically responsible. Thus a man of the Emu clan out hunting on his own may not touch an emu. But if on the other hand, he is in company he is permitted and even supposed to kill it and offer it to hunters of other clans.” (Levi-Strauss 1966: 113-114).

Totemism practices through ritual the theory that a group or clan has a spiritual, symbolic, and ritual connection with plants or animals. These are thoughts from the French sociologist Levy-Bruhl stated in *How Natives Think*, “The member of a tribe, totem, or clan, feels himself mystically united with the animal or vegetable species which is his totem, mystically united with his dream-soul, his forest-soul, and so on.” (Levy-Bruhl 2015: 89).

According to another French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, believed totems were the beginning of religion. He felt that totems brought groups together in ritual and saw them as the origin for human classification among society. “Students of American totemism had already known for a long time that this form of religion was most intimately united to a determined social organization, that its basis is the division of the social group into clans. In 1877, in his *Ancient Society*, Lewis H. Morgan undertook to make a study of it, to determine its distinctive

characteristics, and at the same time to point out its generality among the Indian tribes of North and Central America.” (Durkheim 2008: 88-89). Durkheim studied scholar Robertson Smith’s ideas on totemism, these are his findings written by Alexandra Maryanski. “If one looks at Durkheim’s adaptation of Smith’s ideas, what he came to realize was that the roots of solidarity underlying totemism are similar to the cultural basis of his organic solidarity. In both, individuality is preserved in a non-kin social matrix of structural interdependence is culturally integrated by totems signifying moral codes to which individuals develop collective attachments through emotion-arousing rituals- a mechanism of cultural integration that, he believed, first appeared in the earliest societies.” (Maryanski, 2014: 369).

A culture which has implemented a complex taxonomy are the Karam of New Guinea. The cassowary is a large bird, that lives among the Karam and is not classified as a bird by the local community. “Why to the Karam, is the cassowary not a bird? This is a simple question, but the conclusion I shall arrive at is that there is no simple, single answer to it apart from the very general statement, ‘The cassowary is not a bird because it enjoys a unique relationship in Karam thought to man.’” (Bulmer 1967: 5). A major reason for this classification, is that the bird does not fly in the air. The cassowary lives on the ground, in the forest where birds live in trees, and the animal is not feathered. Finally, the animal does not have wings, which are easily seen. They are never seen perched on a rock or bush, as other birds do. The cassowary is much larger than any other bird weighing approximately fifty pounds, and their bones are strong like humans.

In *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, Rigoberta speaks of the *nauhual*, an animal or plant assigned to a child at birth. Burgos-Debray dedicates a chapter to this subject. “Every child is born with a *nauhual*. The *nauhual* is like a shadow, his protective spirit who will go through life with him. The *nauhual* is the representative of the earth, the animal world, the sun and water, and in this

way the child communicates with nature.” (Burgos-Debray & Menchu 1995: 18). The *nauhual* is usually an animal and cannot be killed by the person assigned to it. If you hurt your *nauhual* you are seen as hurting yourself.

The days of the week have assigned animals; for this reason the *nauhual* is chosen by the day of the week of a child’s birth, “Tuesday is a bad day to be born because the child will grow up bad-tempered. That is because Tuesday’s *nauhual* is a bull and bulls are always angry. The child whose *nauhual* is a cat will like fighting with his brothers and sisters.” (Burgos-Debray & Menchu 1995: 18). The day of the week that coincides with your birth, is seen to be a special day of the week for that person.

In *The Savage Mind*, with discussion of tribes that symbolically take on physical and behavioral attributes of their assigned animals. It is said that the fish tribe is a group that deals with hair loss and baldness. The bear tribe has long dark hair which never changes color, and they are known to fight. In addition, Levi-Strauss states, “The Dog clan was held to be unpredictable, dogs being of a changeable disposition. The members of the Crocodile clan were thought to be strong and ruthless and those of the Cassowary clan to have long legs and to run fast.” (Levi-Strauss 1966: 116).

The islanders of the Torres Straits, located between Australia and New Guinea, have totemic clans. There are attributes of each assigned organism passed on to the human affiliated with them. “Nevertheless, the natives had a very strong sense of the physical and psychological affinity between men and their totems and of the corresponding obligations of each group to pursue the appropriate type of behavior thus the Cassowary, Crocodile, Snake, Shark and Hammer-headed Shark clans were said to love fighting and the Shovel-nosed Skate, Ray and

Sucker Fish clans to be peace loving.” (Levi-Strauss 1966: 115-116). These are said to be myths among the tribes because people cannot act exactly like animals.

The fish clan members live longer and have thin hair, while people of the bear clan have thick hair and fight often. “The Raccoon people were said to live on fish and wild fruit, those of the Puma lived in the mountains, avoided water of which they were very frightened and lived principally on game. The wild cat clan slept in the daytime and hunted at night, for they had keen eyes; they were indifferent to women. Members of the bird clan were up before day-break: ‘They were like real birds in that they would not bother anybody... The people of this clan have different species of birds.’” (Levi-Strauss 1966: 118). The Red Fox clan lived in the heart of the forest and were known thieves, the Red Skunk clan lived underground.

The Navaho place living creatures into two categories, depending on whether they possess the ability to speak or not. Their classification is comparable to the Karam. Plants and animals are categorized as creatures without speech. The animals are divided based on whether they run, fly, or crawl. Plants are named based on three categories their gender, medicinal qualities, and their visual appearance. This is subdivided further into sizes small, medium, and large. If past ethnologists had studied their systems in greater depth, they would have realized that these societies were highly complex and would have been inspired to retrieve more examples.

When eastern Canadian medicine men collect roots, leaves, and bark, they leave an offering for the plant to propitiate its soul. It is believed that if the soul is not present, the body of the plant holds no cures. “It was a professional biologist who pointed out how many errors and misunderstandings, some of which have only recently been rectified, could have been avoided,

had the older travelers been content to rely on native taxonomies instead of improvising entirely new ones.” (Levi-Strauss 1966: 44).

The term Wolverine comes from an Indian word meaning bad temper. Algonkin mythology refers to the wolverine as a symbolic animal of craft and cunning. The wolverine is hated by the Eskimos and the Atapaskan, as well as coastal tribes. They are the only weasels that cannot be trapped. They steal trapped animals from hunters, and steal the traps set for themselves.

Levi-Strauss notes, “It is of course useful to illustrate the wealth and precision of native observation and to describe its methods: long and constant attention, painstaking use of all the senses, ingenuity which does not despise the methodological analysis of the droppings of animals to discover their eating habits, etc.” (Levi-Strauss 1966: 54). For the Navaho, worms, maggots, and insects are paired together under a term meaning eruption and swarming. This indicates that insects are not described by their adult form, but their larval stage.

The Navaho describe many justifications of the virtues given to medicinal plants. For example, the plant grows adjacent to a powerful medicinal plant, looks like a body part, the smell or touch of the plant is correct, the plant gives water the right color, the plant is connected to an animal. Also, if the plants knowledge was handed down from the gods, it was learned from someone without being explained, the plant is near a tree that was struck by lightning, it is good for a certain ailment with a body part. “The terms used to differentiate plant names among the Hanunoo belong to the following categories: leaf shape, colour, habitat, size/ dimensions, sex, habitat of growth, plant host, growing time, taste, smell.” (Levi-Strauss 1966: 62).

Animism

Animism is a concept of giving life and human attributes to nonhuman objects. This way of thought has existed since the beginning of time, humans have a longing to connect with the environment surrounding them. The souls of humans, nonhumans, even lifeless things, invigorate one another. Menchu states, “Man is part of the natural world. There is not one world for man and one for animals, they are part of the same one and lead parallel lives. We can see this in our surnames. Many of us have surnames which are the names of animals.” (Burgos-Debray & Menchu 1995: 19).

According to John Chapman, who has studied animism in depth, every hunter has his own songs which he uses to speak to and charm the soul of the animal he pursues. “The verb to hunt is ‘to make love to the animals.’” (Braakhuis 2001: 392). Chapman feels that understanding animism is acquainted with understanding the indigenous, since animism is found all over the earth. There are several different ideals here: for example, nature and culture should be harmonized, and culture is the way in which we adapt to nature. Do we imagine that we have relations with nonhuman things because we animate them, or do we animate them based of our relations with them? This is the question that animists ask, as illustrated in this thesis, (what we consider) nonhuman things (or beings) are without a doubt animated in the Maya’s relations with them.

The Ojibwa Indians, from the region of Lake Superior, have a term for a sorcerer which turns into a bear, this is known as a bear walker. The act of transmogrification is known as shapeshifting, “Since bears, then, are assumed to possess person attributes, it is not surprising to find that there is a very old, widespread, and persistent belief that sorcerers may become

transformed into bears in order better to pursue their nefarious work.” (Tedlock 1975: 160). Metamorphosis often takes place in myths. The Ojibwa believe that humans undergo transformations into animal forms. “Briefly the Ojibwa believe that a human being consists of a vital part, or *soul*, which, under certain circumstances may become detached from the body, so it is necessary to assume that the body part in all cases, literally undergoes transformation into animal form. The body of the sorcerer may remain in his wigwam while his soul journeys elsewhere and appears to another person in animal form. Thus, both living and dead human beings may assume the form of animals.” (Tedlock 1975: 162).

For animists, the soul is the foundation of life made of things found everywhere in nature. While performing the Deer dance, the *masos*, dancers dressed as deer, take on the life of the deer. The *maso* wears a small dried and stuffed deer head and they are expected to bring it to life. The attitudes and the movements of the deer are replicated by the dancer. It is required to have at least four performers, just as four are needed in a hunting party. This group consist of one dancer and three singers.

The Yaqui’s deer dance is emblematic for the State of Sonora. The attitudes, posture, and movements of the deer are replicated by the dancer. The dance is a reenactment of the hunt. These elements of performance stem from a time when deer were hunted as an everyday occupation. There are many other Native American tribes which engage in this dance. For the Huichol the dance is performed in the same way as the Yaqui, with the same number of dancers. *Popul Vuh* introduces deer as guardians of the forest. Deer are interpreted as innocent animals and the hunters as sinners for killing them; this is depicted in the dance.

Many indigenous people let animism direct their dreams. The Maya place much importance on interpreting their dreams. When I was in Belize, in August 2016, I spoke with a

man of Maya descent. He told me, “If you have a dream that a black dog bites you, it means you will soon be arrested.” Such examples show the Maya to be a culture with a complex frame of thought that attempts to make sense of the world around them. He also told me that the deer dance relates to a drought, and the deer was the only animal fast enough to make it to the gods to send for production of water. The jaguar, god of destruction, was not able to catch the deer. As a result of the deer reaching the gods, the people were able to have rain again and the drought ended.

In Chapter 2, Nature as a Healing Element: Maya Health, Wellness, and Medicine, I will demonstrate how the centuries old awareness of the characteristics of plants and animals as expressed in religious beliefs as well the deep respect for nature of the Maya are manifested in the knowledge of plants as healing elements in the daily life of the Maya.

Chapter 2: Nature as Healing Element: Maya Health, Illness, and Medicine

Historical Background

Throughout their history, the Maya have had an extensive onslaught of disease over their history. As a culture immersed in the natural elements, the Maya have found ways to combat illness through plant-based medicine. Plant medicine has proven in many instances to be equally effective in comparison to traditional western medicinal practices.

Amerindian studies and related cultural studies show that nature is constructed not only by our assignment of meaning, but is also dependent on local scientific knowledge and practice. The Maya have experienced bouts of disease since the beginnings of their ancient civilization. Widespread disease is attributed to the fall of the ancient Maya. Due to the encounter of the Spanish conquistadors in their society, numerous diseases caused a decline among the Maya population. “Of all the agents jointly at work; however, none proved more destructive than an array of diseases introduced by Spaniards from the Old World to the New. As many as eight pandemics (smallpox, measles, typhus, and plague, alone or in withering combination) lashed Guatemala between 1519 and 1632, with some twenty-five episodes relating to more localized epidemic outbreaks recorded between 1555 and 1618.” (Lovell 1996: 400-401).

When the Spanish traveled to Central America in the 1520’s, with their invasion came disease which caused demographic collapse. The Maya population plummeted quickly as they

began to die off. The first fifty years after the arrival of the Spaniards had the hardest impact on the population, but the effects were long lasting. “A fall in numbers between 1684 and 1710, however, suggests that the process of recovery was irregular. Disease lingered throughout the colonial period, causing reversals in the upward movement of population in certain regions of Guatemala even in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.” (Lovell 1994: 134). Also, extensive changes to agriculture and the landscape increased disease. Insect vectors for disease shifted from animal to human hosts. Chagas’s disease was a cause of infant mortality in addition to adult debilitation.

In present day Central America, Maya mothers still breastfeed, “Babies are breast-fed. It’s much better than any sort of food.” (Burgos-Debray & Menchu 1995: 14). However, breastfeeding now takes place for a shorter length of time, not building immunity as it did in the past. “The up to 4 years of ancient mothers’ breastfeeding is more than twice as long as contemporary breastfeeding. Intriguingly, the classic period adults of this area survived childhood anemia to a much greater extent than contemporary people survive this disease. This leads Wright and Chew to the seemingly counterintuitive conclusion that ancient Mayan children were living under healthier conditions than modern Mayan children, and that this enhanced health is related in part to the benefits of extended breastfeeding.” (Robin 2001:19).

The contemporary Chiapas Highland Maya have an International Cooperative Biodiversity Group drug discovery project whose purpose is to utilize Maya medical knowledge of plants to develop pharmaceuticals. Through local institutions, Maya societies have appropriated the use of tropical ecosystems to access common resources. “The ethnobiological purpose of the project emphasizes the naturalistic aspects of Maya medicine, primarily the use of

herbal remedies. This biological gaze decontextualizes the situated knowledge of Maya healers, ignoring the cultural context in which they create and apply that knowledge.” (Nigh 2002: 451).

The Quiche from the highland Coban plant maize, squash, and beans. They use the field once and move to a new site each year. “The Itzaj, by contrast, plant complex polycultures, conserve forest resources in and around their fields, leave large reserves in their plots, and worry about sustaining biodiversity.” (Nigh 2002: 454). The Quiche see their home as the sacred mountain valley; Maya communities are of the belief that all land and natural resources for example, springs, caves, and rivers, have guardians or owners. In their narrative, these owners are God, Jesus, an angel, or a Catholic saint. The Maya, as humans given these resources, are obligated to participate in individual rituals for these owners. There are therefore festivals necessary to keep owners of resources happy.

Treatments

In contemporary Guatemala one method of treatment for fractures is bonesetting, a healing process which has been in use since the ancient Maya. The process heals broken and fractured bones through the laying on of hands. The client’s injury is assessed by the bonesetter, the client is held steady and the injury is wrapped with gauze or cloth. The limb is immobilized using cardboard or sticks. “Manual medicine is a set of healing traditions prioritizing the use of the hands and manual manipulation of the body to bring about healing. It forms a critical part of the healing landscape in Guatemala, a country in which the majority of inhabitants live in rural areas and practice small-scale agriculture” (Hinojosa 2002: 22). This practice can be carried out by *huseros* (bonesetters) and midwives.

Midwives largely take on cases of less severity; for example, they commonly treat fractures. They have guidelines to adhere to; as a result they choose to avoid risky cases. “Since midwives are familiar with a wide range of health problems and perform a good deal of manual manipulation, they are considered somewhat more knowledgeable than bonesetters. This is especially the case since many midwives have undertaken some obligatory midwife training at local health facilities and have sometimes also received health promoter training.” (Hinojosa 2002: 31). The *huseros* feel that they are more effective at healing bones than physicians, because they continue to check on the healing status.

The outlook is that physicians only place a cast on the bone to immobilize the affected area, while bonesetters give continuous treatment to the bone to ensure that it heals correctly. Guatemalan physicians are opposed to bonesetting; they believe x-rays should be used to correct injuries. “Physicians are critical of how Maya bonesetters, as individuals without formal training, diagnose and treat injured people, but they are still more critical of how bonesetters practice using only their hands. For a person to try reducing musculoskeletal injuries without using radiography seems unthinkable to Guatemalan physicians. Community physicians dispute the *huseros*’ hand-centered practice and have pressured them to not attempt to reduce fractures.” (Hinojosa 2002: 23).

As early as the Neanderthals, there is archaeological record in dental cavities of herbal use for medicinal purposes. The record shows residue of bitter plants in teeth. These plants are of no nutritional value yet hold healing properties. Use of medicinal plants can even be seen in primates such as chimpanzees and gorillas: they eat spiny plants to flush out tapeworms and nematodes. There is evidence that more of these plants are used during the season that nematodes are most active. “Using medicinal plants is a very old behavioral adaption found in many primate

species, not just humans...In addition, primatologists have established that primates of several species select many of the same plants for foraging that humans use as medicinal plants for treating gastrointestinal diseases.” (McElroy & Townsend 2015:24). Primates also ingest plants to ward off malaria and blood flukes.

Medicinal Uses

In *Medical Anthropology in Ecological Perspective* there is discussion of people who rely on medicinal plants obtained from the wild or home gardens. The Berlins and their students conducted research on the Maya of Chiapas in Mexico. “The largest set of health conditions recognized by the highland Maya are gastrointestinal diseases, among which they differentiate detailed signs and symptoms for many different types of diarrhea, pain, and worms. For treating these conditions they often use medicinal plants and less often over-the-counter pharmaceuticals or bicarbonate of soda.” (McElroy & Townsend 2015: 25). Further studies by students of the Berlins showed that Hispanic women living in Athens, Georgia used tea of the *mazanilla* flower, as well as mint to combat gastrointestinal issues. These women also created topical treatments with rue and basil to treat rheumatic pain.

In the indigenous culture of the Nahua in Mexico, medicinal plant use is also a common practice. The women are well trained in the use of plants for reproductive health. In Vera Cruz, Mexico, women grow plants in their garden for treatment of reproductive issues. Plants are also collected from other sites for this purpose. “Even plants that are found in common areas (riverbanks, roads, etc.) will frequently be managed by people over the course of the plant’s lifetime if they are found with heavy foot traffic. Most plants are collected while people walk

from the fields or other villages, and thus they are managed during these encounters.” (Smith-Oka 2008: 610).

The reproductive issues treated include uterine displacement when ligaments have worn and no longer hold the uterus in place; this is usually seen in women in their forties and older, who have had five or more children. Another frequent reproductive treatment is healing for postpartum mothers and babies, “The category with the highest number of plants (containing almost 50% of the plants collected) is for postpartum concern. Women and their newborns are bathed immediately postpartum with a mixture of seven plants, which accounts for the higher number found in this category.” (Smith-Oka 2008: 608). The *Nectandra sp.* and *Heliocarpus* plants are also used to speed up childbirth. “*Nectandra sp.* was also mixed with a bit of cooking oil and given to a woman in the last stages of labor. This mixture served a dual purpose: the oil made the birth canal slippery and the plant gave the woman renewed strength to handle the final contractions of labor.” (Smith-Oka 2008:610). There is also the use of plants for fertility and women who no longer want to reproduce, and these women use herbs to bring on menopause.

The Tzeltal and Tzotzil Maya of the Highlands, numbering approximately 800,000, have an elaborate knowledge of their biophysical environment. They use several hundred species of plants for treatment. This form of treatment is used more frequently than the clinics they have access to, which they only use on rare occasion for issues of grave illness. “In the Maya worldview, all things are connected and plants are recognized for the gifts of healing.” (Aude 2013: 313). Patrick Aude did a study on the Q’eqchi’ Maya’s use of medicinal plants. He recorded plant use in the Maya Mountains ranging from Punta Gorda to the villages of Jalacte and Criques Sarco. There is a Conservation garden in Punta Gorda created to conserve plants from extinction, “Of the 130 distinct plant resources at the Garden (of which are common in the

tropics) as well as nervous system disorders... These plants include plants widely used in Belize that are also known outside of the Maya tradition, such as ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) for nausea, fevergrass (*Cymbopogon citratus*) for colds and flu, guava (*Psidium guajava*) for diarrhea, all spice (*Pimenta docia*) for digestion, cat's claw (*Uncaria tomentosa*) for inflammation, and jackass bitters (*Neurolaena lobata*) for arthritis and ulcers." (Aude 2013: 316).

Amiguet (2006) also did a study on the Q'eqchi's use of medicinal plants in Southern Belize. The healer's use of plants was analyzed to see which plants were used more frequently. The three plant families used the most were *Piperaceae* (pepper family), *Rubiaceae* (coffee family), and *Asteraceae* (sunflower family). "The Q'eqchi' healers use the *Piperaceae* for many ailments, but the major usage categories are for infections, digestive system disorders, and muscular-skeletal system disorders. In Belize the Q'eqchi' mainly use *Rubiaceae* for nervous system disorders, digestive system disorders, and infections. The *Asteraceae* are known for anti-inflammatory, g toxic, bactericidal, and fungicidal treatments." (Amiguet 2006: 27-28).

The Maya of Highland Guatemala face severe gastrointestinal issues as a society. Most villagers are limited in their access to proper waste disposal, sanitation, and nutrition, all of which brings about disease. The Maya turn to plants for treatment, "The market bundles are purchased for the standard price of five cents, as are the small sacks of 'Romero' needles (*Rosarinus officinalis*) used to treat body aches and the log pods of 'Cana de fistula' employed as a specific against typhoid fever... Guatemalan peasants, unlike their urban contemporaries, have developed and still remain an extensive botanical knowledge not only of medicinal plants, but of all usable wild flora and domestic crops." (Logan 1973: 543). In the markets, the sale of these plants are high and create income for the 'hibateros'.

During my second trip to Punta Gorda, I spoke with Robert, a man of Maya and African descent. He is married to a Maya woman, and they have a young child. I asked him to tell me about the Maya and their relationship with plants, animals, and nature. He said, “Oh ok, well I just know that more or less they are really... they were the last people that were in tune with nature, and so you know, they have a lot of local healing, and a lot of bush, that they practice from thousands of years up to now.” When I asked how he learned about plant healing, he answered, “Well I learn mostly from my mother-in-law and her grandmother taught me. Cause see the bush medicine is like multicultural. Like Maya use it and other ethnic groups practice you know like tradition. Uses of certain bushes for healing. The Maya have practiced it for a long, long time.”

I asked about the plants that are used for healing. He said, “Well, they have all different plants, you know they have some you know that is used for inside healing. Well like the plants we have around here, like um. We call it the tree of life, that’s just like the local name. You have the special name. You put that in the water, and squish it and you drink it, and it cleans you from the inside. Or you can rub it if you have infection on your hands or so.”

After describing how this plant fights infection he went on to say, “We have different plants that grow right around us, ya know? Like we have Guinea Hen Root. Guinea Hen Root, is a root that is very good for sinus and head cold.” I asked where the name Guinea Hen Root came from. He responded, “Well that’s just like the local name ya know? All those plants have scientific name, but that’s how we know it around here ya know? Then we have it a kind of leaf, like leaf is like luminous lookin leaf like, lot of them. That is good for like blood pressure too.”

Guinea Hen Root is scientifically named *Petiveria alliacea*.

Robert shows an extensive knowledge of plant medicine. Most plants that he speaks of are in his garden and he simply removes them from the vine to create herbal remedies. He had a clear gallon jar where we interviewed, and it had the “tree of life” root inside with water that he mentioned in the interview. He had me to take a shot of it to clean my body of any possible infection. I took a shot; it was tart and full of herbal hints of taste.

Claude Levi-Strauss documents in *The Savage Mind* (1962) that using plants for medicinal purpose takes place in many cultures. In reading Levi-Strauss, one begins to understand the power that nature had upon the indigenous. There is an example where Levi-Strauss spoke of the Siberians, “The precise definition of and the specific uses ascribed to the natural products which Siberian peoples use for medicinal purposes illustrate the care and indigenousness, the attention to detail and concern with distinctions employed by theoretical and practical workers in societies of this kind.” (Levi-Strauss 1966: 8). The idea among natives that all sacred things have their place, and that being in that place is what makes them sacred. Without this concept existing, the structure of the universe could fall out of order.

Many cultures in Central America treat illness with medicinal plants. These plants are selected by taste, such as bitterness which is known to hold healing properties. The selections are also made by plant shape as seen with the Maya women of Vera Cruz using female shaped plants to increase fertility. The plant treatments that the Maya have developed are used to treat ailments ranging from gastrointestinal to reproductive disorders. Usage of many different species of flora shows a vast knowledge of the plants within their surroundings and shows the great importance of plants to the Maya community.

The life of the traditional Maya, as noted, is dependent on the harvest of *milpa*, the food of mankind according to the culture. The Maya believe they are created from yellow and white

corn. They sow the crops, plant them, and leave for the *finca*, a farm where sharecropping is practiced, to earn money. Later they return to tend to their crops occasionally until the harvest. While waiting for the seed to sprout, traps are set and dogs are used to ward off rodents from digging up the seeds.

The Maya also do not believe in eating processed food, such as ham. They only eat that which comes from the earth. Machines are products of the *ladinos*, Latin people, brought to rule them. Menchu states, “The *ladinos* bring their machines in little by little and very soon they own everything.” (Burgos-Debray & Menchu 1995: 72). If the maize fails for the season, it is not seen to be at fault of anyone. This is simply seen as an act of nature. If they do not have corn, they eat scrap food they prepare for the dogs.

The Maya in many instances still live a life free of many of the technological devices, which are part of the North American way of life. Many Maya face inadequate shelter, malnutrition, and high infant mortality rates. Their exceptional knowledge of plant life and healing properties creates for the community an effective source of medical remedies used in daily life. Treating ailments with plants often has proven to be as effective as pharmaceuticals, and in some instances these natural plant remedies are transformed into pharmaceutical products.

Another practice in nature and culture is the Deer dance, this dance is an ancient tradition that is still practiced in modern times. The dance shows reverence to the deer, which is an animal seen as a symbol of purity. The deer are hunted for subsistence by the Maya and are praised for the nourishment they provide to the people. In Chapter 3, the Deer dance will be examined in both traditional and contemporary Maya culture.

Chapter 3: The Deer Dance

Historical Background

The Maya Deer dance began in ancient times. There are two significant features of the dance: syncretism and fertility. Syncretism is the amalgamation of different religions and cultures. There are known to be two types of syncretism: one where symbols and deities were added to original religious beliefs without much change, and the other where emotions and beliefs change. Many cultures will borrow just enough Christian symbolism to seem converted. For instance, after the Jesuits were in contact with the Maya, and attempted to convert them to Christianity, the Maya incorporated the Deer dance into their practices under a veil of Christianity to be able to continue their traditional religion. It has been found that the religious beliefs of the Maya converts did not change after contact with the missionaries. “Farriss tones down the difference between deep and shallow change, but demonstrates how the Maya merged their indigenous worldview with Catholic deities and saints forming ‘creative synthesis’” (Shorter 2007: 295).

In “The Way of All Flesh. Sexual Implications of the Mayan Hunt” (2001), Braakhuis looks at the role of the deer in Mayan mythology, “That the deer hunt means both war and alliance is already suggested by the succession of events in the myth of those deer hunters par excellence, the Mesoamerican Twins... In the continuation of the story in Kekchi Maya Twin Myth, the deer runs parallel with a quest for women ending with the deer consecrating the main Twin’s marriage.” (Braakhuis 2001: 391). In the art of the Maya, there are images of women

mounting stags, suggesting an intimate association between the female and the quarry. This illustrates the connection between fertility and the hunt. Many Ixil Maya, of Guatemala, believe that dreaming of capturing a deer means that a bachelor will attract a woman.

The Lacandon see dreaming of a woman to mean that a deer will be obtained in a hunt. “The Aztecs, for example, were familiar with ancient myth connected to the Chicimec hunting deity, *mixcoatl*, in which deer pursued by two primeval hunters turn into dangerously seductive women ready to destroy their pursuers, whereas other women are hunted down as if they were does.” (Braakhuis 2001: 392).

Deer are introduced in *Popol Vuh*, the Maya creation story, as guardians of the forest. “Now they planned the animals of the mountains, all the guardians of the forests, creatures of the mountains: the deer, birds, pumas, jaguars, serpents, rattlesnakes, fer-de-lances guardians of the bushes.” (Tedlock 1996: 66). These are faultless animals and the hunters are perceived as sinners for killing them, this is depicted in the Deer dance. *Popol Vuh* also discusses the origin of the deer hunt, which includes the deer being asked for by the people. The animals’ pelts were to be set aside for disguises and deception. As the story goes, they began the hunting of all the young birds and deer.

Deer dancing therefore expresses a pre-contact worldview, it is a syncretism between local religion and Spanish Catholicism, a unique Indio heritage. “It is only with the Deer dance that the *pascolas* can recreate the ancient world, remembered in dance, mimetic dramatization, and in the words of the ancient deer songs.” (Shorter 2007: 291). A *pascola* is a masked dancer, the mask allows the dancer to take on a spirit which mentors the dancer. The dancers are sometimes light-hearted and comical in order to keep the audience amused, as in the version performed in Sonora, Mexico.

Today, there are several festivals or fiestas throughout the year in the Q'eqchi' village of Indian Creek, Belize which feature the Deer dance. One major fiesta occurs on November 1st and 2nd, All Saints Day and All Souls Day; a second important festival is celebrated in conjunction with Easter. A high point of these Catholic holy days for the Maya is the presentation of traditional dances, such as the Cortes dance and the Deer dance. During these festivals, special masks and costumes are required for the many dancers, singers, and musicians who perform the public rituals for the sacred occasion. The elders of the village hold the knowledge and memory of the dances. For the Cortes dance, a drum and a flute are used along with rattles or shakers. This dance mimics the combined forces of the church and the army during the European conquest. The Deer dance represents the important relationship between humanity and nature. The music for the Deer dance is played on a marimba and Maya harps. Many of the people in the village have never seen these dances but have only heard stories about them.

There is much work involved in preparation for the dance. After the hunt, the carcass must be prepared for ceremonial and household use. Evidence suggests that Deer dancing is associated with hunting as a way of securing a relationship with the animal and plant world, especially the deer. Eduardo Kohn's studies show that the Runa of Avila have a similar worldview, "That hunter's challenge of surviving as I... as it plays out in this ecology of selves, depends on how he is hailed by others – others that may be human or nonhuman, fleshy or virtual." (Kohn 2013: 25).

For the Yaqui of Mexico, Deer dancing takes place during the Lenten *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) ceremonies. The dance is also performed for funerary services and *pueblo fiestas*, but the Yoemem never perform it for secular reasons. Deer dancing for the Yoemem merges

indigenous and Catholic culture. During the dance, for example, the performers draw crosses on the ground, while invoking the names of animals important to native life.

The dance is a way to offer the community insight into their syncretic religious history. It shows an understanding of how the Yoemem infused the Catholic figure of Jesus into views of ritual sacrifice and hunting. “The dances transfer cultural roots that are themselves religiously hybrid, and thus, while being tribally specific, they also express a history similar to those of other native groups in the borderlands.” (Shorter 2007: 289). The dance is a ritual, symbolic of knowledge and truth for the Yoemem.

The performance of the dance provides an opportunity for the Yoemem communities to transmit culture to their children and establishes a collective identity between the old and the young. Catholicism and indigenous beliefs are combined to maintain a blossoming worldview. The Yoemem find it to be an ethical requirement to establish a dialogue with their nonhuman kin. The dancer’s behavior is a means of reinforcing the ultimate values of Yoemem culture. For this reason, the *moro*, ritual leader, leads the dancers into the ritual area because in this moment they are nonhuman.

The community of Avila, Ecuador studied by Eduardo Kohn, has similar goals of human and animal interaction. Kohn observes, “My argument is that we are colonized by certain ways of thinking about relationality. We can only imagine the ways in which selves and thoughts might form associations through our assumptions about the forms of associations that structure human language. And then, in ways that often go unnoticed, we project these assumptions onto nonhumans. Without realizing it we attribute nonhuman properties that are our own, and then, to compound this, we narcissistically ask them to provide us with corrective reflections of ourselves.” (Kohn 2013: 21).

Maya cave art was found in Acum, Mexico, with depictions of deer. “Both Acum and Tixkuytun have paintings of animals: a deer at Tixkuytun, and a turtle, long-necked bird, and a deer head at Acum.” (Stone 1997: 36). (Fig. 6) Deer were raised as food by the Maya. There are reports that the women of the Yucatec engaged in animal-raising activities. Bishop de Landa says the women would breastfeed the fawns, this allowed them to raise the deer as domesticated animals. This has also been seen with the Karam in New Guinea in their interaction with pigs, “Pigs, which live with us and share our women’s milk (for Karam women, like women in many other parts of New Guinea, sometimes suckle piglets), also eat our excrement (though we try to stop them) and eat our corpses (though we try to prevent that too).” (Bulmer 1967: 20).

Similar to other indigenous rituals, the dance is concerned with physical time and space. Known to evoke the original deer, it is believed that deer songs sung during the dance put Yoemem listeners in direct contact with their past. “The song texts, however, deal with the deer and his persecutors – the deer representing good, and his persecutors, principal among the mountain lion (the “*tigre*,” a form of the sun god), evil.” (Boley 1975: 502). The songs also stand for the perspective of the deer, plants, flowers, or animal friends found throughout nature.

Dance is of extreme importance to local residents; through performance the community is able to connect with healing, spiritual relationships, the history of oppression, as well as land loss. The movement of the dance allows performers to represent themselves and their people. Emotions can be awakened through the bodily exploration which dance requires. “Some dancers and choreographers talked about the transformations they experience on stage when dancing as animals or other beings.” (Murphy 2007: 9).

Ritual practices such as dance express aspects of daily life and existence. Native dance is related to religious worldview and spiritual understanding. Native religious and ceremonial

dance was restricted by the U.S. and Canadian government from 1880 to 1951. The dancing was viewed as dangerous and an act that could potentially induce warfare.

Dance was also deemed a waste of time and energy, time that the government felt could be used more productively by working. In contrast, natives value dance due to tradition, and the continued practice of the dances resulted in the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978. This act was put in place to allow the continuance of their practices which were desired. Performance creates a spiritual connection with the land and ancestors, as well as connecting generations since the practices are handed down. “In thousands of different forms, locations, and ways, Indigenous dancing has tapped these capacities: Native peoples used, and continue to use, dances as a powerful tool in continuously shifting negotiations of agency, self- determination, and resilience.” (Murphy 2007: 29).

The United States Central Intelligence Agency felt as if the Hopi dances were evil and prevented the tribe from having a great civilization. Natives were forced to become Christian; their ancient religious beliefs caused them to be seen as other. Christian colonizers were against dance, especially Indian dance. The devil was believed to appear in bodily shape during their dances. Although there was plenty of opposition towards these indigenous practices, they are still being performed today, “Throughout the Americas, from Chile to Canada, the people have never stopped dancing; as the living dance, they are joined again with all our ancestors before them, who cry out, who demand justice, and who call the people to take back the Americas.” (Murphy 2007: 1).

On my first field research visit to Belize in August 2106, my aim was to attend the Deer Dance Festival which was shown on the internet as taking place the first week in August. I arrived in Punta Gorda on August 1st for this reason. When I asked around, I was told that the

festival would be taking place in three weeks. Once I was there, I understood that technology did not have a large presence in the town, and if dates were changed it may have been difficult to make online updates. Slightly disheartened I wondered if I was ever going to be able to see the dance performed.

Maya Day

During my second research trip in March 2019, I planned to interview as many people as possible of Maya descent about my research topic. I wanted to take in as many experiences that would help me to better understand the context of the Maya cultural traditions and social practices which elaborate on nature. On my first day back in Punta Gorda, I noticed a banner advertising Maya Day, a celebration where the Deer dance is performed; it happened to be the day before I was flying back home. So unexpectedly, I had the opportunity to witness the Deer dance. I made friends with Robert, a local man of African and Maya decent, and he offered to take me wherever I needed to go. He agreed to take me to the village of Blue Creek for Maya Day, so I could see the Deer dance performed. It took about an hour and a half to get to Blue Creek from Punta Gorda. The route starts off on a well paved highway, better than Houston roads. All the cars were flying on this highway and no one seems to pay attention to the speed limit. There are not many cars on the road, and I have never seen an officer writing a ticket.

Along this highway you began to pass small villages as you travel further out from PG, as the locals call it. Eventually, we turned off on a dirt road, and for quite some time we were riding on the dirt road in a pickup truck with the windows down. The ride was very scenic. Actually, to get anywhere in the Toledo District, you ride through the jungle.

On the bumpy road there are trees as far as one can see on either side. There are scattered houses, fields of cattle and a quarry of stone every now and then. Unexpectedly, there are also Mennonite farms in the area. I had never seen Mennonites before coming to Belize, they seemed to be similar to the Amish. I was told you can stop at these farms where they sell ice cream.

At a certain point, traffic began to increase due to people coming into the village for the festival. We reached a bridge to cross over the river to enter the Village of Blue Creek. There were people fully clothed relaxing in the river. There was a small banner that hung which read “The Home of Maya Day”. We found parking where we could get out and join the crowd. It felt similar to going to African American church bazaars in Houston. There were people from many different ethnicities there.

It was a bright day with only a few clouds in the sky. A large open field was bordered by booths with Mayan foods for sale. In the center of the field was the area where all the dancers were performing. This was a beautifully colorful display. Each Deer dancer wore a costume with a cloak wrapped around his back, and a colorful bandana at the top of the back. The dancers each had a deer mask that sat on top of the head, with antlers and attached bells and a second bandana on top of their head. Their cloaks were adorned with fringe and sequined designs which flickered in the sunlight. (Fig. 7)

The Deer dancers were lined up at one end of the field, and on the other end of the field was another set of dancers wearing different costumes. These dancers had on masks with black or yellow faces. Their costumes included top and trouser sets with fringe decoration. Some also wore animal masks, such as a jaguar mask. These dancers were shaking rattles and dancing in a backwards and forwards linear movement, while the Deer dancers were still at the other end. They also coupled and were linked at the arm without locking arms when in this stance they

pivoted in a circular motion. When I asked my *Ladino*, of Maya and Spanish descent, cab driver if he could explain the dance to me, he said, “In current times, it is a mixture of dances and these dances are put on to keep tradition alive.”

The Deer dance is one of many activities that can be enjoyed by tourists, through the new concept of ecotourism. This is Belize’s preferred way of having visitors experience their land. This will be further discussed in the following chapter, where my own encounters as an “ecotourist” while conducting my fieldwork provides insight into this contemporary practice.

Chapter 4: Ecotourism

Historical Background

The Maya do not have any major political influence in the five countries which they occupy. Even with the Maya being the majority in Guatemala with a population of 4.4 million as well as a population of 1.7 million in Mexico, their political impact is minimal. Many archaeologists have helped in making central Belize a destination for ecotourism.

The American archaeologist Anabel Ford was involved in the reconstruction of El Pilar, an archeological site in Bullet Tree Falls in the Cayo District near Guatemala. Ford began with a group called “Friends of El Pilar” and she employed the local Maya of Bullet Tree Falls to give visitors tours of the site. Her efforts were successful and were noted by Andrew Gordon, “Ford had the right idea at the moment. Recommended policy on tourism emphasized the importance of festivals, folklore, handicrafts, history, local cuisine, and music as keys to advancing the nation’s tourist industry.” (Gordon 2017: 14).

When Belize became independent from British rule in 1981, tourism was condemned. For instance, the industry was seen as being run by elites, contributing to international inequality, and a cause of environmental degradation. Tourism shifted in the late 1980’s, and the Peoples United Party (PUP) from 1989-1993 supported new tourism. This was frowned upon, because the thought was that the land was being exploited for the tourism industry. Eventually a change came about with new strategies in tourism.

Ecotourism is a somewhat new concept which focuses on the presentation of natural habitats and regional cultural traditions to the general public, especially to foreign visitors. For the Maya community, ecotourism is implemented with the intent of keeping the Maya amidst nature while being concurrent with a modern, and progressive way of life. This new way of thought was developed to respect and restore nature, and to preserve local cultures around the world. The focus of ecotourism is to have tourists venture inland to have an experience of nature and culture while learning about nature in an undisturbed context. Activities in Maya regions can include hiking in the forest, visiting archaeological sites, observing wildlife, and engaging with Kriol, Garifuna, and Maya villages. “In the 1980’s, international travelers and biologist began visiting and exhibiting interest in protecting wildlife in the estuaries, karst hills, lowland savanna, and broad leaf forests surrounding Gales Point Manatee. Biologists have been particularly interested in the protection of the Hawksbill turtle and the Caribbean manatee, both of which are considered vulnerable to extinction. The rural ecotourism project began, in February 1991, with a proposal to the Government of Belize drafted by American wildlife biologist, Robert Horwich, to designate approximately 170,000 acres, including Gales Point Manatee village, as a biosphere reserve.” (Belsky 1999: 650). In Gales Point, there was also a ‘Community Baboon Sanctuary’ and ecotourism was used to increase local income. These are indigenous howler monkeys, referred to as baboos.

“In the 1980’s tourism was reinvented as ‘ecotourism.’ Ecotourism is defined as a small-scale, up market tourism in which visitors respect and express interest in local natural history and culture where a local tourist economy builds support for environment conservation.” (Belsky 1999: 647). In 1992 there was the introduction of Mundo Maya a program which would bring the five Mayan populated countries together to offer a tourist experience which would benefit the

culture. “Tourism has become a major source of revenue across the Mundo Maya and the cultural heritage of Mayas- ancient and living ones alike- has been commoditized and showcased as a major attraction to lure national and international tourists. The promotion of ethnic tourism, and cultural tourism of the Mundo Maya has created a surge of interest in the ‘mysterious’ ancient Maya, the colorful living Maya, and the variety of the exotic tropical environments in which they lived and continue to live.” (Magnoni 2007: 372). This has been a welcome change to the typical type of tourism which was seen before this. Ecotourism provides a more thought-provoking experience than that of normal beach and resort vacations that the people of the Maya world were becoming accustomed to. “The predominant form of tourism today in Mexico is large-scale, mass-based tourism centered along beaches. Only 10% of the tourism in Mexico can be considered cultural and ethnic tourism. Cancun alone, located on the Caribbean coast of Quintana Roo, attracts three fourths of all foreign visitors to the country.” (Magnoni 2007: 362).

2016 Fieldwork

My first visit to Belize took place July 30th- August 9th, 2016. My experiences while in Punta Gorda were forms of ecotourism. Even to get to the beach in Placencia, I had to take a two-hour bus ride on the local bus, the James Bus Line, which picked up riders from each village, it was an old bus without air conditioning. There was no luxury to these experiences; they were unpolished and direct encounters which made them all the more rich. I would never have been able to get to know the Maya or see the culture in the way that I did had I stayed at a resort and remained secluded in a hotel property. In August 2016 and March 2019, I traveled to

the Toledo District in Belize to conduct fieldwork and gather cultural data on the local Maya community. The District, which is similar to a state, is in the south of the country. This area has the largest concentration of people of Maya descent in Belize.

In my initial fieldwork project in Belize, I flew from Houston to Belize City where the only international airport in the country is located. After customs, I boarded a small plane for the flight to San Pedro. A taxi driver picked me up and after about an hour-long ride on a bumpy road, I was dropped at my hotel in San Pedro.

While at the hotel, I made friends with the staff. There was a staff member who explained to me that in northern Belize, there is a lot of mixing among cultures. I told him I would be traveling to the south to Punta Gorda. He said that Punta Gorda was where most of the Maya do not mix with other cultures. According to him, they still live a very traditional lifestyle, living in thatched roof houses, as opposed to the more modern way of life in the North. He said, "You're going to see when you go down there."

While talking with him, he showed me different things around the property that I did not notice on my own. He pointed out that the hermit crab can make a home out of anything. There were some with snail shells walking around by the pool. Then he showed me some small watermelons that were growing by the pool. He was *Ladino* and explained to me that animals are a part of their culture. His godfather gave him a bull calf as a gift. He said he raised the bull and watched it grow. One day the adult bull snarled at him. He said that animals have the capability of turning on humans even when they have raised them. The young man lived in San Ignacio where he owned a large piece of property. He worked at the hotel a few days a week and would commute back to San Ignacio to spend time with his wife and children. When I received news that a hurricane was coming, he let me know that he was leaving to go back to San Ignacio.

On August 1st, 2016, I went to the small local airport to catch my flight to Punta Gorda where I boarded another small plane from the local airline Maya Air. This afternoon flight was filled to capacity with passengers. I was off on my personal exploration of an ancient culture. My first stop was back to Belize City, then to Placencia, followed by Dangriga, and finally to the last stop, Punta Gorda. Upon arrival, we landed on a small airstrip, which is really the term the locals use for the airport. The office for the airline was located in a trailer, and the baggage claim area simply consisted, of a cart with the bags piled up on it. The desk clerk for the airline offered to call a cab for me.

I waited a short period of time and soon a man pulled up in an older model Mitsubishi Galant. He let me know that he was there to take me to my hotel. He was a very personable East Indian man, and while driving he explained that there was a sizeable population of East Indians in the town. He gave me a tour of the city which took only five minutes and then took me to my hotel, Coral House Inn.

Upon arrival, I inquired about the impending hurricane. I was told that Punta Gorda is the highest district of elevation in Belize and not to worry. I was put in contact with BZ Tours and began my research on the very next day. I was met by a local guide named Roland, who identified himself as Kriol. He took me to Luubantun, a nearby archaeological site.

To get to the entrance of the site, one takes a path about a mile long. The first thing that I noticed were the tall trees towering over us; the particular tree is called a Silk Cotton Ceiba tree. We were met by a female Maya tour guide who works for the site. The site was not found in its original condition. There was rubble of large rock structures piled everywhere. Tree roots from large trees grow through the structures and over time break up sites. Periodically, archaeologists will recreate with the stones left behind the original formations of the site.

There were two ball courts on this site where the ball game of the ancient Maya was played. (Fig. 9) The lawn was well manicured, and one could imagine the ball games being played on the grass. (Fig. 10) A maintenance crew keeps the site regularly mowed. Stairs in tiers lead to temples. A creek runs by this site, for as is traditional, all sites are along the water. The ancient Maya built sites by the water for functional purposes. An amazing feature of the site is that some of these huge stones are rounded for aesthetic purposes, and the way they are stacked had to require a lot of manpower. (Fig.11) There are trees everywhere that shade the entire premises.

I then went to meet David, a Maya man, at his cacao farm in the Village of San Pedro Columbia. I was not able to tour the farm due to recent rain which made the ground muddy. I did, however, eat at the small restaurant David had built on the premises. His daughter prepared a meal for me, which consisted mostly of local vegetables and boiled meat. The farmer has fifteen children who help him run the farm. The oldest is a thirty-four-year-old daughter who cooks for guests and performs chocolate demonstrations; the youngest is a twelve-year-old boy. We were able to peek into a chicken coop which was also part of the farm. He explained that the chickens lay eggs every morning. When asked how he collects the eggs, he replied “That’s what I have children for.”

From the restaurant I walked over to David’s outside kitchen area for the chocolate demonstration. This area is constructed from painted concrete blocks as was the restaurant. There is a hearth with a metal top where the cacao beans are cooked. An amazing view of all the village can be seen from this area. His farm is on top of a mountain and as you look out upon the valley, all you see is a landscape of vegetation covered in trees. You can also see neighboring houses,

although they are far away. (Fig.12) The Maya of this village seem to have large plots of land that stretch for acres.

The eldest daughter demonstrated how a fire under the metal countertop was used to cook the cacao beans on the hot surface. (Fig.13&14) After being heated, the beans are crushed with a stone. The crushed beans are then sifted in a plastic bowl to separate the outer shells from the edible beans. The inner portion of the bean is then crushed with a long slender stone. In a more modern method one can use a metal grinder. This is a cone shaped structure, with a long handle attached for turning. Either process is hard work, as I attempted both in the demonstration. Both of these methods will create a paste. The paste is then mixed with hot water and sugar or honey. It is a sweet drink similar to hot cocoa. There were chocolate bars for sale; my favorite of the samples that I tasted was coconut.

I purchased a few bars and could not stop eating them, they were so good. I later brought some back to Houston to rave reviews from family and friends. When leaving the farm, I stopped at a concrete house with a thatched roof, where the farmer's family members were laid out on the floor looking very comfortable. There did not seem to be doors, air conditioning, or any signs of technology.

I then traveled to the San Antonio village waterfall, the smaller waterfall of the Toledo District. There were two men in civilian clothing guarding the entrance with machetes. They collected money from the tour guide, and we were allowed inside. The waterfall had a small pool of water at the bottom. The water was cold, and the rocks were slippery, but I still maneuvered around to explore. Clear little fish with iridescent flecks swam around. There was a clearing above the waterfall where one could see further back into the jungle with vegetation hanging

over. There are streams that run off from this area. The guide let me know that he comes with his family for a day of swimming and sets up a pit for barbeque.

I knew that this would be the last outing for a while, because the hurricane was set to hit that night. So, I hunkered down in my hotel room and watched the news with updates. The main threat seemed to be to the north of the country, and there was mainly coverage on Belize City until the power went out. There were large gusts of wind and around two in the morning the power went out, so I went to sleep. Hurricane Earl made landfall in Belize as a Category 1. The following morning there was still no power, with news that Punta Gorda was mildly affected. The city I had just visited, San Pedro, was in wreckage.

I took a walk around to kill time and avoid feeling cooped up. Damage seemed slight; there was just a ghost town feeling. No businesses were open and there were not many people on the streets. Around two in the afternoon, the power was restored. When discussing the storm with people in the town, the view was the same all around. Everyone spoke of it as a minimal storm, a category one, and said they had experienced worse storms.

On the following day, tours were once again available. I was scheduled to go to Nim Li Punit and a nearby cave. The Nim Li Punit site seemed to me similar to Lubaantun. At the entrance of a small museum, three large stelae collected from the site were displayed.

In the museum, various display cases contained hafted bifaces that were shaped like laurel leaves. These artifacts were dated Late Classic AD 750-790 AD. They were presumably used in ceremonial activities since they were found in the burial context.

Bark beaters were also found at this site, which are stone objects carved with grooves worked into the sides. They served several functions but were primarily used for grinding corn

and pounding beans. In ancient times they were also used to pound the bark to make paper for the codexes or writing books.

Jade ornaments were found in the tomb in the Royal Family Plaza. Jade was a sign of wealth and also represented life giving properties. There were teeth on display with jadeite and hematite inlays. Dental inlays were indicative of royalty and wealth in ancient Maya society. These formed a part of a burial cache located in the Royal Family Plaza.

There were several burial sites; one featured a large stela fully intact containing glyphs. One of the tombs contained the remains of at least five people in a sequential burial. Along with their bones were buried shells, pottery, jade, stingray spines and objects of carved stone. These individuals were members of the royal family at Nim Li Punit and remained important figures, even after their death. There was also an astrology center with four large stelae signifying the change of seasons.

After visiting the archaeological site, I went to the village of Indian Creek where Maya women taught me how to make tortillas on a smaller stove than the one used to make chocolate but the same make. The *masa*, ground corn and water mix are stacked in a tall mound, broken off into pieces and mashed on a small circular piece of plastic by the fingers. This allows the tortilla to get the perfect circular shape. (Fig.15) Then the tortillas are placed on the hot metal plate above the fire to cook. The women also showed me how to grind chocolate, similar to David's demonstration, but only the last step of grinding the chocolate was performed and there was no chocolate for sale. These women served a meal, similar to the meal at David's, and then we parted ways.

The next stop for the day was the large waterfall in the village of Big Falls. (Fig.16) You have to walk through the jungle to get to the waterfall; it is much larger than the one in San

Antonio, Belize. The water was rushing rapidly because of excess water from the hurricane. (Fig.17) I was told that usually you could jump from the top, but the water was too strong on that day it was not advised to do so. There were a group of friends hanging out at the base of the waterfall where the water collects, and you can sit like you're in a pool. They had food and drinks, so it looked as if they were making a day of it. The water was cool, just like the temperature of the waterfall in San Antonio.

When heading to the cave where I was scheduled for the tour, the Maya man who would have been our cave guide let us know that the current was too strong from the excessive water due to the hurricane. He said, "I don't want anyone to lose life." After this talk, I made the decision with my guide that it would be better to go to back again to the small waterfall in San Antonio Village. This time it was a very different scene than a couple of days before. The swimming area under the waterfall was full of people. Everyone was swimming and jumping off the waterfall. I had a nice swim in the cold water, and I went to the top of the waterfall, but was too afraid to jump; instead I found a small groove in the rocks as a waterslide.

I considered going to Guatemala, which is approximately an hour-long water taxi ride that leaves out of the port near Coral House Inn. When I arrived at PG Water Taxi, I had just missed the only ride for the day that returns to PG within the same day, so I needed to figure out something else to do for the day. I walked over to the James Bus Line and asked what options I had for leaving the city and returning on the same day. A clerk let me know I could ride the bus to Independence, Stann Creek District, which is right above Toledo District. This would put me close to the beach in Placencia, Stann Creek District. I bought my ticket for the bus and headed to Independence.

The bus was an interesting experience. The buses for James Bus Line are like our school buses in America. There was no air conditioning, and since I needed to cool off in the August heat, I cracked the window. There were many stops along the way on the two-hour ride to Independence, which is where the larger bus station for the area is located. Anywhere that people were waiting along the road, the bus would stop; there does not have to be a designated bus stop. At times, there was standing room only for those who boarded. Many people were traveling for an extended stay, and this was apparent because there were many suitcases stored on the bus. People from all different ethnic backgrounds were riding, including other tourists. Sometimes there was music if someone had a radio, usually island music of Spanish origin and reggae.

When I arrived in Independence, I asked a clerk at the station for the next step to get to Placencia. I was told to take a taxi to Mango Creek, Stann Creek District and there I would find the Hokey Pokey Water Taxi. This was pretty simple it was not hard to find a taxi and I arrived in good timing to catch the next water taxi. The water taxi was a fifteen-minute calm and smooth ride through the mangroves, a nice scenic ride. As you approach Placencia, beach houses start to line the shore of the creek.

Once off the water taxi, there was a short walk to the beach, along the way there are stores and markets set up. Placencia is a more modern town than Punta Gorda, there were larger stores with new sidewalks that lined the streets. Large real estate signs were placed right before the beach entrance. At the same entrance is a sidewalk lined with stores and travel businesses. Some of the tables that were set up for the market portion of the beach were run by Maya, who had original weavings for sale.

The beach had beautiful blue water lined with palm trees, although there were portions of the shore with collections of seaweed and trash as you step into the water. As you get further out the water becomes clear; there were boats passing by and people engaging in water sports in the distance. There were restaurants and bars along the shore, and many resorts as well. Hammocks and wooden beach chairs were placed throughout the sand, with no rental fees. There were Mayan women that carried a sack on their backs. If you allowed, they would roll out the sacks to display the crafts that they had made for sale. This was definitely a nice relaxing getaway. I was told by local residents that they prefer Hopkins Village, Stann Creek for a trip to the beach for the scenery, as opposed to Placencia which is more of a tourist attraction. Hopkins Village is further north almost to Cayo District. I did not get to make it to Hopkins.

I asked PG tours about kayaking right after the hurricane and was told that the river was not clear from the storm. I also asked about snorkeling in an attempt to see as many animals as possible within the region I was visiting. Snorkeling was not an option because the ocean water was not clear from the storm and the sand that became mixed in would make it hard to see the marine life. Eventually the ocean cleared up and I was able to schedule snorkeling for my last full day in Punta Gorda.

Roland called to let me know that he was given the update that the river was clear now as well, if I wanted to go kayaking. So, I made the decision to cancel snorkeling and go kayaking instead. I got on the James Bus Line and rode up to Big Falls, which is about an hour ride. When we arrived, there was a big sign for Extreme Adventures, the company I would be kayaking with. I went out on the Rio Grande, which runs through a significant portion of Belize. We had a Mayan man as our kayaking tour guide, and he was able to answer any questions about the wildlife we saw around us on the river. He pointed out iguanas on the ledge of the riverbanks.

There were times that you could hear a splash in the water and the guide let us know that it was the iguanas jumping into the water. At one point I saw a large, beautiful white bird sitting on the riverbank. I asked our guide what type of bird it was, and he said it was a great heron.

The other tourist was not well balanced on the kayak and began to tip over towards the beginning of the tour. There was also lots of debris in the river from the storm, large piles of tree limbs and trash accumulated together. The debris caused blockages in the river that the kayakers had to pass over, which was challenging. When dusk was approaching, the guide realized we would not make it to our destination before dark. He located the house of a friend along the river, so that he could use the phone to contact Extreme Adventures to pick us up and give us a ride back to their office. Although this was not how the tour was expected to go, I did enjoy being on the water seeing wildlife and having a unique experience.

All of the tours on my first visit were provided by BZ Tours, I did not hear of any other touring companies during my time there. I later returned for three more weeks in 2019 and had a much different experience. Because I had become familiar with the town in 2016, I no longer had the need to hire BZ tours to show me Belize. I created my own schedules and was able to see Toledo District through friends I made and through riding the James Bus Line.

2019 Fieldwork

On my second visit to Punta Gorda, March 4th- 25th, 2019. Immediately after landing at the air strip I knew to call a taxi. There was not a long wait before Charles, the only taxi driver I previously built a relationship with, was there to take me to my hotel. He always has plenty of

information on current events in the town. At one point he informed me that there was an outdoor restroom being built by missionaries. This was thought of as an act of community service to improve the way of life in the town, by adding an additional restroom perceived to be needed. Hines let me know this made no sense to him, because the restroom was by the shore and drained out to the ocean. Although there is not a sandy beachfront, the residents of Punta Gorda like to swim in this water which is easily accessible to them.

I stayed once again at Coral House Inn. There had been a turnover in the staff, and the majority of the employees were new. Most of them were Maya women. I met Anita, a college student, in her early twenties who would go to class in Independence in the morning and come and work in Punta Gorda in the evenings. She lived with her parents in the Village of Cattle Landing which was a fifteen-minute ride right outside of Punta Gorda. She was a very kind person and easy to speak with, as were most of the local Punta Gorda residents. We quickly formed a bond and she agreed to take me anywhere that I needed to visit for my research. In addition, we would hang out in town together, and I got to experience things from the point of view of a Belizean.

On her day off we planned to go to the waterfall in San Antonio. She picked me up from Coral House Inn and we went to the grocery store near her house, in Cattle Landing, and purchased snacks to take with us. We went to her grandfather's farm which was down the road from the grocery store, so I was able to see a Maya farm.

The first thing I noticed when we arrived was a large field of cattle. She mentioned, "We don't have fat cows, like American cows." They were lean cows and bulls that she said, "would be used for meat mostly." There were coconut trees all over the property. She grabbed a long stick to knock a coconut out of a tree. She hit the coconut repeatedly until it was knocked loose

and fell out of the tree. She then grabbed a machete and started cutting on the end of the coconut at an angle, so we could drink the water. She opened the top portion with the knife, and I took a sip of the water which did not have much flavor to me. I could understand how if living in Belize the coconut became a convenient source for a refreshing drink.

Anita wanted to have oranges to take to the waterfall with us. Her grandfather grabbed a stick that was able to attach to a tree with a string. He would attach the stick to limbs and pull them down and Anita would grab the oranges off the tree when they were in reach. The tree was filled with oranges, so she took down an arm's full for us. They were green oranges, which is the way her family eats them. With a knife, they cut the skin off in a spiral motion, as opposed to peeling the orange with their hands. I was not sure at first if the orange was ripe since it was green, but it was surprisingly sweet.

When we made it to the waterfall, there was nobody there but us and the attendants that worked at the site. The setting was somewhat different than when I visited previously in 2016, due to the season. The dry season is preferred by tourists and the rates on hotel rooms are much more expensive during this season. When there is little rainfall the creeks dry up and maneuvering around the terrain is much simpler. Each season last for a duration of six months, dry season being December through May and rainy season takes place June through November. Being there in March, I encountered the dry season, while my first visit was in August was during the rainy season.

The waterfall that I remembered covering the entire rock formation, was now down to one stream of water flowing from the edge of the entire formation. I could see the grooves in the uncovered rocks that I used as a slide when I visited in August. There was still the pool of water at the bottom, and Anita and I took a swim. When it began to rain, we ate our snacks at the

covered picnic table. I brought my speaker to play music and we hung out there and made a day of it.

On another day, Anita invited me to her family's home for a lunch she cooked. Her parents' house was five minutes away from her grandparents' farm. Her father owned a business and it was on the bottom floor of her home. It was a motorcycle business, run by her father. There were motorcycles for sale on a showroom floor. The services offered were part sales, servicing, and repairs.

Upstairs was where the living quarters were located. Anita cooked a stewed chicken dish for me that I enjoyed. The meat was well seasoned and tender, she served it over rice. I ate it with my favorite hot sauce, Marie Sharp's, and they had different flavor selections of it at the house. She offered me soursop juice, which I was nervous to try. Because I had never experienced this juice, I was not sure if I would care for the taste. It turned out to be a sweet and refreshing juice. While we were eating, she turned on Netflix as there were modern conveniences in her home. I was surprised that a woman in her early twenties would prepare a traditional lunch for a friend with such ease. This inspired me to cook more when I returned home.

She had chosen her next day off to take me to interview people she felt would be good for my research, which I discussed with her on numerous occasions. We went back to her grandfather's farm and I was able to interview him. He was a tall and slender man who was extremely friendly and talkative. When I asked him what animals one commonly sees in the bush, he replied, "Ahh, in the bush yes there's sometimes you find quash. Right now, they are eating my corn. Yea so those are the main one I have to be looking after them every day, because they destroy our crop. Other like deer, um probably peccary. All kinds of animal are around the area where I work." This is similar to what Menchu said when she discussed traditions of

planting crops, “Then we have to look after the maize because there are animals in the mountains and, at sowing time, they come and dig up the seeds. So we take it in turns to keep watch in the fields, taking a turn around the fields now and again during the night. Racoons, squirrels, taltuzas, and other rodents are the ones that come at night.” (Burgos-Debray & Menchu 1995: 53).

He also let me know about cutting down trees, “Well just because we sometimes like right now they’re on the brushing. It’s a plantation we cut them, we have them to fall the tree to burn the place. Sometimes the tree gets in the way, and then you chop them. So but then that’s because we have to.” I asked him if this was to make the soil rich, and he said that was correct.

Copal is also a plant of great significance to the Maya. The first time I came by to try to interview Robert, it was morning and he was burning copal sap. (Fig.18) That morning, he did not have time to hold an interview, because he was headed off to work but he explained he was burning copal to keep bad spirits away. When I finally got to interview him, I asked him to tell me about the Maya practice of burning copal sap. He said, “Yea the copal sap is for like ceremonial healing and so. You know, like when they burn up, do offering to the Gods and they have different spiritual healing, so they burn that with tobacco and cannabis and all that thing there.” We also talked about how the sap is removed from the copal tree. “Yea you cut the tree, cut the tree like in a v shape and the sap drains right out. Catch it with a bag ya know or scrape it off.” I asked him if it dries into the substance that I saw him burning on the morning that I stopped by. “Yea, yea. And they are also, the Maya are also good at spiritual battle. Like if someone tries to do you bad spiritually or try to set things for you to have a bad time or so. They know how to cure that too. So that’s their, like if somebody try to put a spell on you or try to cast bad luck on you. They know how to find it and take it out from you.”

Menchu also spoke about this in a chapter entitled “The Natural World. The Earth, Mother of Man.” She observed, “Pom, copal, is a sacred ingredient for our people. We use it to express our feelings for the earth, so that she will allow us to cultivate her. Copal is the resin of a tree. It has a smell like incense. We burn it and it gives off a very strong smell: a smoke with a very rich, delicious, aroma.” (Burgos- Debray & Menchu: 56-57).

When speaking to Paul about a poisonous tree Anita mentioned to me, he told me, “Yea there are some poisonous trees around. They have one that is called um poison wood, yea poison wood. A huge tree, the sap is the poison part of it, even the leaf. If it touch your skin it will burn your skin. So that’s very dangerous and then sometimes when we work in the bush we have to be careful if it’s a, if that a big tree. They get really big...so all the barks everything you have to cut them ahead of, maybe 2, 3 days just for the sap to get dry around the tree. But if not, if you just start chopping it right away all the sap splashes on your skin or your face you get...a bad rash.”

They know about all the animals around them including ocelots, tapirs, snakes, and iguanas. “Modern Itza are familiar with virtually all the species recorded for Lowland, and many not recorded. They know the overwhelming majority of useful plant and animal names recorded for pre-conquest Cholti-Lacandon and early post conquest Yucatec, as well as those recognized by modern Mopan Maya from southern Peten, Lacandon of Chipas, and Yucatec Maya.” (Atran 1993: 640). They bathe in the river in the morning among some of these animals. While kayaking on the Rio Grande, I saw a man and woman with a baby bathing in the river.

When I spoke to Paul about animals, he mentioned the nightwalker to me. Since I had never heard of this before, I asked him to explain this animal to me. He said, “A nightwalker is an animal that travels at night...It’s like a big cat yea, traveling at night. Let’s say right now there’s no nightwalker out, but they come. As night come they start to go in, they start to come

out. Right now they are probably sleeping, but you can't see them. They are on the huge trees, where nobody destroy them a lot...They are a little brownish color."

The people of Punta Gorda are not afraid of jaguars; everyone speaks of them as if they are not a threat and seem surprised when you mention them being dangerous. I also interviewed a Mopan Maya man in his twenties, his name was Joe. He worked at my hotel in the mornings cooking breakfast for the guests. When I asked him if he was afraid of jaguars, his response was, "Um jaguars, they don't attack people they run away. I think I encounter like of them already, That's a black jaguar. Yea while I was riding my bike. I went to the village to visit my aunt, and I was riding my bike on the rocky road. And it just jumped. It um crossed the road. Yea and it didn't do nothing...yea, they usually afraid and they're not like. They're wild."

Paul also told me what he found to be dangerous, "Dangerous ones, there's no dangerous ones except the snakes, yea the snake, tarantula or scorpion." I had just watched him cut up a tarantula in the grass with a machete, so I made mention of this. "Yea, especially those are minor animals but the big ones like the snakes. You have to be very careful when you walk in the bush. Well sometimes you find them; sometimes you won't, so it all depends. Where you are traveling and what kind of work do you do. In the bush you won't find them right now, except they hide under the grass or around the trees or under anything that they don't get disturbed a lot."

After leaving her grandfather's farm Anita took me to Emery Grove, the village where she grew up. We rode for a short distance on the highway from the farm and turned off onto a dirt road. What seemed to come out of nowhere hidden by the trees of the jungle, was a village full of people, relaxing on a Sunday. It was afternoon; Anita let me know many of them had just come from their Christian church service. They attend a church located within the village.

We walked up on a large clearing, where men were lining up trees to build a roof. (Fig. 19) I stopped and interviewed as many people as I could in this village. In total I found eight people willing to interview. I attempted to speak with as many women as possible on my research topic in order to collect a good number of interviews and not have a biased perspective. Anita let me know that the women did not know much about animals, because they do not spend time in the bush. She turned out to be right, based on the two women I spoke with. The second woman went to grab her son, in his early twenties, after I asked her a couple of questions.

It was not that the women were guarded and not willing to be interviewed, the Maya the women maintain the home and spend most of the day preparing food for the family. For the Maya women are central to the domestic domain. Being excluded from venturing into the bush as the men do, keeps the women's awareness on what takes place in that environment limited. The work women perform outside of the home is to gather plants for cooking and healing. Firewood is also collected by women for their fire hearth, where they cook meals for the family. Since men have knowledge on animals from being in the bush, I turned my attention to them.

There was a group of three men hanging out, one was working on repairing a motorcycle. (Fig. 20) When I asked if they were willing to speak with me, they all stopped what they were doing to for my interview. During the interviews there were domesticated animals roaming around, such as pigs and chickens. (Fig. 21) Jason was the first of the three to speak. I asked him what animals he found to be dangerous. He said, "I don't see them dangerous...I'm not afraid of them." When I asked the same of his friend Stacy, this was his perspective, "No, only the snakes. Some of the snakes are dangerous."

The snake is the most feared creature of the people I spoke with in Punta Gorda. When asked why many of them said if you fire a gun in the air other animals run away, but snakes will

continue to come towards you. Snakes have an unpredictable nature to them and are dangerous due to the venom in their bites. Joe said, “Most dangerous, I would say the most dangerous animal is the snake. It’s um what do you call it, I forgot what they call the snake do you know?” From my other conversations while in Punta Gorda, there was one that came to mind. I said, Tomy... He quickly replied, “Yea Tomygoff, yea, yea. Tomygoff yea, that is the most dangerous one.” Then he began telling me about another snake, “uh huh they have this black one, I don’t really know its name...yea a snake in Belize, that is dangerous so is poisonous. But um that is the second dangerous one. And the third I would say is a boa constrictor.”

I was able to meet a Q’eqchi’ man Alan, who was young with dreadlocks and although of full Maya decent took on the appearance of a Rastafarian. (Fig. 22) When talking about what he sees in the bush he said, “In the bush, well Ima original jungle guy. I see all kinda animals. I see jaguars, tapirs, we see actually baboons, we see snakes, we see all kinda animals we think about we have to have in there man. And the biggest animal in the jungle is a tapir man, it’s the biggest. All animals for human, that what I see in my experience. In my experience all animals are scared of humans.” He told me that tapirs run away when they see humans.

Conclusion

Through the use of plant medicine, it is evident that the Maya are highly knowledgeable of their environment around them. For many years they were curing themselves before western medicine found its way to Central America. The Maya have proven to be resourceful in using plants from their surroundings to keep them alive.

The Deer dance is a ritual performed for deities of the Maya to show thanks to the deer which is sacrificed in the hunt. The deer is seen as an innocent animal, hunted to become food for survival. Through animism the deer is brought to life through the dancer, to give the animal human characteristics. The dance is intended to recreate the actions of the hunt and has become a source of keeping the generations tied together through ritual practice. Tourists are able to attend performances of this dance, at festivals, through ecotourism. This dance reinforces the combination of nature and the people who dwell in it becoming one entity.

Totemism is an intricate classification system created by indigenous people through connecting with the natural world. Durkheim considered religion and associated rituals as a reflection of society. “According to the elders, everything has its *secret*,” said one of our informants in Chiapas. These ‘secrets’ are ritual actions that complete one’s obligations to the spiritual world. So success in agriculture is dependent not only on material and ecological factors, but also on the harmony that farmers and their communities establish with the spiritual beings that animate nature.” (Ford 2015: 73). Human classifications are derived from society and culture. There is not a differentiation between the world of people and that of plants and animals. Totemism is way of binding humans with the natural elements that are ascribed to them in clans. This makes nature a part of everyday life, which is seen among the Maya.

In Belize ecotourism has been introduced as a practice to keep the land in its natural state. This method of preservation has allowed the people of Belize to control the type of tourism that they will accept in their country. As a result, the tourism industry has not changed the natural landscape of Belize. There have not been manmade beaches created for tourists to come lounge by the water, on what is considered to be a typical vacation. Instead Belize's tourism industry is filled with exciting cultural adventures for tourists to partake in. This is keeping the country from changing into a commercialized development, which is not desired. Instead the country is still in its original state of majority jungle landscapes.

Ecotourism allows the Maya of Belize to have jobs, teaching their culture in ways that only they are capable of doing. As opposed to restructuring their cities to be tourist friendly and adding in large hotels, Belize is not developed compared to its neighbor Mexico. This leaves the country with a natural element, that the local residents appreciate.

My travels to Belize and the experiences while there, made the theory of animism come alive. Through my fieldwork my previous research in text was reinforced. I saw animals everywhere when in the Toledo district and they were held in a high regard. There were many yards with a turkey meandering around, and plenty of stops around Punta Gorda where I would see a group of vultures or iguanas roaming freely. (Fig. 23) No one ever spoke ill of animals or scared them away. I did not witness anything other than animals calmly coexisting with humans in a manner where there was a peaceful harmony.

The Maya belief system practices that they are people developed from corn. They praise corn and do not see a differentiation between themselves and nature. Their spirituality allows them to be combined with nature as humans, "There is no real separation of nature and culture for the Maya. No word exists that equates with our term 'nature.' The knowledge of the

landscape, the spirits of the natural world, and the respect for the common good pervade daily life and its rhythms. The *milpa* cycle embodies the relationship of the Maya to their fields, forests, and gardens.” (Ford 2015: 76).

There are ritual actions, such as the Deer dance, in place to feed one’s adoration to the spiritual world. The Maya have protected the country of Belize through maintaining efforts not to destroy the jungle that is their home. Ecotourism has been a way of keeping change of the land to a minimum, in order to keep their natural environment as it is. This allows spiritual and healing practices to continue and keeps the culture from changing.

Illustrations



Figure 1. Regional Dialect Map by PBworks, mayateamfour.pbworks.com accessed 10 June 2020.



Figure 2. Map of Punta Gorda photo by Moon Belize, moon.com accessed 10 June 2020.



*Figure 3. Cacao tree with cacao blossoms
photo by Miriam Bracey fieldwork San Pedro
Columbia, March 2019.*



*Figure 4. Fresh cacao cut open photo by
Miriam Bracey fieldwork Punta Gorda, March
2019.*



Figure 5. Dried Corn at David's farm photo by Miriam Bracey San Pedro Columbia, March 2019.



Figure 6. Black painting of a turtle, long-necked bird, and a possible deer from Acum, Yucatan. After Stone, 1995.



Figure 7. Deer dancers photo by Miriam Bracey fieldwork Blue Creek, March 2019.



Figure 8. Ball court photo by Miriam Bracey fieldwork Lubaantun, August 2016.



Figure 9 Ball court photo by Miriam Bracey fieldwork, August 2016.

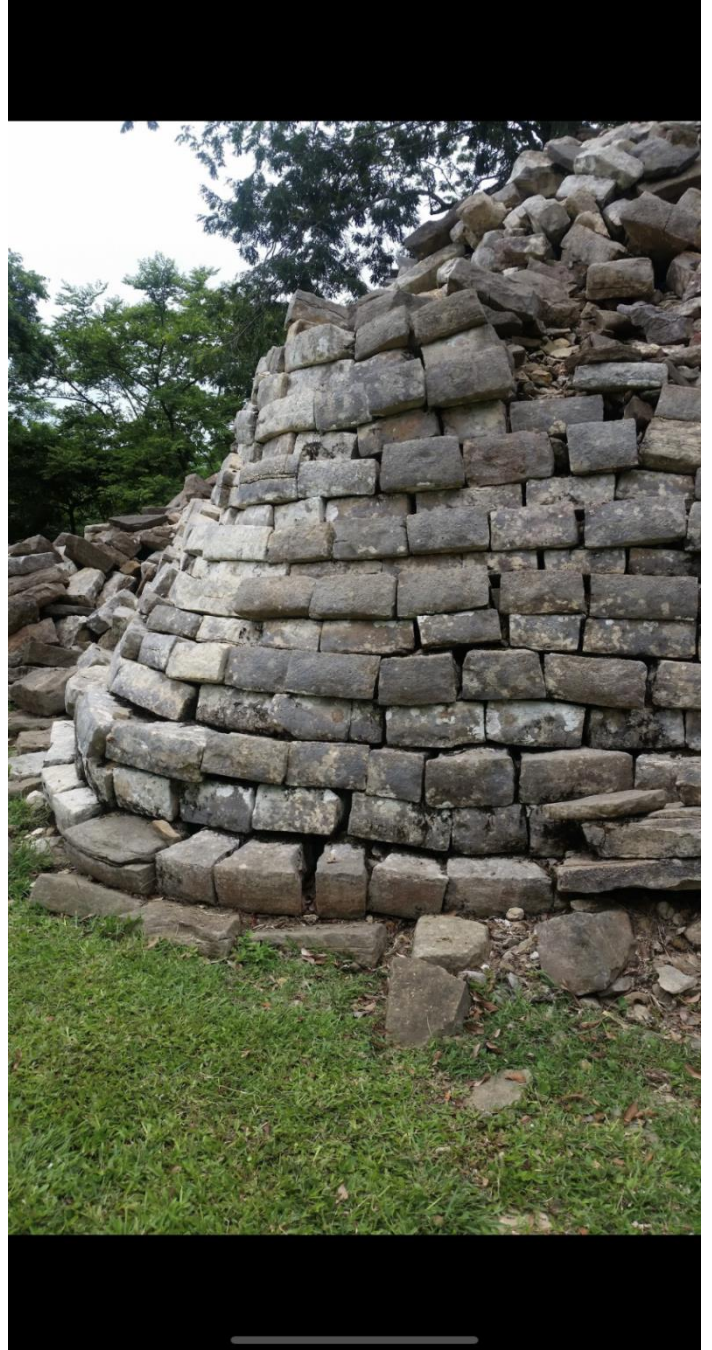


Figure 10 Rounded stones photo by Miriam Bracey fieldwork Lubaantun, August 2016.



Figure 11 View from David's farm photo by Miriam Bracey fieldwork San Pedro Columbia, August 2016.



Figure 12 David's daughter cooking cacao beans phot by Miriam Bracey fieldwork San Pedro Columbia, August 2016.



Figure 13 Cacao beans cooking photo by Miriam Bracey fieldwork San Pedro Columbia, August 2016.

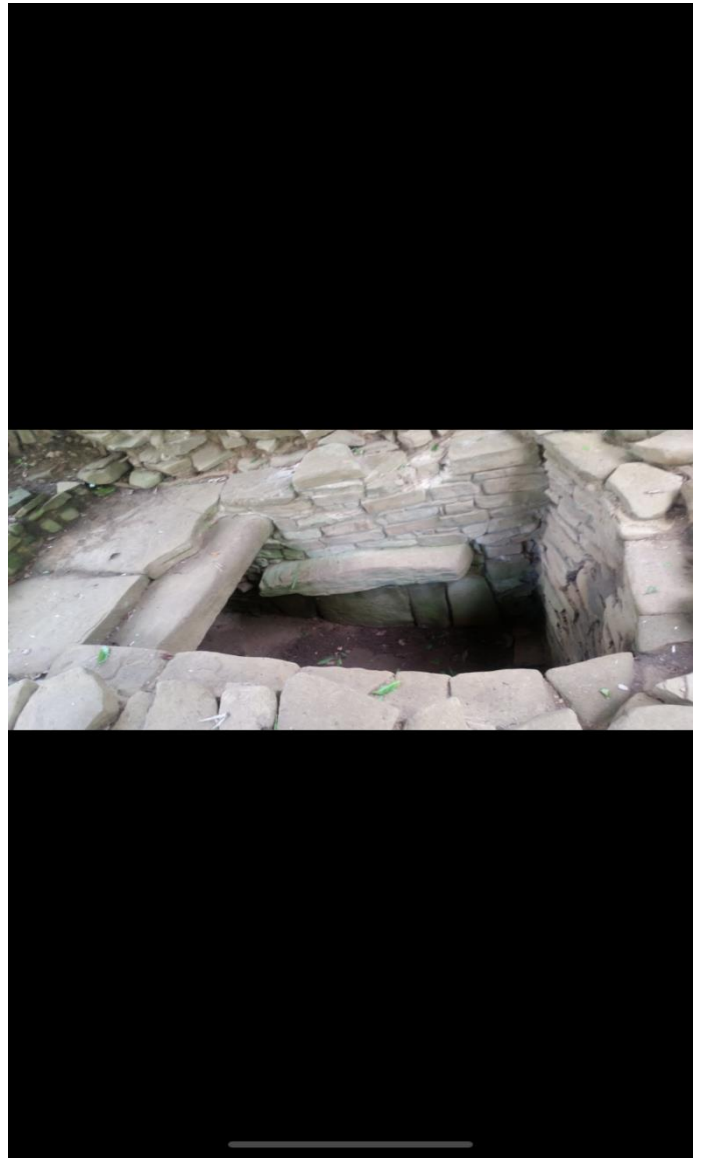


Figure 14 burial site photo by Miriam Bracey fieldwork Nim Li Punit, August 2016.



Figure 15 Making tortillas photo by Miriam Bracey fieldwork Indian Creek, August 2016.



Figure 16 Waterfall photo by Miriam Bracey fieldwork, August 2016.



Figure 17 Waterfall photo by Miriam Bracey fieldwork Big Falls, August 2016.



Figure 18 Copal sap photo by Miriam Bracey fieldwork Punta Gorda, March 2016.



*Figure 19 Maya man building a home
photo by Miriam Bracey fieldwork Emery
Grove, March 2019.*



*Figure 20 Jason with motorcycle photo by Miriam
Bracey fieldwork Emery Grove, March 2019.*



Figure 21 Pigs photo by Miriam Bracey fieldwork Emery Grove, March 2019.



Figure 22 Rastafarian Maya man March 2019.



Figure 23 Turkey photo by Miriam Bracey fieldwork Punta Gorda, March 2019.



Figure 24 Vultures photo by Miriam Bracey fieldwork Punta Gorda, March 2019.

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