

THE SACRED SITES OF SAN JOSÉ CH'AQA'YA':

CONTINUITIES AND TRANSFORMATIONS

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THE SACRED SITES OF SAN JOSÉ CH'AQA'YA':  
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## **DEDICATION**

To the family (especially my mother) who always encouraged me to return to school and pursue what I loved, the professors and mentors who helped me to do so successfully, and all the friends who gave me hell along the way and kept me motivated.

Last but not least, to my long-time friends in Ch'aqa'Ya', some of whom I am proud to have called friends for sixteen years now.

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## CHAPTER 1

### SAN JOSÉ CH'AQA'YA': A COMMUNITY IN TRANSITION

#### SAN JOSÉ CH'AQA'YA': THEN AND NOW

During a three-month period beginning in May of 2009 I conducted research to map the contemporary sacred sites in and around San José Ch'aqa'Ya', Departamento de Sololá, Guatemala (figure 1 and 2). This Kaqchikel Maya speaking community sits on the northern rim of Lake Atitlán in the heart of the Kaqchikel cultural area. I worked in this rural Maya community with an archaeology project in the 1990s and, at that time, most residents practiced subsistence agriculture and reported that they rarely travelled further than the nearby market town of Sololá. The ongoing civil war as well as a lack of year-round roads and other infrastructure connecting the community to the outside world worked to ensure the community remained relatively isolated from even nearby regions. When I returned I found that while the community is still a primarily an agricultural one, traditional *milpa* (maize farming) fields have increasingly been converted to land that is utilized for onions, carrots, cabbage, and other crops bound for external markets (figure 1). Local residents questioned about this transformation report that only those unable to afford the fertilizers and pesticides necessary for market crop cultivation still depend solely on subsistence *milpa* agriculture of corn, bean, and squash cultivation. The shift in agricultural practices has also increased the number of people in the village who make a

living from market economy activities such as transportation services and brokering in produce. Projects aimed at infrastructure development, subsidized by the Guatemalan government with help from various agencies of the European Union, are constructing roads throughout the area, and this continuing work now employs many people as well.



**Figure 1.** Terraced fields in Ch'aqa'Ya'. The lower terraces are ready for harvest while the upper ones are being replanted. During three months I saw an entire rotation of this terraced field, with onions being harvested almost continuously and immediately loaded on trucks bound for Guatemala City.

I returned to Ch'aqa'Ya' in 2009 to find a very different place than I had known in the 1990s. During my field seasons with the Proyecto Arqueología de Sololá, when I needed to make an international phone call it necessitated a round trip of twenty miles to Sololá; now cell phones are ubiquitous in the village. Televisions were a novelty at that time and very few residents owned one; now satellite signals broadcast numerous programs into the homes of many of my friends. When I left Ch'aqa'Ya' in 1996, the

truck I used to ferry team members or supplies to the project site was often the only vehicle making the drive back and forth to Sololá, and courtesy necessitated I carry as many local residents as I could with me to town. Now passenger vans regularly make the same trip every half hour. It is not uncommon to see private vehicles, even taxis, driving the well-paved roads that were previously only dirt. These roads were often impassable without four-wheel drive fifteen years ago. As well, cinder block homes covered with stucco are now commonplace, replacing houses that were once adobe (figure 2). However, while modernization and increasing integration with the external world have brought great change, many residents in Ch'aqa'Ya' still live by a system of religious belief and its underlying cosmology that locals refer to as *costumbre*.



**Figure 2.** The community of San José Ch'aqa'Ya'. Some of the newer homes are visible in this photo. The town plaza and cathedral are visible in the distance (center).



## MY RESEARCH PLAN

Therefore, after visiting the community in January of 2009 to investigate the viability of conducting research, I returned to San José the following May with the goal of observing and documenting certain aspects of Maya religious practice. I wanted to examine the current practice of *costumbre* and determine if continuities existed between contemporary and ancient Maya ritual. Researchers have identified the continuation of rituals that resemble pre-Columbian religious practices in other contemporary Mesoamerican communities (see Gossen 1974, Tedlock 1982, Cook 1986, 2000, Schele and Freidel 1990, Friedel, Schele and Parker 1993, Monaghan 1995, Sandstrom 2005). I hoped to not only corroborate the continued practice of ritual with links to ancient Maya practice, but to uncover deeper associations to pre-Columbian Maya belief as well, especially as concerns the local sacred landscape. Specifically, I wanted to map the currently utilized sacred sites in and around the community and identify any geographic patterning that might exhibit links to ancient Maya symbolism.

An early hypothesis I planned to investigate was whether the locations of the sites might represent a cosmogram – a symbolic representation of sacred cosmology or creation mythology – as a number of researchers theorize is present in the layout of some archaeological sites. F. Kent Reilly (2002), for example, has described this phenomenon at the Olmec site of La Venta. Other evidence of sacred site layout symbolizing creation cosmology is documented by Michael Coe (1965), Anthony Aveni (1980), and Wendy Ashmore (1989) at various sites (in Brown 2005:388). Although I have not yet found the complex patterning seen in the layout of some archaeological sites, I did find the importance of the cardinal directions to be paramount to contemporary *costumbristas*

(practitioners of *costumbre*) in Ch'aqa'Ya'. Such symbolic modeling of the landscape based upon directional patterning is well documented in ancient Maya belief. Frequently this patterning is seen as chiefly functioning to conceptually center the community in a metaphorical cosmos. This is noted in contemporary (Vogt 1969:141-144, Gossen 1974, Tedlock 1982, Cook 1986, 2000, Schele and Freidel 1990, Friedel, Schele and Parker 1993, Heyden 2005:22, Mautner 2005:118) and ancient Maya communities (Fox 1978, 1987, Carmack 1981, Bassie-Sweet 1991:177, Paxton 2001, Aguilar, Jaen, Tucker, and Brady 2005, Brown 2005, Mautner 2005).

During the time I spent in the 1990s in Ch'aqa'Ya', I observed many aspects of Maya spirituality that I believed to have pre-Columbian characteristics. I befriended many local residents and glimpsed much that piqued my interest in this area of contemporary community life. For example, events in the Popul Vuh, a record of Quiché Maya myth transcribed into Spanish in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, were sometimes referenced in conversation. In one episode of the Popul Vuh, the Creator Couple ground maize into flour from which they fashioned humans (Tedlock 1996:145-146). Nicolas Tuiz, a Maya elder with whom I spent time, often talked of these mythical events. He noted that just as there are red men (indigenous or Mayan), yellow men (Asians, in his mind), Black men and white men, so too are there these colors of maize. For him it was not only the Maya who were *hombres de maíz* (men of corn), but all of humanity. I was also exposed more directly to Maya spirituality through contact with Maya daykeepers (Maya spiritual guides) and this only further interested me in Maya religious practice. I continued to seek out more knowledge of this aspect of life in the community during my time with the Proyecto Arqueología de Sololá.

I decided to pursue my interest in Maya spiritual practices almost fifteen years later. I felt it important to not only document links to the ancient Maya before they inevitably disappeared in the face of modernization (as I thought at the time), but to learn more of the nature of ritual practice in a specific community so as to compare this with other contemporary Maya groups. Garrett Cook reports that Benson Saler (1960) described the religious specialists in the Quiché Maya community of El Palmar as “vague theologians, but explicit practitioners” (Cook 1986:139); Cook feels that such a characterization also describes the religious practitioners of the community of Momostenango in which he works (2000:117). Thus I felt that gathering data for comparative study with other Maya communities could reveal more about the main currents of belief that underlie these ‘vague theologies.’ The similarities and differences between specific communities can tell us much about the survival and strength of Maya culture as well as its continuing evolution. As I will later explore in the work below, my continued research into this subject has led me to see these ‘vague theologies’ as a viable ideological framework that allows for the local adaptation of belief systems. It is this adaptation that ensures the preservation of the ideological structure itself and allows for a continually adjusting symbolic system with which practitioners can interpret a changing world. However, at the time I began my research I was primarily concerned with documenting contemporary religious practice rather than attempting any analysis of the larger processes of religious change. Other ethnographic literature on the Kaqchikel, especially in this area, is limited at best (see Maxwell 2008, Early 2006, and Fischer 2002 for more recent work among the Kaqchikel) and to date none has been conducted on the northern rim of Lake Atitlán that deals specifically with ritual activity. Only a minimal

amount of archaeological investigation has been done in this region, as well (see Lothrop 1933, Sabom-Bruchez 1997). This lack of investigation in the area led me to see the necessity of documenting the ritual practices of the Kaqchikel, especially during this critical time of rapid change and acculturation.

Among those I befriended while previously working in Ch'aqa'Ya' was Don Fidel, a local *ajq'ij* (daykeeper). When I returned in 2009 I approached him for assistance with my research. With his assurances that he would help and support me in any way possible, I began to identify and map the local sacred sites. He considers me a friend and also feels it is important to document Maya culture and religious knowledge. Don Fidel, frustrated by a lack of access to some sites – primarily due to the conversion of landowners to Evangelical Christianity – and aware of proposed legislation that would guarantee sacred site access to practitioners of *costumbre*, also felt the project I proposed to be of potential use in protecting these sacred locations. Santiago A., a local resident, served as my primary guide to the actual altar locations. After visiting the sites I would then return to the home of Don Fidel, where I stayed during my time in San José, and discuss the sites and their significance with him. I undertook follow-up research, including interviews with other Kaqchikel daykeepers, during the month of July while I was a student in a Kaqchikel language program taught by native speakers, many of whom practice *costumbre*. A final period of fieldwork in August 2009 addressed some of the more complex issues uncovered during the initial investigations.

Upon returning to Ch'aqa'Ya', I found that many of the friendships I established during my previous time in the community remained strong and thus I was greatly assisted by local residents throughout my research. In particular, as noted, I was

welcomed back by Don Fidel, the primary spiritual caretaker for the *costumbristas* in Ch'aqa'Ya', and this investigation was carried out with his help and full approval. His assistance also ensured that I could conduct research while being respectful of local religious practices. Rituals were performed by Don Fidel to assure that proper respect was shown prior to visiting the sites that I was mapping. These rituals and his friendship proved to be invaluable in my ability to be accepted by the local community of *costumbristas* and successfully carry out my investigation.

I identified and mapped thirteen primary sacred sites in and around Ch'aqa'Ya' (figure 3) during a period in late May and early June. I was unable to visit two more altars because landowners have restricted access to the sites, however I was able to generalize their locations and learn something of their attributes and histories from collaborators. With the help of local guides, site locations were identified, descriptions of the sites were recorded, and stories relevant to the history and/or legends associated with the sites were collected. Once we located the sites, a reading was taken using a Magellan Triton GPS. I then wrote a physical description and drew basic sketches of the site. I did not make detailed drawings of the altars themselves (sometimes consisting solely of a few flat rocks) as often the physical makeup of these altars may be slightly modified according to the materials to be ceremonially offered. I travelled to most altars multiple times to note the offerings that had been left in the time since my previous visit. Santiago and other residents often related various local legends concerning the sites as well as details of their history and the level of ritual activity (or inactivity) at the sites. Often my lines of questioning would take the form of semi-structured interviews as we discussed the lore of particular altars, and notes concerning this information were always recorded

on-site. Photos of the sites were also taken, and although I was anxious as to whether this was appropriate given the sacred nature of these altars, Don Fidel assured me that this was acceptable. Don Fidel also supplied information as to the frequency of ceremony at sites as well as many other aspects site utilization and history.



**Figure 3.** The northern rim of Lake Atitlán. The village of Ch'aqa'Ya lies just over the ridge. This photo shows the approximate area surveyed during my research.

During conversations with Don Fidel subsequent to visiting the sites I was able to ascertain the day-name associations of the altars (which indicate their spiritual attributes, more will be discussed of this later) as well as document much other relevant information. In the afternoons and evenings I would return to the family compound of Don Fidel and await times when he was available to discuss the sites or other aspects of Maya spirituality. His services as a spiritual guide are in great demand and there were

almost always people awaiting a consultation with him; often there were also visitors from more distant communities staying in a room he kept in his home to accommodate such people. Many times these guests had travelled some distance to visit and frequently required elaborate and lengthy ceremonies and thus occupied much of his time. As well, Don Fidel often had to travel in order to perform rituals. Therefore, visits with Don Fidel were sometimes infrequent and I spent much of my time at his home playing with the children, reading and writing, or visiting with the women of the family while they went about their daily business. However, though my visits with Don Fidel were at times rare, discussions with him were always informative. He would cheerfully answer any questions I had, although at times – on particularly long or hard days – he would ask that we continue our conversations after he rested. During these discussions he not only taught me much of Maya spirituality in general but also supplied answers to any questions I had concerning site use, significance, or other information relevant to my research. He offered insight into not only his own personal utilization of various sites, but information about their use by others as well.

The friendships I established in Ch'aqa'Ya' were vital in my ability to conduct this research. Due to the ongoing civil war, the early 1990s were a time in which distrust of outsiders was strong. I had, however, earned the trust of many by demonstrating my clear concern for the community. Don Fidel also seems to feel I have been destined (it is my *suerte*, or fate) to work with him and this community and thus he is very open and generous with the information he shares with me. As well, had I not lived in the community in the past I would not have been aware of the magnitude of some of the changes occurring in contemporary site use. I may have been informed of such change

but would not have easily been able to see the patterns that are of so much importance in the analysis I present here. Although only a relatively short time had passed, fifteen years ago both community life and ritual practice were very different. The political context, economic patterns and social life of the community, along with religious practice, have changed greatly and my observations from these two periods clearly revealed the disparity between them. The fifteen years I was absent were a time of rapid change, and the fact that I had not been present during this time only made the juxtaposition of the differences all the more apparent. However, significant long-term continuity is also evident, and accounting for this continuity – as well as documenting it – is the primary aim of the following chapters.

## **THE ORGANIZATION AND OBJECTIVES OF THIS REPORT**

In the last few decades there has been substantial research on Maya religious systems, especially as concerns the apparent continuity between ancient Maya ritual and contemporary practices. Besides the archaeological evidence that indicates such continuity, geographically widespread similarities in contemporary ritual also point to a common (and ancient) origin for Maya religious practice, as this might indicate an archaic religious system that could have diffused across Mesoamerica. However, while I identified evidence of continuity with pre-Hispanic religious systems, my research also indicates that (local) Maya ritual practice is undergoing substantial change in response to the rapidly changing political and economic circumstances of the contemporary Maya world. Although I began my work with a hypothesis that the layout of the community and its surrounding sacred sites would exhibit geographic patterning evident in the sacred geography of other Maya communities, both contemporary and ancient, I found a rapidly



transforming belief system. While associations with ancient practices and beliefs and continuity are evident in the characteristics and locations of these sites, and often the ritual performed at them correlated directly with evidence of pre-Columbian ritual, I also noted a changing ritual landscape. In particular, ritual change seems to be primarily in response to external pressure related to the changing political economy the community is undergoing as a result of increasing globalization. Changes in overall patterns of utilization, specific site attributes, and even specific ritual activities, appear linked to shifting economic strategies in the community.

However, as alluded to above, what I hope to establish in this paper is that the changes in Maya religious practices, at least as indicated in San José Ch'aqa'Ya', appear to be taking place in the context of a broader structural framework that makes up the system of Maya spirituality. As the world external to the community is increasingly integrated into local life ritual practice is changing in response, yet this change only occurs within a continuous framework of belief. I argue that the similarities I observed between ancient and contemporary ritual point to a larger adaptive system of belief and that the continuity of Maya belief is in the structure of the system itself, rather than the various traits preserved. It appears that this framework is the true enduring aspect of the Maya religious system and can account for those aspects of contemporary Maya ritual that appear to have pre-Columbian origins. While it seems that shifting subsistence strategies are driving specific aspects of changing ritual practice, I see certain integral components of the belief system that operate to resolve potential contradictions between contemporary circumstances and ancient religious practices, therefore allowing for

continuity. Thus, I will explore the overall nature of Maya religious change, not just the specific factors that drive it.

Although a full discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of the present work, it bears noting that a long history of adaptive structures inherent in the fundamental makeup of Maya belief systems may have functioned throughout pre-Columbian times as various elite conquests imposed new ideologies on Maya peasantry. As well, such an adaptive religious framework could account for the rapid and significant integration of Catholic elements into the indigenous belief system that occurred as a result of the Conquest. Local Maya populations would be previously experienced at integrating belief and practice that was beneficial for their own survival into already existing belief systems; often this change would be manifested on a strictly local level, as local populations struggled to survive in changing political, economic, social, and environmental circumstances. I believe this same process is occurring today in Ch'aqa'Ya'; whereas previous ideologies of dominating classes would have come in the form of religious systems, in contemporary times the new "ideology" is an economic one.

This use of ancient symbolic structures, and the ritual associated with them, as a means of giving meaning to contemporary events and ordering the world in the face of continually changing conditions is the primary issue I hope to address in the following analysis. An example of similar analysis is Victoria Bricker's seminal work *The Indian Christ, The Indian King*, in which she shows how pre-existing Maya prophetic tradition was used throughout the colonial period (and beyond) to order and give meaning to continued Spanish oppression. I hope to build my case in a similar fashion. Of particular importance is an investigation into how symbolic structures are reproduced, as well as the

transformation they undergo in response to changing economic, social, and political circumstances. It is my hope that the present work will provide some insight into the means by which such issues might be better addressed.

In the following chapters I will report the findings of my research that show the considerable similarity evident between ancient Maya religious belief and contemporary practice in San Jose Ch'aqa'Ya'. However, I will also address the current changes in ritual practice I observed. I will then present my analysis that introduces the means in which I feel the continuity I uncovered through my research can be maintained in the face of the rapidly changing ritual practices I also documented.

I will begin this report in chapter two by presenting a brief review of the theoretical foundation upon which I base my own work. In chapter three I will give an overview of contemporary Maya spirituality, concentrating on the evidence of continuity between ancient belief and practice and the contemporary ritual life I observed in Ch'aqa'Ya'. Based on this continuity I will show how the links between ancient and contemporary practice can actually be seen as comprising a temporally continuous structural framework of belief within which Maya spirituality operates. Chapter four is a discussion of the spiritual landscape of Ch'aqa'Ya' and the geographic patterning I found in the layout of sacred sites, again emphasizing that this modeling is part of a framework of belief existing since pre-Columbian times. In this chapter I will also introduce the idea that such patterning is of great importance to the regeneration of the belief system as a whole. Chapter five describes the sacred sites and the data I gathered relating to them, especially as concerns their functions in the ritual life of Ch'aqa'Ya'. I will also discuss how the particular petitions for which these sites (or, more specifically, the spiritual

beings that guard them) are deemed most propitious might differ in other communities as contrasted to Ch'aqa'Ya'. In chapter six I will discuss the current changes in site utilization I observed. I then offer a description of the processes I see at work in the changing ritual behavior I observed, as well as try to determine the factors I perceive to be driving this change. In a final analysis (chapter seven) I will then show how the very structure of Maya religion in fact allows for adaptation to changing external conditions, as I feel it is through examining this structure that one can best account for the continuity of Maya religious belief and ritual practice. In this conclusion I will also explain how the geographic patterning I found in the sacred geography appears to be the primary component in a system that allows for constantly adapting belief that can still maintain long term continuity.

This thesis, then, will both review continuities between ancient and contemporary Maya sacred sites as well as analyze current changes in site utilization, at least as exemplified in San José Ch'aqa'Ya'. In presenting this analysis I also hope to demonstrate the necessity of community-specific investigation into changing ritual activity; such research will allow for comparative studies to better understand the overall nature of Maya spirituality. When viewed in the context of a continuous framework of religious belief, comparative research can not only highlight the specific factors driving religious change but can better illustrate the processes that underlie the dynamic nature of Maya spiritual systems.

Further, viewing contemporary Maya ritual from the perspective of the structural foundation upon which it rests might help to clarify the means by which sacred sites can be defined. As recent attempts to allow for the legal protection of ritually important sites

has progressed, the definition of a “sacred site” has proven to be difficult. Thus, the changing face of contemporary religious practice might prove even more problematic in future identification of sacred sites deemed eligible for legal protection. However, recognition of an overall structural system of belief as concerns the sacred may be able to shed light on the dynamic nature of sacred site utilization and help refine the means by which such sites are determined to be significant in contemporary religious practice.

## CHAPTER 2

### A VIBRANT AND DYNAMIC MAYA RELIGIOUS SYSTEM

When I returned to San José to begin my fieldwork I initially felt the most important project was to document contemporary ‘survivals’ of ancient practice before they disappeared in the face of increasing integration with the global community. I hoped, as well, that by documenting the survival of ritual with links to pre-Columbian Maya religion, I could then use this research as a springboard for a wider study of religious and, even more broadly, social change among the highland Maya. John Watanabe’s early work among the Maya of Santiago Chimaltenango provided a model for such work. His initial study of Maya ritual healing led to broader research focused on social change in the face of globalization. He writes of the early perspective with which he approached his fieldwork, as well as the way his views eventually changed, in the introduction to *Maya Saints and Souls in a Changing World* (1992), noting that he started his work from a primarily essentialist position. I too began my research feeling there to be a sort of primordial Maya culture that I could discover still present in contemporary Maya populations (and document before it vanished). Thus, I initially approached my fieldwork assuming that cultural change in Ch’aqa’Ya’, just as Watanabe says of Chimaltenango, “involved the slow erosion of... beliefs and practices” (1992:18); I hoped to record those beliefs and practices that were presently ‘eroding’

After learning that some of my local friends had converted to Protestant Christianity, I initially had some concerns about negotiating the community division between my Protestant friends and those I knew who practiced *costumbre*. As I was only now starting to reestablish relationships in the community, I felt this might make a wider study of religious change somewhat problematic at the moment, and thus decided to leave a broader investigation into the overall change illustrated by the widespread conversion to Protestantism for future research. In the hopes of avoiding potentially divisive issues, I proposed what I (naïvely) felt was a rather straightforward project. I would simply map the sites where ritual was currently conducted and then determine if I could find any patterning evident in site use and location. In particular, as noted above, I hoped to look for cosmological patterning correlating to that found in archaeological site layout. I felt that by looking primarily into geographical patterning I might avoid some of the deeper and more sensitive questions of religious change that I hoped to one day investigate; I would leave these issues, and their implications, to dissertation work.

## **INITIAL THEORETICAL APPROACH**

When I entered the field I began my work with a fundamentally interpretive perspective. In searching for continuity in site patterning I would be working to understand, at least on a surface level, pre-Columbian as well as contemporary symbolic systems. However, I was also mirroring the mistake (as I see it) of many previous scholars analyzing religious and symbolic systems in that I, at least indirectly, viewed Maya religion as a static system. Such a static nature is at least implicit in earlier ethnographies of the Maya documenting the remnants of a ‘primordial’ culture. In searching for contemporary cultural survivals of such an ancient culture, I too was

viewing Maya culture as intrinsically static. This rapidly changed, however, as even brief experience in the field revealed a much more dynamic nature to Maya religion than I had imagined. I began to recognize that my research would require a more detailed look at the syncretic nature of contemporary Maya spirituality. I was familiar with the unique mixture of Catholic and indigenous elements that comprise Maya religion, yet early in my observations it was obvious that the change occurring in sacred site use involved factors related to a shift in local economic conditions rather than the influence of another religious system. Edward Fischer, reflecting on Geertz's famous comparison of culture to "webs of significance" (1973:5), observes that often overlooked in this analogy is the recognition that humans construct these webs with "largely borrowed strands" (2002:7). While I previously felt that contemporary Maya religion did indeed involve the integration of "borrowed strands" of Catholic influence I now saw that the elements being borrowed often came from cultural arenas other than religion. Additional aspects of the outside dominant culture, especially those of an economic nature, were being incorporated into the Maya spiritual system. However, it also appeared that these elements were being integrated in a manner that still allowed for the continuity that seems apparent in the Maya belief system.

My recognition of this dynamic nature of Maya belief did not fully dispel my initial notions of a doomed religious system. I felt that material (and external) causes and conditions would overrule the symbolic (internal) aspects of Maya life; it seemed to me that some aspects of Maya belief were simply not reconcilable with a capitalist economic existence. I saw the advent of a truly capitalist system as the death knell for Maya culture in general, especially as exemplified in religious practice. I mistakenly believed that



indigenous belief could not effectively adapt to modern conditions. This seemed especially probable given some of the fundamental aspects of Maya spirituality that appear to stand in direct opposition to capitalist practice. The importance in Maya belief of a reciprocal relationship with the sacred/natural world seemingly contradicts a capitalist system – one in which resources are ‘extracted’ from the natural world – predicated on unequal access to resources and surplus, for example. Yet I was observing a thriving Maya belief system operating in an evolving capitalist economy. Moreover, the current changes in Maya religious practices were obviously influenced by changing external conditions and increasing integration into a globalized world. However, the insight I needed to fully appreciate the idea that the belief system could, in fact, be structured in a manner to allow for the addition of certain aspects of external culture beneficial to cultural continuity would not come until later.

Initially, I suspected that the religious modifications I saw were the last struggles of practitioners trying to maintain relevance in a changing world. I felt that possibly Don Fidel and other spiritual leaders might be simply shifting their own interpretations to ones that would remain pertinent, even if in a manner inconsistent with ancient practice; this discontinuity would surely be the demise of a coherent belief system. It even appeared that individual daykeepers (at least as exemplified by Don Fidel) might be revising their own practice to best fit local needs. Such changes in ritual activity did not adequately fit my model of continuity that stemmed from the survival of elements of an ancient (primordial) religious system, as I did not see how lasting continuity (on the time scale I proposed) could be achieved with such a transforming system. I was essentially assuming a structural functionalist point of view in my assumption that Maya religion played a

primary role in maintaining cohesion in Maya society; because I saw both a strong surviving cultural heritage as well as the contemporary practice of religion with pre-Columbian links, I mistakenly viewed the existence of the latter as a principal cause of the former. Thus the dissolution of the one would inevitably lead to the loss of the other. However, the inherently static nature of structural functionalist explanations could not account for the thriving and dynamic contemporary belief system I was observing.

Victor Turner's idea of the multiple-vocality inherent in cultural representations allowed for one avenue of continuity. If, as he posits, symbols can represent many things, not only to various people but in and of themselves, perhaps these symbols (ritual behaviors) could stand the test of time (and I would observe them as continuities), even if much of the original meaning of these elements might be lost through repetitive transformation. Such "degenerationist" thinking is prevalent in the work of some of the earlier Maya scholars such as Robert Redfield and E. Michael Mendelson (Cook 2000:188-189). However, I was also observing symbolic *meaning* that seemed to exhibit continuity. While, in fact, it seemed that the specific interpretations of individual Maya religious practitioners might allow them to view the same symbols in different ways, it also appeared that the overall structure of the belief system in some way maintained continuity. I began to feel the individual interpretation that accounted for the varied differences in ritual could only take place (and remain viable) within a structural framework of a coherent Maya belief system – a system that might, in fact, be built upon this individual interpretation as a central tenet of its structure.

Thus, in much the same way as Turner (1967) sought out what he termed the "dominant symbols" embedded in culture, in seeking this framework of Maya belief and

ritual I was searching for what might be termed a dominant *symbolism*: the links to creation mythology that have been, and continue to be, an overall symbolic representation of Maya spiritual belief. Turner saw dominant symbols as those which, over time, come to encompass in their “meaning-content” most of the key features of human social life (1967:108). Using this concept I can link contemporary symbolic systems to an ancient system so encompassing that it perseveres into present times. Within this dominant symbolism, the role individual interpretation plays in the processes of change can be properly situated so as to allow for continuity of belief. Furthermore, Turner argues that the only way to successfully analyze rituals and their symbolic meaning is to observe them in relation to the events occurring around them and within the context in which the ritual was taking place (1967:109). Thus, I first began to recognize that the economic system in which Maya religion is embedded is of great importance in any analysis of their system of belief. This idea only grew in importance and, as later chapters will reveal, is now a central facet of my analysis. However, initially this recognition at least enabled me to see the changing religious practice I observed not as the last throes of an increasingly irrelevant system, but as a system adapting to changing conditions. In fact, in Turner’s view, ritual is not only intertwined with the context in which it is occurring but is in fact transformative in ordering these external circumstances. He conceived of ritual performances as integral to the processes by which groups adjusted and adapted to both internal changes as well as external conditions (Turner 1967:94).

This insight is seminal to the argument I present concerning contemporary Maya ritual life. The ritual life of *costumbristas* in Ch’aqa’Ya’ is continually changing as practitioners struggle to order the changing world in which they find themselves; this

change is manifested on a primarily local level rooted in local conditions and circumstances. This is the fundamental perspective upon which I build in the following chapters. In the Maya world, or at least that of San José Ch'aqa'Ya', the day to day mundane reality of life in and of itself seems to inform ideas of the sacred and these ideas are constantly transforming to accommodate the changing necessities that people face.

Recent scholars have refined explicitly structural functionalist approaches such as Turner's in a manner that better avoids the inherently static models these perspectives produce. However, before examining these more current approaches, I would like to present a brief overview of the recent history of theories of social change (and by extension continuity) in Mesoamerica that informs much of the ethnography of the Maya. A brief history of Maya scholarship not only establishes the means in which many of previous scholars continue to inform my thought, but also helps underscore a key point I hope to make in this work. By presenting the evidence I observed indicating that a highly dynamic and adaptive belief system can still exhibit significant continuity, I hope to further dispel the continued use of perspectives that inherently view Maya religion as a static system.

## **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON MESOAMERICAN CONTINUITY**

As noted, when I returned to Ch'aqa'Ya' with the goal of documenting the remnants of ancient practice still evident among contemporary Maya, I too mistakenly viewed Maya religion and culture as a static system. My early funding proposals are even written with such a concept implicitly embedded in them. I was initially drawing on a long tradition in Mesoamerican studies in which acculturation into an increasingly

homogenous global culture was viewed as the inevitable outcome of contact (Fischer 2002:9). Up until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars observing Maya culture tended to work from a fundamentally essentialist perspective in that they posited aspects of a primordial Maya culture could be observed in cultural survivals found among modern Maya. This view essentially held continuity to be a given – assuming no contact with alien cultures there would be no cultural change; however contact with other cultures inevitably led to acculturation. Ethnographers were thus committed to documenting existing elements of ancient Maya culture before they were lost to an increasingly acculturated Maya society. Frequently this research simply produced trait lists and descriptive works detailing these aspects of Maya culture (Fischer 2002:9). However, as Eric Wolf commented of the ethnographies of the 1950s, with this view “anthropologists of the time tended to shortcircuit four centuries of history, to draw a direct line from the Pre-Columbian past to the Indian present” (1986:326).

This view started to change (although it is still utilized by some researchers today) in the late 1950s when scholars began to question why Mesoamerican culture histories seemed to have different trajectories of change than groups in other parts of the world (Monaghan 1995:6). The very fact that in Mesoamerica many communities have been part of a larger society/civilization for hundreds, if not thousands, of years seemed to be a primary reason behind these different developmental processes (Monaghan 1995:7). Eric Wolf brought seminal insight to bear on the process of change in indigenous peasant communities that particularly influenced Mesoamerican (including my own) studies. His concept of “closed corporate communities” set the stage for the perspective that continuity is a product of change rather than something built into social systems

(Watanabe and Fischer 2004:4, Fox 2004:292). In this view, contemporary Maya communities are an adaptation to the economic crisis and exploitation that characterized peasant Maya lifeways, particularly since the Conquest. These communities had a corporate structure based around communal lands and resources that was “closed” to outside influences through such means as the prohibition of land sales to outsiders, endogamous marriage, and the formation of internal market mechanisms that limited outside trade. For Wolf, the survival of “Indian” culture depended on the maintenance of this closed corporate structure; once it collapsed “traditional cultural forms” were rapidly reformulated by external influence (1955:456). Although he later (1986) criticized the extent to which his own insight has been used as a defining characteristic of modern Maya communities, his work was important in shifting the view of Maya culture away from the idea that indigenous society existed in a sort of timeless vacuum.

By the last two decades of the 20<sup>st</sup> century, Wolf and others came to criticize the overemphasis on the closed corporate concept in defining Maya community, especially with a recognition of the ties to national and international political and economic systems that these communities maintain (Fischer 2002:185). Researchers also began to question the idea that multiple aspects of social life could be restricted to a few core functions, with Wolf himself noting that this concept was often utilized in a way that overlooked many important village-specific aspects of social life, especially in its disregard for other social connective networks except that of the market (Wolf 1986:327). Although the changes wrought by Wolf’s early insights into Maya communities allowed researchers to see Maya communities in terms of not only historical processes, but also in the broader context of economic and political changes, the dependence on the closed corporate

concept greatly limited the analysis of many communities (Monaghan 1995:8). John Watanabe, in particular, criticizes the way this concept “has become canonized for many Mesoamericanists as a substantive archetype... against which the ‘community-ness’ of actual communities is measured” (1992:227). Yet some researchers have still implicitly seen Maya identity as solely a result of “counterhegemonic resistance” (e.g. Martínez Peláez 1971; Hawkins 1984; Flores Alvarado 1993, cited in Fischer 2002:243), and this view is predominant in many other prominent works of Maya scholarship (e.g. Friedlander 1975, Smith 1977, Warren 1978, Annis 1987, cited in Wilson 1995:7).

Thus two fundamental approaches to the study of Maya community were formulated. These still form a basic division in Maya research. John Watanabe identifies these as “historical contextualism”, in which Maya community/culture is seen as a response to colonial oppression, and “cultural essentialism”, in which modern Maya communities are seen as the survival of a primordial ancient culture (1990:183, see also Wilson 1995:7, Cook 2000:185-188). However, as Watanabe notes, “Implicitly or explicitly, both approaches portrayed the Maya as fundamentally passive – either the stoic survivors of a fading past or the hapless victims of an unjust present” (1992:8).

## **CULTURAL LOGICS: A REFINED THEORETICAL METHODOLOGY**

The idea of the “fundamentally passive” nature of the Maya stood in direct contradiction to the vibrant and dynamic religious system I was observing. Furthermore, the concept of Maya spirituality as a syncretic system, at least as the idea is commonly utilized, appeared to rest on an implicit acceptance of this passive nature of Maya culture. Recognition of this fact forced me to revise my original ideas concerning the syncretic nature of contemporary Maya belief. I was no longer able to see the continuity in their

spiritual system as the survival of ancient traits and practices that had been integrated into the belief of a dominant culture imposed on the Maya by conquest. An idea often put forward by researchers (see Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:49) holds that the Maya have essentially replaced their own idols with the images of Catholic saints in order to preserve the worship of indigenous deities, however my observations indicate even more complex process at work.

Other researchers, as well, have recently begun to raise interesting questions concerning the use of syncretism as a concept to account for religious change. Some argue that all religions are composite in nature and are constantly being redefined through time therefore all religions should be seen as syncretic and researchers should “recast the study of syncretism as the politics of religious synthesis” (Stewart and Shaw 1994:7, cited in Greenfield and Droogers 2001:30). These scholars feel the definition of syncretism is ambiguous as to whether it involves simply the mixing of religious elements, or if it is rather a process of domination (Greenfield and Droogers 2001:31). Thus they call for a reformulation of the study of syncretism into one that analyzes the inevitable conflicts that occur as different societies attempt to revise and adapt symbolic systems and meanings while in continual competition for a dominant position (Greenfield and Droogers 2001:30). This type of approach can reconcile the differences between the two models of power relations inherent in the basic theoretical divide noted above: the functionalist (essentialist) model that sees syncretism as a means to resolve contradictions and thus achieve cohesion, and the Marxist (historicist) perspective in which syncretism is seen as “an instrument of oppression, creating a false unity and hiding social conflicts” (Greenfield and Droogers 2001:30).



Greenfield and Droogers identify a synthesis of these opposing theoretical perspectives that takes into account such relations of power as “praxis theory.” From the perspective of praxis theory the need for the constant re-conceptualizing and reframing of indigenous cognitive models using knowledge gained experientially is emphasized. This approach thus fully recognizes the importance of individual agency. According to this model the actions of the individual are always influenced, as well as constrained, by existing social and symbolic structures. However, within these structures are a range of meanings that can be used by the individual (i.e. the daykeeper, as primary spiritual caretaker) to interpret their experience in the world. The individual may in fact create new meaning which in turn may alter these social and symbolic structures. For these authors, praxis theories are those approaches that are concerned with the “process of meaning-making and not... meaning itself” (Greenfield and Droogers 2001:32).

Greenfield and Droogers identify thinkers such as Bourdieu, Giddens, Moore, Ortner, and Sahlin as some of those who utilize a perspective concerned with this intersection of social and symbolic structures, individuals, and external influences (2001:32). This approach provides a basic means of framing analysis of religious practice in a manner that recognizes the dynamic nature of belief and avoids the use of implicitly static models. Particularly relevant to my own work, Edward Fischer (2002) further refines this perspective in formulating the concept of “cultural logics.” For Fischer, although change is fundamental to culture, this change must take place within preexisting cognitive models (cultural logics) in such a manner that it allows for a sense of cultural continuity, especially in the face of externally induced change. His perspective allows for examination of the dynamic relationship between the internal cognitive models of

individuals and their culturally shared structures of belief. However, he also recognizes the influence of the larger political, economic, and historical processes within which these are both situated (2002:18). These cultural logics are not rigid rules, but rather shared predispositions that inform individual thought and action; they do not predict individual behaviors, but they do indicate a certain regularity to behavior that can be seen by the outside observer (2002:15). In Ch'aqa'Ya', my research indicates such a model can describe the change I see occurring as individuals adapt their religious practices and beliefs in response to dramatic changes brought about by globalization; these changes appear to be occurring only within such a pre-existing framework of cultural logics. Within this system the retention (and preservation) of a distinct religious identity, and thus the observed continuity with pre-Columbian belief, is possible. In fact, the system itself appears to exhibit such continuity.

In the 1970s, Bourdieu introduced the concept of "habitus," and it is upon this idea that Fischer primarily draws in formulating the idea of cultural logics. For Bourdieu, habitus encompasses the overall systems of collective predispositions that not only inform individual action but also act to configure new frameworks of practice and belief. Within the context of this habitus these frameworks then continually reproduce themselves in newer and more adaptive forms (1977:22, see also Fischer 2002:18). Furthermore, habitus is of such a fundamental nature that it is often taken for granted; it is so essential to the cultural makeup of a society that it operates on a level below conscious thought (1977:167; cf. Tyler 1978, Shore 1996:54, in Fischer 2002:18). Thus people are continually adapting their culture to necessary conditions; however these adaptations can only be made within a system based on cultural experience that is itself

structured by an internalized system of ‘logic.’ The internalized model of belief within which one lives is always shaped by this framework and one’s actions in some way always informed by such belief, yet the actor may well be unaware of the very system that informs his or her thought. Fischer thus uses Bourdieu’s insight to better reconcile the problematic relationship between individual action and the maintenance of continuity. Individual creativity can only occur within those existing cultural forms, ideologies, and material conditions in which the actors exist. The individual creates his/her own cognitive world, yet it can only be created out of pre-existing cultural ideas (2002:7).

The notion of cultural logics allows for a deeper exploration of the change I observed in contemporary religious practices in Ch’aqa’Ya’. Using native information I gained from my collaborators as well as my own ethnographic observation to interpret the dominant symbolism of *costumbre*, I am utilizing some of the basic concepts of ritual analysis put forth by Turner, yet with an added twist. Recognition of the cultural logics underlying the continuity in ritual practice allows for a broader perspective and echoes what Garrett Cook calls the “loosely structuralist” continuity thesis. Cook notes that Eva Hunt (1977) and Victoria Bricker (1981) formulated a ‘continuity thesis’ that posits a core of indigenous concepts and attempts to identify the central elements in this core and explain how these not only endure in the face of change but give coherence to the transforming institutions of this change (2000:185). Thus I follow a similar path by using an approach that identifies the underlying cultural logic and the external factors that act upon this logic, allowing for a more synthetic perspective that can better account for a changing yet continuous belief system. Furthermore, through a theory of practice based on Bourdieu’s insights (refined into the idea of cultural logics) I can better ground my

observations. This type of inquiry into the symbolism of *costumbre* places a greater emphasis on direct study of the knowledge and practice of the *costumbristas* themselves, avoiding the implicit objectivism of more explicitly structural functionalist approaches (while yet utilizing an essentially structuralist approach). This more fully recognizes that a symbol system cannot be understood apart from the knowledge supplied by the daykeepers (Tedlock 1982:6). There does seem to be a structural framework that informs the behavior and belief of those practicing *costumbre*, and thus a structural perspective is necessary in an analysis of the system. However, it also appears that this structure is constantly changing yet, within the context of the underlying cultural logic, modifications can be made that do not violate the integrity of the belief system as a whole.

This idea of a system that can be both adaptive and yet, due to the fundamental cultural logics upon which it is based, still exhibit continuity in a core framework of belief is the primary means in which I deviate from a more conventional structural functionalist interpretive approach. I still seek to interpret the dominant symbolism that frames the practice of *costumbre*, however I can better recognize the importance of the manner in which individuals interact with the larger – themselves dynamic – systems of political, economic and social institutions. Viewed from this perspective, symbolic transformation occurs as new symbolic forms and meanings emerge from the dynamic interaction of individual agency, cultural norms, material conditions, and the particular position in broader systems of external relations within which this interaction takes place (Fischer 2002:16). This is a particularly useful means of analyzing the processes of religious change that appear to be occurring in Ch'aqa'Ya' and provides a convincing

theoretical perspective with which I can outline the processes I see as the local response to the forces of globalization.

### **CULTURAL LOGICS AND CONTEMPORARY RITUAL IN CH'AQA'YA'**

Like Bourdieu before him, Fischer also sees systems of cultural logics as so fundamental to existence that the actor does not even recognize their presence; it is only from the outsider's perspective that these cultural logics can be analyzed (2002:16).

When I first returned to Ch'aqa'Ya' and observed what I saw as significant changes in ritual practice, I tried to specifically ask Don Fidel about these changes. When I asked why certain altars were not utilized anymore and others were now much more heavily utilized (as opposed to fifteen years ago), he simply told me that it was all due to the wishes of the *espíritus* (spirits – his general term for the sacred forces or deities that control the cosmos). For him, there had been no substantial change (at least within the overall belief system – I now tend to agree) in the time I had been gone. For Don Fidel these changes were all taking place within a continuous system of Maya belief, a belief that remained, structurally at least, the same as it had always been.

Don Fidel would obviously not recognize the use of the term “cultural logics,” however his recognition of the *espíritus* guiding his religious practice (which allows it to be “as it has always been”) is, in essence, such a system of cultural logics. Furthermore, he fully recognizes the effect material changes are having on ritual practice; once again this is simply due to the *espíritus* responding to the needs of practitioners. As I will later show, the ritual he and other *costumbristas* perform continues the long history (in Maya ritual) of ‘world renewal’ that was of great importance to ancient Maya kingship.

Although Don Fidel would not define his ritual in such a way, by walking the fine line intrinsic in Turner's earlier approach and giving weight to my own observations (and an anthropological education) I can see contemporary ritual in terms of ancient world renewal ceremonies. Don Fidel initiates every *trabajo* (lit. work – however, this term is often a synonym for *costumbre* ceremonies) by opening a *puerta* (door), or axis mundi in anthropological terms, to the gods, just as did ancient Maya kings. By doing so, ancient ceremonies allowed rulers to link themselves to the regeneration of the cosmos and, although Don Fidel does not explicitly define his actions as such, by means of contemporary ritual action he is, in effect, doing the same. I posit this functions (within the context of this system of cultural logics) to sanctify the integration of external elements into his belief system through a continued ritual renewal of the system. Thus, although 'world renewal' as practiced by the ancient Maya is not a stated or overtly recognized part of contemporary ritual, it appears to be a part of the underlying cultural logic that is the foundation of contemporary belief.

It is by analyzing the change I observed using an approach such as Fischer's that I am able to best reconcile the rapid change local *costumbre* seems to be undergoing and the long term continuity in belief that is also apparent. While surface changes in ritual are modified in response to increasing integration with outside market economies, continuity is maintained as long as these modifications occur within the context of the underlying cultural logic. Partha Chatterjee distinguishes two cultural spheres – the material and the spiritual. While the spiritual domain is that which bears "the 'essential' marks of cultural identity" he notes that "the greater one's success in imitating Western skills in the material domain... the greater the need to preserve the distinctiveness of one's spiritual

culture” (1993:6). In the same manner, while *costumbristas* in Ch’aqa’Ya’ continue to adapt their lives to a changing and globalized world, often by emulating a Western material model, they do so within the context of a belief system that allows for the preservation of Maya identity. Chatterjee further notes the change in these spheres takes place at a different rate: at the material level it often occurs rapidly while change in the spiritual domain is much more gradual. As Fischer notes, the underlying system of cultural logics is at a level of cognitive depth that results in a slower pace of change than surface elements (2002:17-18). Thus, as is the case in Ch’aqa’Ya’, the surface level changes take place quickly, allowing the belief system to remain relevant in the face of changing external conditions, yet the belief system remains coherent and continuity is maintained; indeed, practitioners may note no change. Furthermore, it seems that the belief system is structured in a way as to sanctify these surface adjustments in ritual.

It appears the role of the daykeeper is such that he or she can mediate this change (rapidly if necessary) in ritual practice to accommodate rapidly changing circumstances. The fundamental task of the daykeeper is to negotiate the ambiguous middle ground between the needs of the petitioner and the appropriate ritual necessary in order to best approach the spirits with a request. Thus, for daykeepers, knowledge of both the time-honored customs of their religious system as well as the current situations of those who seek their help is necessary in decisions as to the ritual to be conducted. It is the daykeeper’s interpretation of the ritual appropriate in a given situation that can accommodate changing conditions and allow for rapid change in the “material domain” while yet maintaining the continuity in the “spiritual domain.” However, as Fischer notes, when external circumstances do not conform to the internalized cognitive model of the

underlying system of cultural logics, and the expectations of this cognitive model are not met, the cultural logics can be modified into a new “working hypothesis” (Fischer 2002:35). In Ch’aqa’Ya’, it appears evident that economic changes are, in fact, creating conditions that call for a new working hypothesis, one that more explicitly addresses the changes wrought by globalization. Furthermore, it appears the position Don Fidel (or any contemporary Maya *ajq’ij*) plays as a mediator between ‘traditional’ Maya identity and the external forces of the capitalist world is critical to the maintenance of the system and that this function of the daykeeper is, in fact, a part of the cultural logics of the system.

In light of the potential of utilizing the concept of cultural logics as a tool to best understand cultural continuity and change among the Maya, Fischer (2002:262) and other researchers have called for an emphasis on community-specific studies of such processes. In fact, John Watanabe, whose work has already been noted as influential to my own, noted a decade earlier that his research into such processes “requires careful attention to how global situations are actually realized in local contexts” as “Maya communities constitute their own ‘existential sovereignties’ rooted essentially – but never exclusively – in the immediacy of local sustenance and sociality” (1992:12). He was trying to determine, as is Fischer, the common conventions (i.e. cultural logics) that Maya communities use to survive in their own social and environmental conditions (regardless of how these change across time) and how these underlying premises help to explain change and continuity among the Maya (1992:11-12). For Watanabe, contemporary Maya culture is not a remnant of a primordial culture or a historically dictated product. Maya communities are created from the specific circumstances in which they are situated and from the ongoing actions and perceptions of their members as they work to survive in



the particular conditions and possibilities offered by the larger world around them (1992:16). As I will elaborate on in the final chapter of this work, this call for community specific research is central to future research I see as necessary in order to better understand the continuing development of Maya spiritual practice.

As noted, John Watanabe began his research in the highland Maya community of Santiago Chimaltenango with some of the same misconceptions of Maya cultural change as I held when I first began my fieldwork. In his case, as in mine, his understanding quickly changed as he became integrated into the local community and was better able to observe the mundane day-to-day life of local residents. This insight allowed him to see the worldview of the local community in “conventional rather than purely cognitive terms” while still recognizing the importance of cognitive models and symbolic systems, especially as manifested at a local level (1992:16). Garrett Cook, in his analysis of religious belief among highland Maya groups, paraphrases Watanabe’s approach, noting that Watanabe gives continuity a “complex dialectical twist in which the central core is not so much conceptual as social: Maya community persists, with syncretism as its mode of adaption” (2000:188). This “twist” gives me a much better platform on which to build my thought. Greenfield and Droogers echo this idea a decade later: “Should the focus of the investigation be only on the eventual outcome or on the process with the assumption that it always will be continuing to produce new syntheses” (2001:31). With this in mind, I present the analysis in the chapters to follow in the hopes of illustrating the process by which local religious practice in Ch’aqa’Ya’ appears to be producing such “new syntheses” of ritual practice.

## CHAPTER 3

### MAYA SPIRITUALITY: CURRENT RITUAL AND ANCIENT CONTINUITY

Before beginning an analysis of the specific ritual changes, as well as the continuities, I observed in San José Ch'aqa'Ya', it is necessary to have a basic background in contemporary highland Maya *costumbre*. Many of the beliefs and practices of contemporary Maya spirituality also exhibit continuity with ancient religion. Given the evidence of such practice in pre-Columbian Maya society, as well as the fact that many of these ancient beliefs appear to shape the ongoing practice of *costumbre*, some of these aspects of ritual life thus might be seen as indicative of an underlying framework of cultural logics. Therefore, in this chapter I will briefly discuss some of those aspects of Maya spirituality that are not only necessary for the reader to understand, but as well appear vital to the maintenance of a coherent belief system.

#### ***COSTUMBRE: AN OVERVIEW***

The body of belief that is recognized by many researchers as a general system of indigenous Maya spirituality shares some similarities with Christianity. This has often led researchers to identify the process by which continuity has been preserved as the syncretism of these two religious systems. Although similarity between many of the

symbolic and conceptual aspects of pre-Columbian belief and Catholicism may factor into the intertwined relationship of these religious systems, as discussed in the previous chapter the concept of syncretism may actually underemphasize the dynamic nature of contemporary *costumbre*. I propose that it is important to view *costumbre* as a distinctly indigenous system. For example, the concept of a supreme being who, at least in San Jose, is identified as *Dios* (God) is an important part of contemporary Maya spirituality. However, while Don Fidel recognizes God as the ultimate creator, beyond this parallel the beliefs of *costumbre* and Catholicism are often divergent.

As Don Fidel related to me, *nosotros* (“we” – he often uses this pronoun to represent what he sees as pan-Maya beliefs) believe that God is the ultimate creator and supreme divine force in the spiritual world, but that the spiritual world is *como una empresa* (like a business/company) in that there is a hierarchy of spiritual entities through which one must proceed in order to visit with the head of the company. The sacred power of *Dios* is manifested in many different forms with varying attributes, in much the same way that Catholic saints watch over different areas of human life. However, a great distinction that separates such belief from standard Catholicism lies in the fact that all terrestrial space itself is seen as sacred and imbued with spiritual power. This idea is also of great importance to many other contemporary Maya (Maxwell 2008:16-17) and Mesoamerican groups (Monaghan 1995:137). Don Fidel explained that the energy of the divine permeates all things – specifically he told me that all of *Madre Tierra* (Mother Earth) is sacred. This is the primary means by which Don Fidel separates his belief from Catholicism, noting that he makes offerings to the *Mundo* (“world” – the term by which he refers to the totality of the manifestations of the supernatural) rather than the *iglesia*

(“church” – by which he is referring to Christianity in general). He sees God and creation as one and the same thing. Instead of God being responsible for creation, God *is* Creation and thus not only are all the spirits of the earth and heavens manifestations of one divine entity but physical locations are part of this divine whole as well. In fact, for practitioners of *costumbre* certain of these locations are especially powerful; it is at these locations that one can best communicate with God (or the various manifestations of the divine).

Sacred force is often concentrated at certain points such as caves and mountains and therefore these are particularly appropriate places to perform ritual (Vogt 1969:375, Schele and Freidel 1990:67, Brady and Prufer 2005:8). However, as all terrestrial space is imbued with the energy of the divine, any location can be a site of sacred importance. The sites are simply points of greater concentration of spiritual force; these locations can be anomalous natural features or undistinguished places, they can be locations of particular historical importance or obscure and unknown spots – it is, however, the continued performance of ritual at these sites that allows them to remain viable as portals to the divine (Maxwell 2008:17). The manner in which these sites come to be seen as sacred is a matter of great interest to me, although for the time being it must remain a matter for future research. Don Fidel simply explains that these locations are sacred because the spirits deem it to be so. However, it is only those people such as daykeepers who can recognize these sites as sacred portals; their spiritual ‘gift’ allows them to understand the flows of sacred energy in the physical environment and thus identify these places (Maxwell 2008:14). Moreover, and of primary importance to my research as well as the practice of the daykeeper, at these sites one needs to know the appropriate sacred entity with which to communicate when conducting ceremony. For the highland Maya,

these entities take the form of various spirit guardians, each associated with one of the twenty day names of the 260-day sacred calendar (Maxwell 2008:14).

Although the 260-day calendar (the *cholq'ij* or *tzolk'in*) is but one portion of the Maya calendrical system, it is the aspect of the calendar that is of particular relevance to the present discussion. The list of calendars used by various Maya groups, both ancient and contemporary, might also include the Long Count, the count of lunations, the count of the Lords of the Night, and the vague (400 day) calendar, among others (Judith Maxwell, personal communication). However, it is the 260-day divinatory calendar that is of primary importance in my analysis, although the *haab'*, or 365 day solar calendar, is another aspect of the Maya calendrical system I will briefly address in chapter four; in combination with the 260-day count this solar calendar creates the “Calendar Round.”

The divinatory calendar itself consists of a 260 day sequence that is made up of a series of twenty ‘day-names’ repeated in a series of thirteen cycles. Each of the twenty day-names denotes a specific spiritual force that affects the attributes of the day on which it falls. These proceed in order until the last has been reached and then the second cycle begins. Thus there is a cycle of twenty days with entirely different attributes, each denoting a particular importance to the days with which they are associated. Each day in this sacred calendar is therefore signified by one of the twenty day-names paired with a number coefficient indicating its relative position in the cycle. For example, the first occurrence of the day *No'j* in the cycle is 1 *No'j*, twenty days later this is followed by the day 2 *No'j*. Daykeepers interpret these numbers in different ways. These number coefficients can indicate the relative strength of the particular attributes of the day with which they are paired (Judith Maxwell, personal communication). Don Fidel, however,

emphasizes the importance of even numbered day-name coefficients, as he notes that such days are more powerful in their positive aspects. Judith Maxwell also reports that some daykeepers see even numbers as tending to highlight the positive attributes of the day and odd numbers the negative ones. Some *ajq'ija'* as well see the middle range numbers (6, 7, and 8) as the most balanced and those with coefficients on the higher or lower ends tending to have a more unstable quality (Judith Maxwell, personal communication). Yet others emphasize that the higher numbered days are the most powerful (Ajpub Pablo García Ixmatá, personal communication). This is a good example of an ancient pattern that has persisted even though individual daykeepers may have different interpretations of present-day its significance. As I will explain in chapter six, such differential interpretations are also important in that they may play a key role in the adaptive nature I see as inherent in Maya spirituality

The day on which one is born, the days that are most appropriate to conduct certain ritual, even the days that are best to conduct the routine business of one's life are all affected by the 'face' (day-name) of each particular day. Daykeepers thus must select the appropriate days on which to conduct ceremonies according to any number of factors, whether it is the birth date of the petitioner, the nature of the request, or even knowledge gained through divination (Maxwell 2008:14-15). For example, when Don Fidel felt that it was necessary to conduct ceremonies on my behalf (in order to assure I demonstrated proper respect to the spirits in the course of my work) he selected, on one occasion, the day *No'j* to make an offering; on another he selected the day *Ey*. *No'j* is a day of particular importance for ritual concerned with knowledge, especially with the knowledge of the ancients; he felt it appropriate to conduct this ceremony as I began to

conduct my research (and was thus seeking knowledge of the ancients). The day *Ey*, for Don Fidel, is associated with “new beginnings” and this *sacrificio* (“sacrifice” – another term often used to describe *costumbre* ceremonies – the relevance of this term will be made clear shortly) was offered previous to my departure to a language program in which I would begin learning Kaqchikel. However, as relates to my research, the most important aspect of this set of twenty spiritual day-name entities lies in the fact that each site or location sacred to the Maya is associated with one particular day-name guardian or *nawal* (Maxwell 2008:14-15, see also Tedlock 1982). As a result, due to the particular day-names with which the spirit guardian of the site is linked, each site possesses different spiritual attributes. Thus, following Don Fidel’s analogy relating sacred sites to businesses, just as when entering a place of business one should know the appropriate person with whom to speak, at these sites one should know the proper sacred entity with which to communicate. It is to these guardians, or daybearers, that daykeepers must individually appeal in their petitions for spiritual aid (Maxwell 2008:29). Therefore daykeepers must not only determine the day but must also select the appropriate altar at which to conduct sacrifices, as individual sites also have characteristics making them especially propitious for certain petitions (Maxwell 2008:14-15).

The spiritual guardians of sacred locations also function to prevent the misuse of the sites and assure appropriate ritual is performed. Don Kawoq, a daykeeper I met through the language program, explained that just as when you visit others you first knock on their door and wait to be allowed in, so it is with sites inhabited by *nawales*. Furthermore, when visiting others, it is polite to bring along something to share with your hosts, such as a bottle of liquor or food, and the same is expected at sacred sites. Even

when more elaborate ritual is not being conducted, a respectful relationship of reciprocity with the supernatural is necessary and Don Kawoq's simple analogy shows the respect he feels sacred sites should be accorded. In fact, an overall bond of reciprocity with the divine is central to Maya spirituality and a primary component of *costumbre*. This bond is fundamental to the entire belief system and all appeals to spiritual beings must take the form of an offering due to this particular relationship with the sacred world.

### **A RELATIONSHIP OF RECIPROCITY**

The truly binding relationship between the divine and humans is seen as one of reciprocity, an aspect of Maya spirituality that many researchers have identified in other communities. The reciprocal bond with the divine necessitates that prayer is intertwined with offering and sacrifice (thus the term *sacrificio* to refer to ritual in general), and this belief underlies the very foundations of contemporary, as well as ancient, Maya spirituality. As Garrett Cook notes, the land and its resources are, in effect, rented from the supernatural beings that protect the Earth – the world is seen as an inherited one that must be maintained (1986:139). Others note that offerings must be made in order to give thanks and pay back the Earth for providing the resources which sustain life (Earle 1986:163) or in order to restore the balance in those places where both the divine and humans reside (Mautner 2005:123). Humans are the primary disruptive force in the orderly workings of the natural world, and the imbalances incurred by the improper behavior of humankind must be repaid through ritual offerings (Sandstrom 2005:38). Thus, the actions of humans, although often necessary for their survival, injure the sacred body of the earth and therefore incur debt that must be repaid through ritual sacrifice (Monaghan 1995:251). This was often stressed by Don Fidel: because all of the Earth is



part of the divine, people must give back (sacrifice) part of what they have in order to replace that part of the world that was given up so that they might survive.

For example, Don Fidel often told me of different occasions when missionaries or others approached him and tried to convince him of the error of his ways. They asked him how he could pray to *piedras* (rocks) and yet believe there was one true Creator. He noted the simple misunderstanding implicit in this argument. God created rocks, humans cannot (humans can create concrete he once related, yet even this is made up of rock and lime – both natural creations) and thus these rocks are part of God, alive with the same power as the divine and worthy of the same respect. Therefore, when we take rocks from this living entity in order to make our houses, we are taking a part of the *cuerpo* (body) of the Earth, and must make appropriate amends for this through ritual offerings. In a conversation I had with Don Fidel concerning this relationship with the natural (and thus sacred) world, I tried to question him as to the nature of this interchange, hoping to have him elaborate on the specifics of this reciprocal link with the spiritual world. He merely reiterated that it is necessary to return a portion of what we take from the *espíritus* and *Madre Tierra*. He seemed puzzled when I tried to make a differentiation between just praying for something and making an offering. Finally he simply told me that these things were *lo mismo* (the same).

Ethnohistorical and iconographic evidence indicates that Classic Maya kingship (and possibly society in general) was also based on such a concept, in that the blood-letting conducted by Maya kings “fed” and nurtured the gods, so that the gods would then supply those things necessary for humans to survive (Freidel, Schele and Parker 1993:151). For the ancient Maya this proper ‘feeding’ of the world was integral to the

reciprocal relationship between humans and the divine, as blood (and other materials) sustained the gods. These sacrifices were then continually recycled between the worlds of the gods and humans to allow for the continuation of the physical realm we inhabit as well as the world of the gods. Material evidence of the importance of this concept is evident in the archaeological record. Obsidian bloodletting blades incised with representations of sacred beings are ubiquitous at many of the large Classic period Maya sites and the stelae at many of these sites depict acts of such sacrificial offerings to the gods (Freidel, Schele and Parker 1993:204-206).

The concept of a reciprocal relationship by which gods and humans each nourish the other is also evident in the stories of the *Popul Vuh* (Schele and Freidel 1990:65). In the initial narrative of the *Popul Vuh* the gods bring humans into existence for this very purpose. In this story the first gods decide to fashion humans in order to create beings who could sustain them. Humans were necessary to the gods as they would be “providers and nurturers” (Tedlock 1996:68-70) to the gods themselves. Although a concept foreign to European ideas of the relationship between the sacred and humanity, in the Maya worldview humans are necessary to the survival (or, at the very least, the happy existence) of the gods. It is apparent this notion of reciprocity has translated more or less intact into present times, as the belief is wide-ranging among contemporary Maya and other Mesoamerican groups.

A reciprocal relationship with the divine seems to be part of an underlying framework of belief – the system of cultural logics – throughout Mesoamerica and, as in Ch’aqa’Ya’, it is paramount that such a bond is maintained in order to assure the necessary conditions for a bountiful harvest. John Monaghan notes that for contemporary

Mixtec the covenants between humans and the sacred require sacrifice in return for the right to practice agriculture and live in civilized society (1995:252). Among the Mixtec, sacrifice is even spoken of as one would fertilizer, as a growth stimulant, in that it is only by giving back to the supernatural that life (particularly agricultural products) in our physical realm will continue to ‘grow’ (Monaghan 1995:213). This same concept was explicitly expressed to me by Don Fidel. For him it is a cyclical process – sacrifice ensures the plentiful rainfall (and in present times, the good business fortune) that is necessary to produce surplus that can then again be sacrificed. A portion of those things obtained from the Earth must be returned through sacrifice. In such a context, then, Don Fidel’s comment that prayer and sacrifice are the same can be better understood.

I attended a very large and elaborate sacrifice with Don Fidel that was conducted on behalf of a resident of Ch’aqa’Ya’ who now lives in a more urban area due to his work as a legal intermediary in land sales. This work has brought him significant financial success. We travelled to a powerful pilgrimage site (the cave at Utatlán) and “Phil” spared no expense in the offering he asked Don Fidel to prepare for him. I have only seen a sacrifice of such a large amount of material in ritual conducted on behalf of large groups. My estimate of the cost of the material burned ranged in the area of US\$300 or more, a very significant amount for a resident of Ch’aqa’Ya’, even one who is financially successful. This offering was one of gratitude to the spirits for Phil’s continued financial success. Furthermore, he says he makes such sacrifices at least once every three months. Although Phil does not make his living by specifically ‘taking’ from the Earth, his living (as does the sustenance of all humanity) fundamentally depends on *Madre Tierra*. It is

thus his responsibility to return a portion of the moderate wealth he accumulates in gratitude for his success (and survival).

For the ancient Maya, every important day, every beginning and ending, every significant event had to be commemorated with bloodletting (Schele and Freidel 1990:89). Blood sacrifice is also important throughout Mesoamerica in contemporary times, although today such ceremonies generally involve chickens or other small animals. There are reports of such ritual among the Mixe (Lipp 1991:48-49, 144, Fitzsimmons 2005:108). R. Jon McGee states that the sacrifice of chickens is common in San Juan Chamula (personal communication) and Judith Maxwell also notes that blood sacrifice is sometimes offered in contemporary Kaqchikel rituals to give great thanks or resolve serious problems (personal communication). However, in Ch'aqa'Ya' sacrifices consist primarily of the burning of pine resin incense, candles, foodstuffs, tobacco, and offerings of liquor. The use of these materials is prevalent throughout not only Maya areas but all of Mesoamerica, and is noted by many scholars (Gossen 1974:191, Earle 1986:163, Tedlock 1986:133, McGee 1990, Lipp 1991:73, Adams and Brady 2005:310, Vogt and Stuart 2005:177). A Nahua ritual specialist reports to Alan Sandstrom that the Earth enjoys food, alcohol, and tobacco just as do humans (2005:44) and Don Fidel as well as other daykeepers explicitly related the same to me. Don Fidel also noted that, like humans, sweet foods and pleasant smells are appreciated by the spirits; other researchers find this concept evident as well (Maxwell 2008:15).

Don Fidel explained to me that the concept of sacrifice is embodied in the idea that the expense of procuring these offerings is itself a hardship, especially given that the wage of a laborer in Ch'aqa'Ya' may only be thirty Quetzales (US\$3.50) a day and even

a relatively minor *sacrificio* might require material costing five times this amount. At a sacrifice, the spirits are, in effect, guests at a celebration laid out as an offering (figure 4).



**Figure 4.** A daykeeper prepares a sacrificial offering. In this *sacrificio* chocolate and cigars have been placed atop incense and candles and surrounded by flower petals.

Some of the material to be sacrificed, such as liquor, may be poured out as an offering, but most is burned; this is the manner in which it is consumed by the gods. In fact the quality of the fire produced indicates much about the spirits' acceptance of the offerings (Maxwell 2008:11). Don Fidel often commented on various qualities of the smoke from sacrificial fires, especially noting that thick white smoke indicated offerings were particularly well received. However, other daykeepers offered differing views of the properties of smoke that indicate a positive response. This seems to be a matter of individual interpretation. As I have mentioned above and will later address in more detail,

such variable interpretation paradoxically appears to be a key component of the underlying cultural logic that ultimately allows for continuity of the system as a whole.

Iconography and archaeological evidence indicates similar materials were burned as sacrifices in the past. Maya sculpture often depicts scenes in which precious materials such as blood, copal incense, tobacco, cocoa and rubber are offered in sacrificial fires (Freidel, Schele and Parker 1993:204). Keith Prufer has found evidence of the pre-Columbian burning of large amounts of copal in various caves of the Maya Mountains in southern Belize (2005:200, 203, 205). ); McGee and Palka have also identified this ancient practice in caves in Chiapas (R. Jon McGee, personal communication). As well, in 16<sup>th</sup> century documents smoke is noted as a metaphor for speech to the gods and copal and tobacco were burned in order to communicate with the divine (Heyden 1986:37, Robert Williams, personal communication). Therefore it would appear that not only the concept of a reciprocal relationship with the divine is similar to beliefs of ancient Maya, but the means in which this relationship is carried out exhibits continuity as well.

## **RECIPROCITY AS CULTURAL LOGIC**

Some researchers have discussed the concept of *k'u'x* as a guiding principle that informs contemporary Maya ritual belief and practice. *K'u'x* (soul or heart) is seen as a defining concept (or cultural logic) in the religious practice of a number of highland Maya communities (Nash 1970, Vogt 1976, Boremanse 1993, Wilson 1995, in Fischer 2002:165); researchers in other Mesoamerican areas note the existence of such a concept as well (Lopez Austin 1988, Sandstrom 1991, Monaghan 1995, 2000). For these researchers, the key element underlying *k'u'x* is the maintenance of metaphysical balance

based upon a sacred covenant between individuals and cosmic forces (Fischer 2002:165). Fischer notes that, specifically in his own work with other Kaqchikel communities, this idea is central to an understanding of the relationship between the cosmic divine and the individual (2002:149).

In Ch'aqa'Ya', the importance of a reciprocal relationship with the divine also functions as such a guiding principle in the ritual life of *costumbristas*. I propose that the notions of *k'u'x*, sacrifice, and reciprocity constitute a framework, or cultural logic, that maintains continuity with ancient practice while still allowing for adjustment in the face of changing conditions. Fischer notes that by basing ritual action on this "*k'u'x* paradigm" the sacred covenant that is paramount to the belief system can be modified in response to changing circumstances while "continuity is maintained through the logical transposition of salient cultural schemas. Maya men no longer pierce the foreskin of their penises to offer blood to the god(s), yet the covenant between humans and cosmic forces is perpetuated through ritual sacrifice to the *k'u'x* of earth and sky" (Fischer 2002:161). The specific change I observed in Ch'aqa'Ya' indicates that, although shifting conditions (especially economic) in the community have necessitated modification of ritual behavior, these adaptations only occur within an ideological framework based on reciprocity. In fact, it seems that many of the basic beliefs and practices of *costumbre* presented above are not only vital to the ritual system itself, but also comprise an underlying framework of cultural logics that both informs the practice of local *costumbristas* as well as formulates internalized cognitive models that structure the way in which residents see the world.

I observed an example of the pervasiveness of the cultural logic of a reciprocal relationship with the divine when talking to my local guide about his conversion to Protestantism. The manner in which he was finally convinced to convert is somewhat telling concerning the underlying belief that guides his thought. For him, the reciprocal relationship inherent in Protestantism was of particular importance in his decision, especially when it was explained to him by a missionary that in exchange for a life lived in accordance with the Bible, God would provide the rainfall necessary for his crops (as well as other needs, my guide noted, although he emphasized rain). When he told me this story, he further expanded on the idea. Santiago remarked that while some people (those who practice *costumbre*) believe in the *Mundo* (the ancestral Maya deities) others believe solely in *Dios*. He explained that it was God who provided the rain and other necessities for a good harvest and thus it was not necessary to go through other channels (as God is still seen as the ultimate Creator by *costumbristas*) to ask for such things. He now feels that a spiritual reciprocal relationship, rather than the sacrifice of actual material goods, is an appropriate means of relating to the sacred. Thus the cultural logic of reciprocity continues to guide his view of the spiritual world. However, for practitioners of *costumbre* this underlying belief also informs their interaction with the physical world.

As I have outlined above, because the physical (and thus the sacred) world must ‘sacrifice’ a part of itself in order for humans to survive, humans must then give back part of what they have in order to reestablish the balance inherent in the world created by the gods. This exchange with the divine must take place in specific manners: there are specific locations at which to conduct ritual and specific entities with which to interact as well as prescribed ritual necessary to conduct. All of this ritual is dependent on the Maya



calendar, and thus the ritual specialist (the “keeper” of days), at the most fundamental level. These are some of the basic concepts of *costumbre* that I see as comprising an underlying framework or set of cultural logics that informs the continuing ritual practice in Ch’aqa’Ya’. However, all of this ritual must, as does all human action, take place in the physical landscape of our world. In fact, it is the way in which humans, and the rituals they perform, are situated in the physical world that is my primary interest. The means in which the physical world is made to relate to the spiritual world, the sacred geography of Ch’aqa’Ya’ is the focus of my investigation.

### **SACRED GEOGRAPHY AND RITUAL: AN INTRODUCTION**

As noted above, ritual dedicated to the sacred, as well as most of the interaction with the *espíritus*, is undertaken at locations that act as portals to the divine. It was a concern with locating these altars and identifying continuity with ancient ritual that was a point of origin for my research. In fact, I found that the site locations do exhibit continuity with models evident in ancient Maya sacred geography, especially as concerns the concept of four sacred directions and, more importantly, the center that can be defined through these directions. This aspect of the spiritual landscape in ancient Maya belief was vital to ritual practice believed necessary to the regeneration of the physical world. I feel that site layout continues to play a central role in the continuation of the world and thus the reproduction and adaptation of contemporary belief.

The system of ritual behavior and belief I have outlined above is situated within a physical world that is arranged in such a way as to metaphorically represent the cosmos; in this way humans are effectively positioned in their proper place within this cosmic

order. The physical world is made to represent the metaphysical world and thus the actions of humans (in the physical world) can be symbolically represented in a ritual microcosm that embodies and signifies the greater divine order. The means by which this is accomplished and, in fact, the actual locations that represent different elements of the symbolic cosmos are both aspects of ritual practice that appear to be part of a framework of Maya belief; concepts concerning sacred geography both exhibit continuity with ancient practice as well as seem integral in the maintenance of this continuity.

While certain elements of belief (such as reciprocity with the divine) appear important in preserving a coherent religious structure, it also appears that the geographical layout of sacred locations is, in fact, part of the system of cultural logics that allows for the continual adaptation and regeneration of a viable system of belief. The sacred sites I mapped are not only locations that allow for communication with the divine, but are also laid out across the physical geography in such a way that they mimic the cosmic order as envisioned in Maya spirituality. The defining of the sacred directions functions to situate the community of Ch'aqa'Ya' in the symbolic cosmic order in such a way as to allow for a continued re-creation of the local 'world.' Thus, through the concept of "centering" and its function in positioning the local community at the focal point of the metaphorical cosmos, community specific variances in ritual behavior can be sanctified. In recreating a cosmic order focused on the individual community ritual activity can, in effect, continually renew life while yet incorporating aspects of the external world that best help to address changes in purely local conditions, allowing ritual modifications made in response to these conditions to be incorporated into the belief system. This situates for the changing site utilization I observed in a context that does not

violate the integrity (and thus continuity) of the belief system as a whole. Thus it appears that centering the community in the sacred landscape is a key concept in the cultural logics of local *costumbre* and is essential in the perseverance of the belief system. However, I will address this issue in more detail in a later chapter. For the moment I would now like to present those aspects of the sacred geography of Ch'aqa'Ya' I documented that appear to represent continuity with ancient belief as well as establish the importance of directional patterning and "centering" in Ch'aqa'Ya'

## CHAPTER 4

### THE SPIRITUAL LANDSCAPE OF SAN JOSÉ CH'AQA'YA'

A primary goal in my research was the identification of the components that make up the spiritual landscape of Ch'aqa'Ya' and the ways in which these interrelate with one another. In particular I was interested in showing how aspects of the sacred geography, especially the relationships between sites, might exhibit continuity with ancient belief. I was also hoping to corroborate elements of belief and practice that ethnographers have observed in other contemporary Maya communities. I hypothesized that similarities across geographically widespread communities evidenced a common (and ancient) origin for these similar beliefs. I felt that such extensive parallels might indicate a very early (pre-Maya or even pre-Olmec) archaic religious system that could have diffused across Mesoamerica, resulting in the varied cultures exhibiting a similar core of belief. However, following my thoughts on cultural logics, I have revised my original hypothesis. Rather than a common *set of beliefs*, it is more likely that extensive parallels indicate a very early *structure of belief* existed that prevailed through time. The similarities across contemporary communities might indicate a long term shared system of cultural logics. In fact, I did find models in the sacred geography of Ch'aqa'Ya' that not only correlate to those in other contemporary communities, but ancient ones as well. Continuity across both space and time is evident in other areas of contemporary ritual (as

described above), however it is in the conception of how the physical landscape relates to the sacred that such continuity is especially prevalent.

In this chapter I will first describe the long term continuity apparent in perceptions of caves and mountains in the sacred geography, especially showing how these relate to the idea of centering the local community in the symbolic cosmos. I will then explain how both of these geographical features are incorporated into a system of primary altars important in locating Ch'aqa'Ya' in the cosmic order. Following this, I will discuss how the concept of such symbolic centering played a key role in ancient Maya thought and how it continues to do so today. The lasting continuity that is apparent establishes the importance of the idea in the long term system of cultural logics that underlies indigenous Maya belief.

## **CAVES**

In Ch'aqa'Ya' two of the most important sacred locations are caves. There is ample ethnography documenting the importance of caves in Mesoamerican communities, as well as considerable evidence for the sacred nature of caves among the ancient Maya. In addition to exhibiting remarkable similarity to the ways in which caves were viewed by ancient Maya, in Ch'aqa'Ya' caves are integral to the geographic patterning that serves to situate communities in their appropriate place in the cosmic order.

A notable example I observed of similarity between ancient sacred locations and a contemporary site in Ch'aqa'Ya' is evident in a comparison of the cave altar of Pa Puerta (figure 5) and an Olmec monument at Chalcatzingo. The bas-relief at Chalcatzingo depicts a god (or more probably, a ruler impersonating a god) as he "calls" forth life-

giving rain through a ritual performance (F. Kent Reilly, personal communication). Pa Puerta is a cave site near Ch'aqa'Ya' from which rain is "called" as well. Pa Puerta ("at the door/gate") is, in actuality, only a small overhang, but is locally identified as a cave.



**Figure 5.** The sacred site of Pa Puerta. This is a small overhang (locally referred to as a cave) situated below an upper altar overlooking the entire basin of Lake Atitlán. This altar is utilized in petitions for rain.

My guide to the site specifically related to me that as smoke generated from ceremony here exits the cave and drifts into the air, this is *una llamada* (a call) to the clouds. The site overlooks the entire lake basin to the south, where moisture-laden Pacific air currents meet the 12000 foot volcanoes that make up the rim of Lake Atitlan; this process forms the thunderheads that bring monsoon rains. According to my guide, the smoke of offerings then calls these thunderstorms to the Ch'aqa'Ya' area. He related that



the site is heavily utilized in March, timing that corresponds to the early beginning of the rainy season. Don Fidel reiterated both this story as well as the importance of the altar in bringing rain, noting that the mountaintop site of Chuichuimuch and this site are the local altars most crucial for ritual involving rain. As well, the name of the site itself reveals an interesting association in that this site is considered an especially powerful ‘door’ or portal to the supernatural.



**Figure 6.** The cave site of Pa Minas. The cave itself, and the area in front of it used for offerings, is located in the center of this photo. This altar is considered the central site around which the sacred geography of Ch’aqa’Ya is organized and is heavily utilized.

Pa Minas (“at the mines”) is a second local cave of great importance (figure 6). This cave is not only vital to the work of Don Fidel, but is central in the identity of the surrounding community. The *cacerio* (a small outlying community generally populated –

at least locally – by extended kin groups) in which it is located is named Las Minas, as is the most prominent natural feature of the area, a rock outcrop rising sharply behind the cave. Other ethnographers have reported that caves are utilized in identifying territory and legitimizing a community's rights over it (Mautner 2005:119). Pa Minas is also considered the “central” site around which the other defining sacred sites of the community are arrayed (a much more detailed discussion of the concept of centering as relates to the sacred landscape will be presented in a moment), thus this site represents the focal point of the entire sacred landscape of Ch'aqa'Ya'.

People in the area say the *antiguos* (ancients) mined this cave for gold and silver, although these precious metals are not naturally occurring in this area. (In Ch'aqa'Ya' the *antiguos* are differentiated from the *antepasados*, or ancestors, as the *antiguos* are seen as an almost mythical people who lived in the area at some indeterminate time in the past). The acquisition of wealth from this location by the “ancients” is a defining factor in the ritual performed here by Don Fidel. Due to these stories and by virtue of the fact that this cave is a *Tz'ikin* site (the day-name associated primarily with monetary matters), Don Fidel reports that this site is particularly appropriate for petitions to the ancestors concerning financial success. This site is considered very powerful and is well known outside of the community. It is often visited by petitioners from other areas, seemingly due to its renown as a site that is very useful in financial matters. Besides the sacred altar located on Don Fidel's property, this is the local altar where Don Fidel conducts the majority of his rituals. Santiago (my primary guide to the sites) and others with whom I spoke report that there is ceremony here every day and, in fact, it was rare that I passed by the site and did not see smoke from a ceremony emanating from the area of the cave.



Two other cave sites important in the sacred landscape of Ch'aqa'Ya' – Juan No'j and a cave located at Uatlán – are sacred boundary markers for the community and powerful pilgrimage sites. These sites are located approximately three hours travel (to the east and north, respectively) from Ch'aqa'Ya' and mark the outer boundaries of a regional sacred landscape with the community symbolically located at the center. Interestingly, these sites, along with the western and southern pilgrimage sites, also roughly correspond to the boundaries of the Kaqchikel linguistic and cultural area; this may be related to evidence others have documented of caves as locations of polity-wide ceremonies for validating territory (Prufer 2005:186).

Juan No'j and Uatlán are the sites most commonly visited by Don Fidel for ritual that might be most specifically termed ancestor worship; they are often utilized for larger sacrifices that are given in gratitude to the ancestors/spirits for one's health or success (as in the case of the large ceremony conducted for "Phil" that I described above). Among the Tzeltal, Vogt and Stuart report that caves are important as places to honor the ancestors (2005:171). Uatlán is the pre-Conquest capital city of the Quiché (a neighboring linguistic group with whom the Kaqchikel are closely associated, often through intermarriage) and the cave site of Juan No'j is seen as the home and place of origin of an ancestral mythical being (Juan No'j). According to Don Fidel's description, this figure is important in retaining ancestral knowledge as well as bestowing strength in unity upon the Maya as a group. Thus both of these sites have close associations to sacred *antepasados*. Other anthropologists identify a general belief of many Mesoamerican groups concerning not only the emergence of ancestral heroes, but of humans in general and even the gods from caves (Aguilar, Jaen, Tucker, and Brady 2005:69). Ethnographers

have also documented the utilization of caves in demarcating territory and as important sites of pilgrimage; they are seen as defining locations for specific communities as they are believed to be the places of the origin of lineage ancestors. This is noted among the Tzotzil (Vogt 1969:141-144), the Chamula (Gossen 1974), the Tzeltal (Heyden 2005:22), and the Mixtec (Mautner 2005:118). This, in fact, appears to be a pan-Maya phenomenon as well as widespread in other Mesoamerican cultures (Brown 2005:382).

In ancient communities Bassie-Sweet notes that “the concepts associated with the cave were at the very root Maya culture” (1991:240). There are numerous examples of the importance of caves in the archaeological and ethnohistorical record of Mesoamerica. These include early cases, such as the Formative (Olmec) relief at Chalcatzingo discussed above, or the Olmec altars (thrones) of La Venta and San Lorenzo that show humans emerging from caves as represented by the open mouths of jaguars (Aguilar et al. 2005:69, F. Kent Reilly, personal communication). Later evidence of cave ritual also exists in various codices from across Mesoamerica, such as the Codex Bodley, which shows a lord making a request at the entrance to a cave (Mautner 2005:120). Additionally, the Mixtec Codices show many examples of important ritual conducted at caves, as well as illustrate caves as important shrines to ancestors (Robert Williams, personal communication).

Sacred caves were often the landmarks used to conceptually center ancient Maya communities in a metaphorical cosmos, thus allowing for a ritual re-creation, in the physical realm, of the universe of the supernatural. Evidence of the practice of community centering through local directional versions of four mythological caves appears among the Classic Maya, especially in the Palenque Cross Group Tablets

(Bassie-Sweet 1991:177). Bassie-Sweet also argues that caves of the four world directions are incorporated into mythology in the form of the *Ritual of the Bacabs*, a ceremonial aspect of ancient Maya belief recorded on pages 3-5 of the Madrid codex (1991:172-173, Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:71). Others also identify archaeological evidence of the centering of communities by means of sacred caves (Aguilar, Jaen, Tucker, and Brady 2005:69, Brown 2005, Mautner 2005:119).

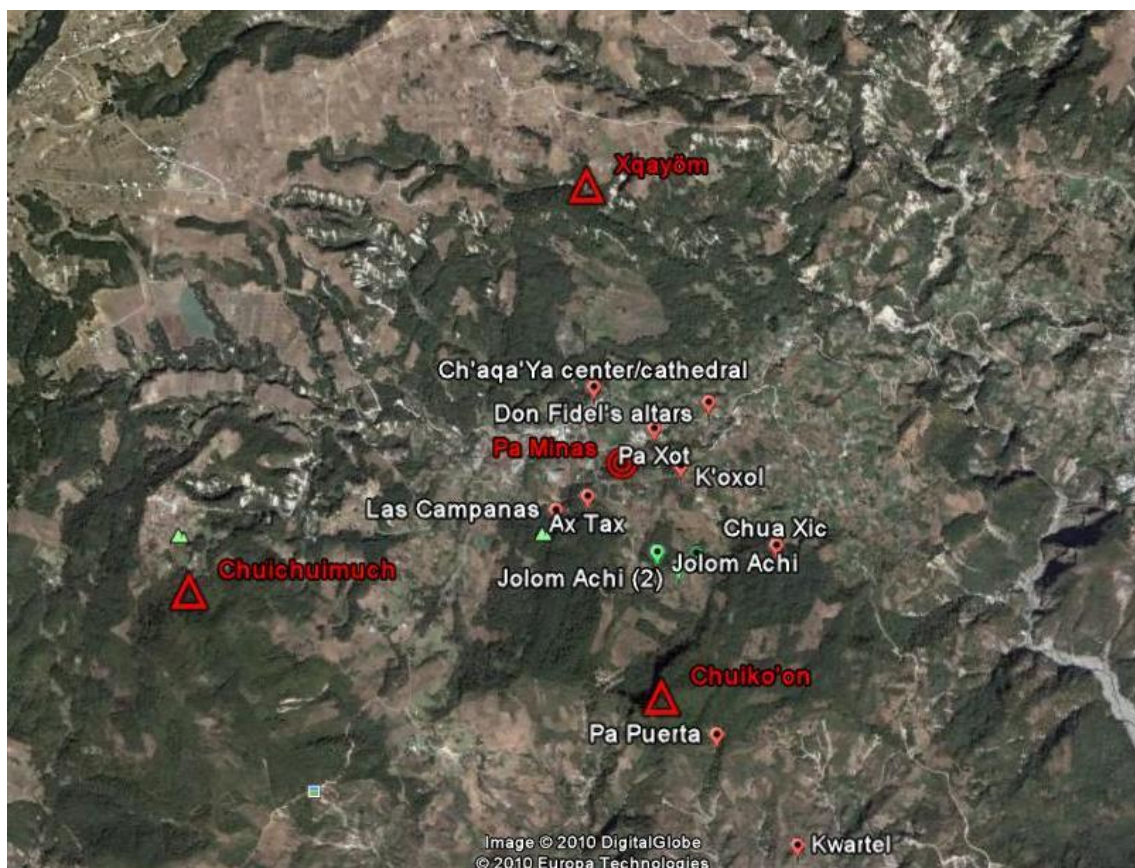
It appears that caves in Mesoamerican culture were, and are, the focal point for rituals, especially those concerning passage into the Underworld and/or ceremonies related to rain and the water necessary for the survival of humans (Vogt and Stuart 2005:180). Furthermore, I would argue that the emphasis on caves across geographic distances and cultures in Mesoamerica is part of the overall framework that exists concerning the relationship between physical and sacred geography. Some researchers posit that in both contemporary and ancient Mesoamerica caves are seen as a part of the larger cosmic order encompassing creation and the origin of humans (Mautner 2005:144). I feel this aspect of the sacred landscape – a link to the original creation – to be very important in the regeneration and continuation of a Maya belief system. As I will later discuss in some depth, it appears that the symbolic replication of the original creation event is vital to the continuity of a coherent belief system.

As noted, the “world directions” (I prefer to use this term when referring to ancient Maya thought, as there is some debate as to the specific nature of the directions represented), and their function in symbolically centering communities, were also vital to pre-Columbian belief. It appears that both ancient and contemporary Maya recognize, in effect, five directions, with the center seen as a direction as well as the cardinals (Schele

and Freidel 1990:66, Maxwell 2008:13, F. Kent Reilly, personal communication). The concept of a fifth direction and “centering” is paramount in the local practice of *costumbre*. As I will soon address in more detail, this center symbolically represents the point of original creation and is the location at which interaction with the divine most effectively takes place. Although only one cave site in Ch’aqa’Ya’ (Pa Minas) plays a fundamental role in centering the community, it functions in the most important role – as the central site in a sacred geography based upon the sanctity of the four directions. Thus, not only have I described some of the overall concepts of caves that exhibit continuity with ancient belief, but in Ch’aqa’Ya’ a cave plays the most important role in centering the community and maintaining a relationship with the divine.

## **MOUNTAINS**

In addition to caves, mountains also play a central role in centering the community. Don Fidel identified numerous geographic locations in and around Ch’aqa’Ya’ that make up the area’s spiritual geography and serve to center the community. He identified two sets of sacred mountains that are important in their association with the directions and serve as community guardians. The locations of the sacred mountains identified by Don Fidel, as well as the local mesas (altars) I will discuss next, include a wide geographic area. He made an analogy to the modern government of Guatemala in explaining this concept to me. Don Fidel related that just as Ch’aqa’Ya’ is a pueblo that is part of a larger municipality, which itself is part of a group of departments that make up the national government, so too is the system of sacred locations surrounding a community; there are local sites, regional sites, and even national sacred sites.



**Figure 7.** The local sacred mountain guardians of Ch'aqa'Ya' and the "center" of Pa Minas. A fourth mountain (Maria Tecun) is located some distance from Ch'aqa'Ya'.

Contemporary Maya communities are often identified by sacred mountains that ring them and are located at roughly the cardinal points (Tedlock 1982:99-100, Maxwell 2008:13). Maxwell notes that these mountains serve to visibly delineate the sacred space of the community and define its spiritual identity (2008:28). Don Fidel identifies Xqayö'm as the northern sacred mountain of Ch'aqa'Ya', with Chuichuimuch identified as the western sacred mountain, and Chuiko'on as the southern mountain (figure 7). A fourth mountain, Maria Tecun is located about 15 miles to the northeast of Ch'aqa'Ya' and is identified as the eastern sacred mountain. As noted, these are essentially the visible markers of the sacred space of the community. The mountains of Chuichuimuch and Chuiko'on dominate the skyline above Ch'aqa'Ya' (figure 8) and the ridge of Xqayö'm

comprises the northern horizon as viewed from the community. Maria Tecun, the fourth sacred mountain, is some distance from Ch'aqa'Ya' (see figure 9), and is only visible from the highest points above the community. Nonetheless, Don Fidel specifically noted that while this mountain is "very far" from Ch'aqa'Ya', it serves as the eastern guardian for the community. However I suspect that there may have been another, closer mountain that more appropriately filled this role in the past and is now inaccessible. As well, some sites like Maria Tecun serve dual purposes. This is may also be a result of adaptations in the sacred landscape in response to changes in the community's social fabric, as sites now inaccessible may have once occupied one of the roles filled by those altars with dual functions. These are questions I will investigate in future research.



**Figure 8.** The mountains of Chuik'on (top left) and Chuichuimuch (right background) dominate the skyline above Ch'aqa'Ya'.



Following the analogy to a governmental system discussed above, Don Fidel also identified a larger array (the “nationally” important locations) of directionally oriented mountains surrounding Ch’aqa’Ya’ that are of great spiritual significance and serve to center the community (figure 10). These are Maria Tecun (filling a double role) to the north, Pulchich to the east, Cerro de Oro to the south, and Chuichuimuch (another site that holds a two-fold position) to the west.



**Figure 9.** The outer array of sacred mountains. These are identified as important in “centering” Ch’aqa’Ya’ in a larger geographic area.

The mountains described above, whether these regionally important ones or those closer to the community, are spiritual “guardians” for the town and imperative to a sacred geography that situates Ch’aqa’Ya’ in its appropriate position in the cosmos. Along with caves, mountains are also part of an overall set of ritually active locations that are oriented to the four directions and fundamental to the spiritual world of the community.

They are key components in a larger system of sites that serves to center Ch'aqa'Ya' in both the physical and the spiritual world.

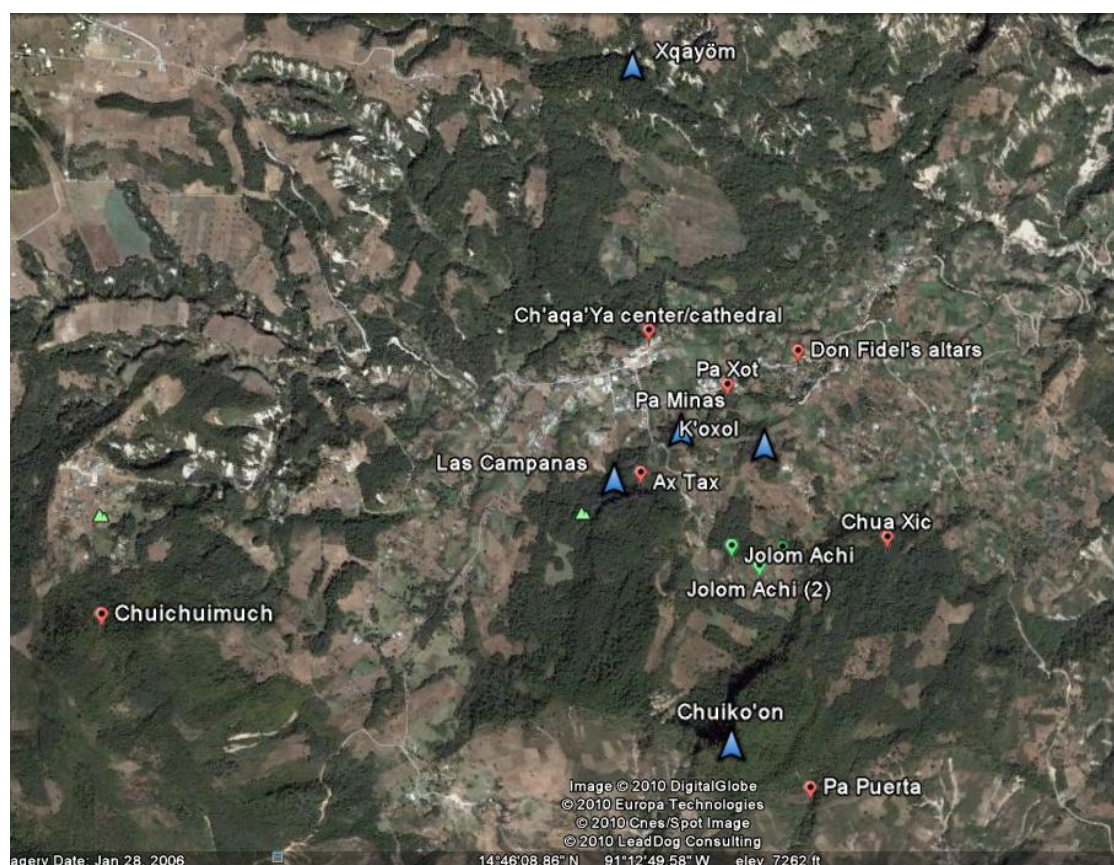
### **THE DIRECTIONAL ALTARS OF CH'AQA'YA'**

In the only other regional investigation of Kaqchikel sacred sites, Judith Maxwell has undertaken an area-wide survey in which she identified the locations surrounding numerous communities that serve to center the spiritual districts in which they are located (Maxwell 2008). As I have described, communities are anchored by a central altar symbolizing the vertical axis uniting the worlds of the sacred with the physical. She found that such an altar is often located on the site of the town's Catholic church, as these churches were regularly established over the altars of primary importance to local Maya communities (Maxwell 2008:28). However, Don Fidel specifically told me that no *costumbre* is practiced at the colonial church in Ch'aqa'Ya', although he noted that bones have been uncovered during renovations to the building as this is said to be the site of a pre-Columbian cemetery. In the Ch'aqa'Ya' area, the directional altars are not centered on the town itself but rather the small outlying community of Las Minas where the archeological site is located. Of course, this would fit the model of the sites as centered on the community, albeit one that was ancient even at the time of the Conquest.

As mentioned above, the cave site of Pa Minas serves as the center of the local spiritual landscape. Don Fidel identified four sites located roughly at the cardinal directions and orbiting Pa Minas that are the primary sites functioning to establish the local sacred space of Ch'aqa'Ya' (figure 10). These are Xqayöm, the site that serves as the northern guardian of the community, K'oxol, the eastern guardian, Chuiko'on, the



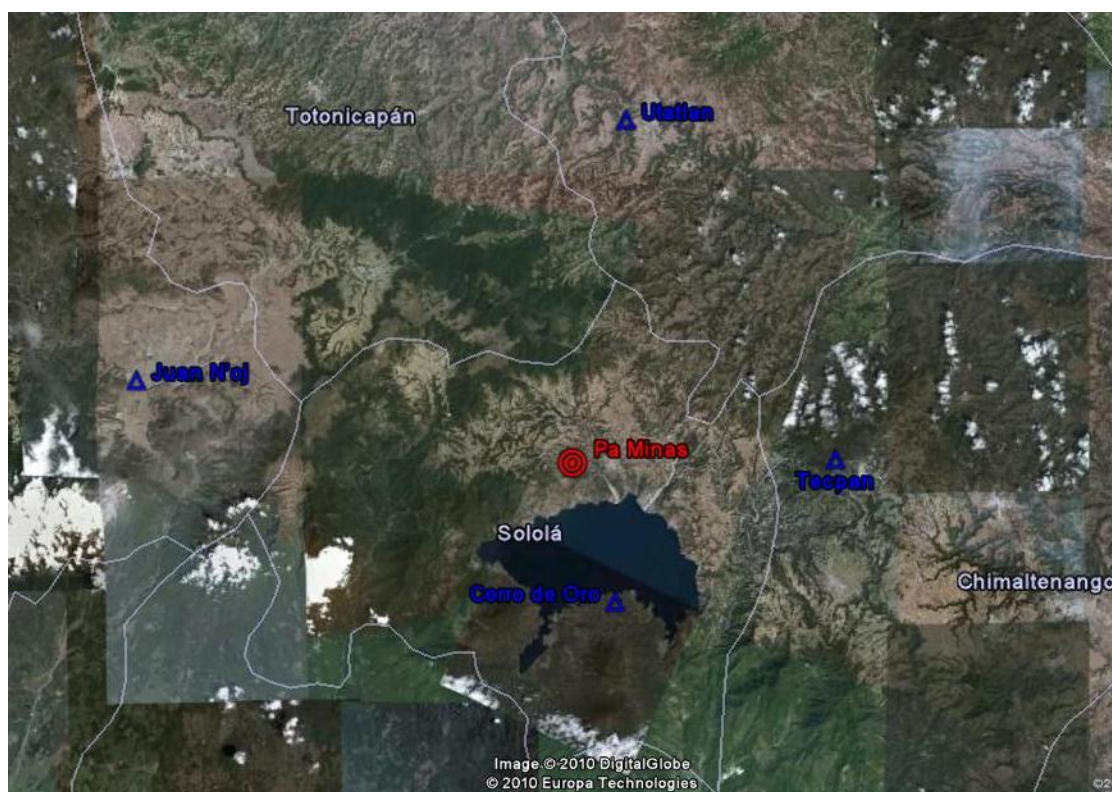
southern guardian, and Las Campanas which serves as the western sacred site. These function to define the spiritual ‘precinct’ of Ch’aqa’Ya’ and are locally considered of great importance. The site of Pa Minas, as previously noted, is also of great importance outside of the community.



**Figure 10.** The primary directional altars of the local sacred geography. K’oxol, Chuiko’on, Las Campanas, and Xqayöm are marked by blue arrows. They are arrayed in a directionally oriented pattern around the central site of Pa Minas (also in blue).

As well, a broader set of sites identified by Don Fidel serves to center Ch’aqa’Ya’ in a region-wide area (again recalling his analogy to a governmental system). These are also considered pilgrimage sites (figure 11). He often travels to these altars when more important or urgent petitions call for a ceremony at one of these more powerful sites. The northern such site is the cave (discussed above) located at Utatlán, the pre-Hispanic

capital of the Quiché Maya. The western site is Juan No'j, a deep cave located outside of Quetzaltenango (previously discussed as well). The southern site of power is located at Cerro de Oro, near Santiago Atitlán and across the lake from Ch'aqa'Ya'. On the eastern side a sacred precinct (containing multiple altars) on the mountain of Pulchich, near Tecpan, is identified by Don Fidel as the important location of spiritual power that is vital in maintaining a "centered" community. All of these sites are approximately three hours in their respective directions from Ch'aqa'Ya'. As I mentioned above, these sites also roughly correspond to the boundaries of the Kaqchikel cultural area.

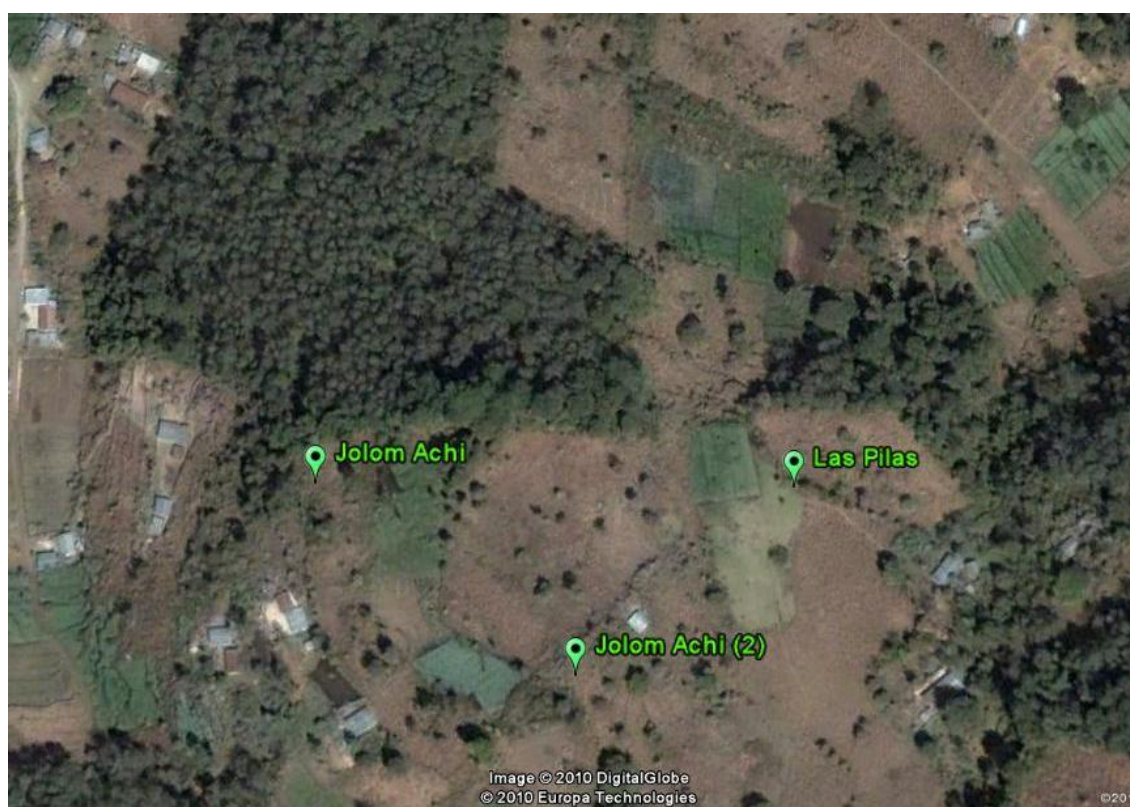


**Figure 11.** The pilgrimage sites surrounding Ch'aqa'Ya'. They also exhibit directional patterning and serve to locate the community at the center of the symbolic cosmos.

Although more investigation into this idea is necessary, I believe a smaller concentric ring of sites clustered around the archaeological site in Las Minas also exhibit directional patterning (figure 12). Three archaeological monuments surround the small



Preclassic to Postclassic site located in Las Minas (see Sabom-Bruchez 1997). I was told by a trusted friend that there are four sites associated with the ancient community although he did not know where the fourth was located. Don Fidel confirmed that there were four such altars, although when further questioned never provided more information. It is probable the fourth site is an altar that I was told is off-limits due to the landowner's wishes. This may be due to the past disappearance of one of the monuments (Las Pilas), reported to have been stolen by foreigners. However, the three identified sites are located almost directly at the southern, western, and eastern cardinal points. Although only one of these locations is utilized (and only minimally) at present, they are all considered locations of spiritual power.



**Figure 12.** Three sites exhibiting directional patterning around an ancient community in Las Minas. Many structures identified during excavations (Sabom-Bruchez 1997) lie within the area defined by these monuments.

During the time I spent with Don Fidel, as he identified the numerous locations I discuss above, he repeatedly stressed the importance of having sacred altars at the four directions, whether this is on a local scale or within a wider geographical area. In discussions with me he often emphasized the importance of these locations as necessary to the existence of the community, especially noting the importance of the central altar of Pa Minas. Similarly, in ancient Maya communities the importance of the four directions and, even more specifically, the center established through directional patterning, has also been well documented.

### **CENTERING IN ANCIENT MAYA COSMOLOGY**

A famous example of patterning emphasizing the four sacred directions is the tomb of Lord Pakal at Palenque (figure 13), in which Pakal is interpreted to represent the “center,” as the glyphs for the four directions are appropriately arrayed around him (Maxwell 2008:13 n.9). A review of the concept of cosmological centering in archaeological sites also shows that it is evident in many other ancient Maya communities: Chichén Itza (Carlson 1981:185), Copán (Ashmore 1991:203-205), Palenque (Carlson 1976:114-115), Tulum (Paxton 1999, 2001), Uatatlán (Fox 1987:55), and Yaxuná (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:126). F. Kent Reilly has also shown how the Olmec site of La Venta is organized around a quincunx that centered the universe on the site (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:137, F. Kent Reilly 2002 and personal communication). Important temples at Cerros are also apparently constructed with symbolic reference to the four directions (Schele and Freidel 1990:107,109), as well as at Copán, where the entire Acropolis (a temple complex) at Copán (figure 13) is oriented to the cardinal directions (Schele and Freidel 1990:324). Additionally, the primary temple at

the site of Seibal, as well as the High Priest's Grave at Chichén Itzá are both structures laid out with stairways ascending the temple pyramids that are oriented to the cardinal directions (Schele and Freidel 1990:387). As with the tomb of Pakal, rulers were also seen as centers of the cosmological world after death; a tomb in the Early Classic site of Río Azul has the directional glyphs marked on the four appropriate walls (Schele and Freidel 1993:72).



**Figure 13.** Directional “centering” in ancient Maya thought, represented both in iconography and site layout. At left the Acropolis at Copán shows directional orientation in overall layout, temple orientation, and stelae placement (in yellow). At right, Pakal’s tomb shows the ruler representing the center of the cosmos or the *axis mundi*. Images reproduced from <http://www.mayaruins.com> (left) and <http://www.mesoweb.com> (right).

Much larger construction events also show evidence of directional orientation: four causeways at the site of Ek Balam in the Yucatan radiate out a distance of 1.8 km from the center of the settlement and are directionally oriented. Seibal as well has a cruciform pattern of causeways showing such patterning (Paxton 2001:132). Even entire regions are seen by some researchers as having a directional configuration in settlement

patterning. Merideth Paxton argues that the entire Yucatan peninsula models a quincunx pattern (2001:109,141-142) and feels this patterning probably represents a ritual model of the creation of the universe (2001:95).

In the specific region encompassing the community of San José Ch'aqa'Ya', many Quiché archaeological sites exhibit temples, temple complexes, or overall site layouts that are oriented to the cardinal directions. In a comprehensive overview of Quiché archaeological sites, John W. Fox notes many examples of directional patterning, especially in the sites located around Uvatlán, the capital of the Quiché Postclassic kingdom, and a site still very important in local ritual practice (as I described above). Often Early phase Postclassic sites dating to the foundation of the Quiché state exhibit site layout that conforms to the cardinal directions. For example, the plaza configuration of the site of Pakaman is oriented directly to the cardinal directions (Fox 1978:29). The site of Chitinamit has two plazas that are aligned directly north-south, with temples in each of them facing south, and a ballcourt oriented east-west (Fox 1978:47). However, just as in contemporary Ch'aqa'Ya', the importance placed on the sacred directions already had a long history in the area before the founding of the Quiché kingdom, and this helps to account for the continuity exhibited during and after the transition that occurred with the arrival of a new elite. Small Late Postclassic sites in the Ixil region just north of the central Quiché area were probably under Quiché domination by the Postclassic period (Fox 1978:91). Nonetheless Fox feels that rather than a product of colonization, the site homogeneity that exhibits east-west orientation is the result of a "uniform, static culture entrenched since Classic times" and that this "may reflect an Ixil belief system seemingly unchanged over nine centuries prior to the Spanish conquest"

(1978:100). Colby agrees that this structure alignment probably reflects a religious system that is a “survival of the Classic period” (1976:74). As noted, the Quiché are closely related to the Kaqchikel (both linguistically and socially) and the altars located at Uvatlán are still important in the ritual practice of Don Fidel. Therefore the continuity between ancient practice at these sites and contemporary *costumbre* is particularly relevant (especially as it persisted despite changing external conditions) to the analysis I am presenting.

Researchers interpret the directional orientation exhibited in archaeological sites as a means of sanctifying space through links to creation mythology and establishing a symbolic center within which to conduct ritual. The concept of a central axis, or axis mundi, around which the world is centered and that acts as a portal of exchange with the otherworlds (the celestial plane and the Underworld) of Maya mythology is well documented for the ancient Maya. The axis mundi represents the mythological location at which the original creators first ‘raised up the sky’ and separated the physical world of the humans from the upper and lower levels of the supernaturals. A famous depiction of this separation of the earth and sky and the raising of the axis mundi is seen in the central panel at the Temple of the Cross at Palenque (Cook 2000:108). Therefore, through directional patterning and ritual performance a symbolic center that replicates this original creation event can be (re)created. Through this re-creation ancient Maya kings, as intermediaries to the world of the divine, could link themselves to the regeneration of life and the cosmos of humans (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:286). Archaeological evidence indicates the raising of great posts at important temples and other ritual locations; these are interpreted by researchers as functioning to define the world

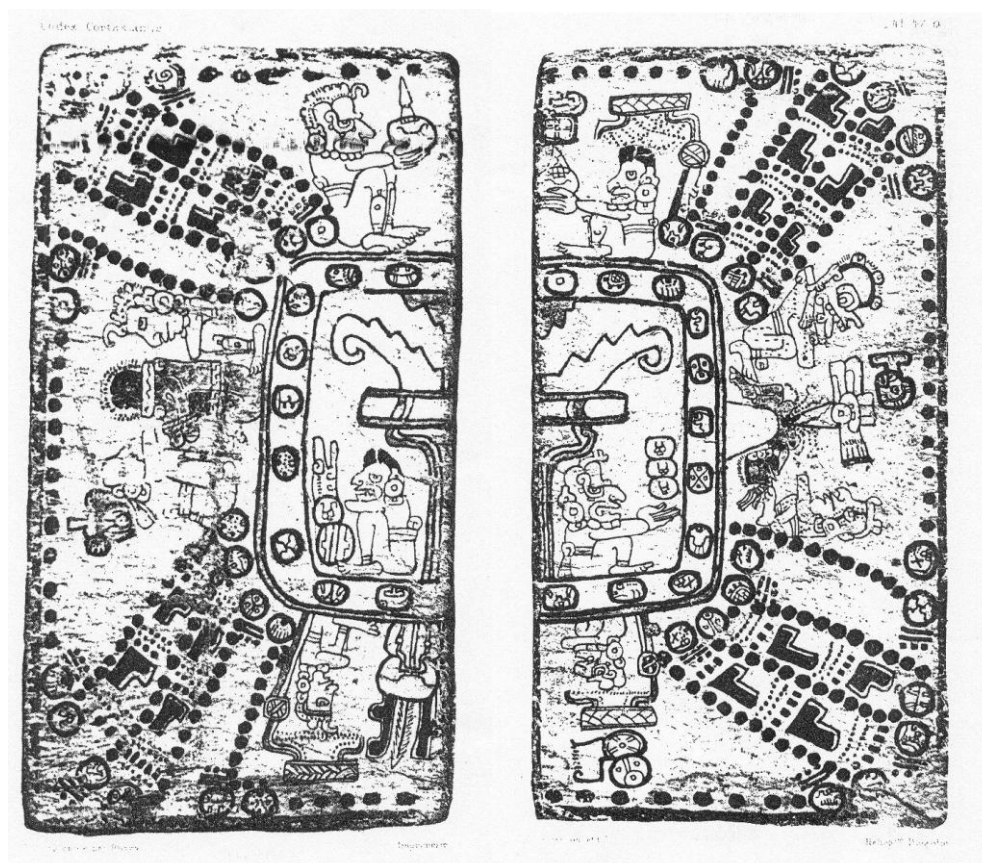
directions and establish the sacred space within which rulers could conduct such ritual (Schele and Freidel 1990:435 n.20). This is specifically documented at the site of Cerros and at Copán, where the stelae (see figure 13) are seen as permanently marking the center of a sacred space utilized by kings in their entry into the otherworlds (Schele and Freidel 1990:485 n.18).

The symbolic centering of communities was critical to ancient Maya religion (as well as kingship), as it was a means by which elite rulers were able to justify their status through their ability to travel the axis mundi and communicate with the gods. Temples, ceremonial plazas, and even entire communities were structured to symbolically place the ruler at the center of the cosmos. During ritual performance these elite personages were seen as representing the original location of the central axis and were thus crucial to the maintenance of the universe through ritual activity (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:394). Through the actions of the Maya king, and his symbolic role as the axis mundi, proper cosmic order was preserved by means of the king interceding with the gods (by maintaining the sacred reciprocal relationship) to sustain the balance of the world (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:212-213).

The concept of the sacred nature of the directions is also recorded in surviving ancient Maya documents. Pages 75-76 of the Madrid Codex (figure 14) are justly famous among Maya researchers for a depiction thought to be a map of the sacred world directions (see Paxton 2001, Schele and Freidel 1990, Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993). Although, as noted, there is debate as to the actual directions represented in ancient Maya documents, for the purposes of the present analysis the point of importance lies in the map's presentation of a sacred center based on a quadripartite division of the world. As



well, the *Books of Chilam Balam of Tizimin* document, as transcribed by Edmonson (1982:82), clearly records that the gates of the site of Mayapan are oriented to the four cardinal points of the Bacabs, deities of the ancient Maya (in Fox 1987:137).



**Figure 14.** Pages 75-76 of the Madrid Codex. This is thought to be a depiction of the quadripartite division of the world and the sacred center. (taken from <http://www.famsi.org/mayawriting/codices/madrid.html>)

Evidence from these and other colonial era documents as well as that recovered from iconography on monumental art indicates that the importance of these directions was directly related to creation mythology; these links to creation mythology thus served to sanctify directional patterning. Researchers link the four directions to sacred beings in Maya mythology variously identified as the Bacabs, or Earth Lords (Paxton 2001:131), the Chacs, or rain gods (Thompson 1970:255), or the Pauhtuns (Schele and Freidel 1990:316), although Taube cites Diego de Landa's 16<sup>th</sup> century report that the Pauhtuns,

the Bacabs and the Chacs are all names for the same deities (1992:92-99). While there is uncertainty in the identification of these beings, it is clear that all of them describe a deity with four aspects, each inhabiting one of the quadripartite divisions of the world as defined by the four directions, that is responsible for ‘supporting the sky’ and thus maintaining the physical realm (Thompson 1950:270, 1970:280, Schele and Freidel 1990:410, Paxton 2001:83). Tozzer (1941:135) notes that Diego de Landa, in the *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* (1566), reported that in 16<sup>th</sup> century belief these beings were seen as “four brothers whom God placed, when he created the world, at the four points of it, holding up the sky so that it should not fall” (see also Paxton 2001:84). In fact, the concept of four sacred beings that support the sky and are located at the world directions holds such an important place in the mythology of such a wide geographic area of distribution that J. Eric Thompson posits an ancient origin for this belief. After reviewing the evidence (both archaeological and ethnographic) from a number of Mesoamerican groups, he feels this characteristic of Maya religion – quadripartite deities associated with the directions – is in fact an early development, possibly a Formative period creation of the Olmec (1970:261).

Although there is no longer such a clear connection to these supernatural beings in the contemporary *costumbre* practiced in Ch’aqa’Ya’, Don Fidel still identifies the *nawales* who inhabit the sacred mountains as spiritual guardians of the community. His view of these supernatural beings surrounding the community does not expressly see them as “supporting the sky” but they are still necessary to the survival of the community by situating it in its proper place in the cosmic order. The sanctity accorded the four directions in ancient thought through association with supernatural beings still prevails

today, albeit in a slightly modified form. However, by means of consecrating the four directions a sacred space is still created with the community located at the center of the spiritual cosmos. This concept allowed the ancient Maya kings to conduct the ritual necessary for the continued rejuvenation of the physical world. In contemporary times, ritual centering continues to play a vital role in the practice of *costumbre*.

### **CENTERING IN CONTEMPORARY RITUAL**

The evidence presented above indicates the importance that the center location or axis mundi plays in the ritual world renewal of ancient Maya communities. As well, I have described the current presence of a system of directionally-oriented altars in the sacred geography that establishes the continued importance of community centering in present-day Ch'aqa'Ya'. The concept of positioning the individual community at the center of the symbolic cosmos seems to hold the same significance in contemporary Ch'aqa'Ya' (at least in the eyes of those who practice *costumbre*) that it did in ancient Maya communities. In effect, Ch'aqa'Ya' becomes the focal point of the cosmos. It also appears that, just as in pre-Columbian Maya belief, the world can be ritually re-created through the appropriate ceremonial activity.

In the Maya worldview, according to Don Fidel, human existence is primarily concerned with the continued regeneration of the sacred force that permeates the cosmos through the preservation of a reciprocal bond with the divine. Whether on a community or individual level, this relationship is most effectively maintained through a point – the axis mundi – that allows for communication with the divine. The concept of a central axis that acts as such a portal is also thoroughly documented among modern Maya by other

ethnographers (e.g. Gossen 1974, Tedlock 1982, Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993, Reilly 2002, Sandstrom 2005, Maxwell and García Ixmátá 2008). In contemporary practice, this point functions in the same manner as in ancient ritual, as it is seen as transcending the physical world and linking both the celestial plane and the underworld with the world of humans. Moreover, this concept is not only necessary on a community level but is also a key component in the individual rituals themselves.

Don Fidel initiates each ceremony by first laying out a design that constructs a sacred space within which to make his offerings to the supernaturals. This design is a quincunx pattern reminiscent of a circle crossed by two intersecting lines that represents the cardinal directions and the central axis. He explains that this establishes the *puerta* (door) to the divine through which he makes offerings. Don Fidel terms this point a “connection” to the *Corazon del Mundo* and the *Corazon del Cielo* (the Heart of the Earth and the Heart of the Sky) and explains that offerings to these spiritual planes must be made through such an opening. The sacrificial fire is then built atop this original pattern following a similar layout (figure 15). Other researchers also note the importance of this quincunx pattern in contemporary *costumbre*. Judith Maxwell and García Ixmátá report (in their work with daykeepers in other communities) that this pattern establishes the quadripartite model based upon the cardinal directions as well as the central axis representing the vertical direction, thus symbolizing the original creation (2008:28, see also Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:129). In fact, in contemporary as well as ancient ritual these sacred centers, while connected to the source of all creation and sustenance, can yet “be created by ritual wherever the Maya needed one” (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:127).



**Figure 15.** Offering laid out with directional patterning to establish an *axis mundi*. The votive candles are oriented to the cardinal directions, with the center of the fire symbolizing the ‘portal’ through which the offering is received by the supernaturals.

Thus, it appears that not only does local directional orientation exhibit the continuity I first sought to investigate, but furthermore, this patterning is part of the overall framework or cultural logics of the belief system. As described above, belief in sanctity of the four directions and the center that they establish was vital to ancient Maya ritual; due to links to creation mythology this belief allowed for a metaphorical cosmic center to be established through which rulers could legitimize their positions by means of their role in the symbolic re-creation of the universe. The link to creation mythology is provided by the concept of a four-part supernatural that supports the celestial realm after the ‘raising of the sky’ during the initial creation event. This provides a critical connection between the importance of the four directions, the center, and the symbolism

of these five directions in replicating a cosmic order that allows for communication with the divine. Thus the directional patterning evident in both contemporary and ancient Maya communities not only serves to order and define the physical world but also place the community in its appropriate place at the center of the cosmic order (Schele and Freidel 1990:66, Aguilar et al. 2005:70). In this way, the individual community is in a position of great importance in the cosmic order of the world and the perpetuation of life itself. I argue this is vital to the adaptation and thus continuation of the religious system. As I will further discuss in a moment, is within the framework of belief comprised of community centering, and thus world renewal, that change can occur allowing for communities to adapt to their own local conditions while yet exhibiting the continuity in belief that appears evident in Maya religion.

## **DIRECTIONAL PATTERNING AND TIME RENEWAL**

It is not only the ritual re-creation of the world that is critical to contemporary ritual, also vitally important is the continuation of time. Although all the daykeepers I observed have slightly different means of invoking the day-names of the calendar, common to all is the practice of naming the days of the sacred calendar in every ceremony they perform. This counting of the ritual cycle symbolically sets time in motion and ensures its continuing passage (Maxwell 2008:14). The cardinal directions are also linked to safeguarding the continuation of time. Freidel, Schele, and Parker report that Diego de Landa recorded a 16<sup>th</sup> century Yucatek ritual in which the celebrants moved from the center to the periphery of the community along the cardinal directions, symbolizing the destruction of the old year and the creation of the new year by the ritual return of the processions into the center (1993:164). During my research in Ch'aqa'Ya',

not only did I observe actions in individual rituals that appeared related to the renewal of time, but I also identified elements of the sacred landscape, especially as related to the four directions, that might be especially important to this aspect of ritual life. This is primarily evident in the correlation of the day-name guardians identified for the three of the four locally sacred mountains to those identified in other ancient and contemporary communities as the Year-Bearers.

Year-Bearers are those days of the 260-day sacred calendar that occur on the first day of the first month of the 365-day solar calendar. Because a 365-day period only accommodates eighteen full sets of the twenty day-names, this leaves five extra days at the end of the solar year, thus the day-name of the Year-Bearer advances five places each solar year. This means that only one of four of the twenty day-names ( $20/5=4$ ) will start a new period of 365 days. These days are seen as denoting significance (according to the attributes of their particular day-name) to the year upon which they fall, and are thus vitally important to the divinatory work of the daykeeper, as well as the life of those who practice *costumbre* (Tedlock 1982:90-91).

In her work in the highland community of Momostenango, Barbara Tedlock identifies the Year-Bearers of the Maya calendar as *Kej*, *Ey*, *No'j*, and *Iq'* (1982:99). She reports that because of their great importance in ritual life, as the new year of these Year-Bearers begins it is greeted with great ceremonies. Although this is not presently the case in Ch'aqa'Ya', in the future I hope to further investigate if this practice existed in the past. In Momostenango, each of these Year-Bearers is associated with a sacred mountain where this ritual takes place (Tedlock 1982:99, Cook 2000:123, 240 n.12). Tedlock reports that the northern guardian for Momostenango is represented by the day *No'j*, the

southern mountain is associated with *Ey*, the western guardian is linked to *Iq'* and the eastern is identified as *Kej*. The directional associations Tedlock reports for these mountains differ from that reported by Don Fidel for the community of Ch'aqa'Ya' in that the northern sacred guardian is listed as *No'j* and the southern guardian as *Ey* (Tedlock 1982:99-100, Cook 2000:241n.16-19). This is the reverse of the associations reported by Don Fidel. However, the day-names Don Fidel identified for three of the sacred mountains in Ch'aqa'Ya' are the same as those identified by Tedlock, as *Ey* is associated with the northern mountain in Ch'aqa'Ya' (Xqayöm), *Iq'* with the western mountain, (Chuichuimuch), and *No'j* with the southern mountain (Chuiko'on). The fourth sacred mountain that serves Ch'aqa'Ya', Maria Tecun, apparently has multiple altars representing various day-names and thus may well correspond to the identification of *Kej* as the eastern guardian by Tedlock. As I noted above, this mountain is located some distance from the community and I suspect that there may have been another, closer mountain that filled this role in the past and is now inaccessible. Such a previously important mountain may have even more precisely fit this model.

Not only does this aspect of the local sacred geography correspond to other contemporary evidence, but archaeological evidence for these same associations is also reported. Robert Carmack, in his investigations of Uatatlán, reports evidence of these same associations. Although he fully admits that any reconstruction of past cosmologies must by nature be incomplete, temples located in the east and west of this site show links to the day names *Kej* and *Iq'* respectively. Again noting that he is only making a possible hypothesis, connections to gods that represent particular day-names have been identified in his investigations. These supernaturals, Hacawitz – associated with *No'j* – and Nic'aj



Tak'aj (associated with *Ey*) have associations to the southern and northern, respectively, quadrants of the site. Thus, this corresponds even more directly to the identifications observed in Ch'aqa'Ya' (and, incidentally, shows the value of contemporary ethnography as corroborating evidence for hypotheses concerning archaeological data). It was only after returning from the field that I discovered this correlation to both contemporary and ancient belief existed in the spiritual geography of Ch'aqa'Ya', thus this will be further addressed as soon as I return to the field.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have presented the evidence of continuity in religious belief and practice between the ancient and contemporary Maya as regards sacred geography. However, I hope to not only establish that such continuity is evident, but as well to show how it fits into a framework of belief within which changes in contemporary religious practice can be situated. I see a framework of overarching belief such as was discussed in the previous chapter, one centered on a reciprocal relationship with the divine, as a system that continues to inform Maya ritual belief. The manner in which this relationship is actuated – the ritual practice itself as well as the attributes and locations of the sacred sites at which this ritual is carried out – also exhibits continuity as well as comprises a facet of the cultural logics of *costumbre*. Yet, these aspects of the system of belief are not adequate in and of themselves to account for perseverance of Maya belief in the face of great change. It is the concept of continual world renewal accomplished by means of the cosmic centering outlined above that I see as primary in the integration of external influences (and paradigms) into local belief systems.

I argue that the underlying belief (cultural logic) concerning centering the community in the cosmos and the continual symbolic renewal of the world that is possible by virtue of this belief is vital to the adaptation and thus continuation of the religious system. Through the “world renewal” that takes place on a local level modifications in ritual behavior made in response to local conditions can be sanctified. I maintain this is vital to the stability of the belief system and can account for the continuity that much contemporary practice exhibits while still allowing for adjustment in the face of changing contemporary conditions.

According to David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, the Maya have been ritually recreating the world for three thousand years. While they note that the details of the rituals have changed, the underlying belief system has not. Creation is continually replicated through offerings to the four directions; while these offerings were once such things as shells, obsidians, and jades, religious practitioners now offer flowers, copal, candles, and food, yet the continuity in the offerings and the belief that underlies them is intact. As a result, they note, “Maya traditions and communities have sprung up all around their ruined past, each sprouting into a newer version of the Classic vision, each rededicating itself to the future by transforming and honoring the past” (1993:255-256). By recreating the cosmic order and placing the individual community at the center of that order, ritual activity (and its symbolic regeneration of the gods and human life) continually renews the world while incorporating external aspects of that world that best help to address changes in purely local conditions. I see this aspect of *costumbre* as crucial to a system of cultural logics within which the Maya religious system can replicate itself within a larger cosmic order while still maintaining relevance to

contemporary conditions. It is within such a framework of belief that change can occur allowing for communities to adapt to their own local conditions while yet exhibiting the continuity in belief that appears evident in Maya religion.

Therefore, an ancient belief that once served to justify the status of Maya elite seems to still function to allow for the continuation of Maya religion. However, this concept, while still of primary importance in the preservation of *costumbre*, now seems to be utilized effectively by the Maya peasantry that once may have been subjugated through such a concept. A framework of belief that was once the realm of the elite is now a part of the day-to-day life of those who still practice *costumbre*. In fact, I see this transformation from ancient elite ideology to contemporary belief as an example of a system of cultural logics that has, over time, continually adapted to the needs of those practicing their religion within the context of this system of 'logic.'

In the above paragraphs I only wish to set the stage for a larger discussion of these issues. However, it is first necessary to discuss the sites themselves. The changes occurring in contemporary ritual are primarily manifested in the utilization of local sites, and thus in the next chapter I will describe these sites and discuss the manner in which their ritual use is changing. The specific changes in site use will be discussed, as well as the interesting differences in interpretation I was able to observe between Don Fidel (in his role as the local spiritual guide) and other daykeepers with whom I spoke (who are from outside the community). The differences in interpretation between someone living and practicing in the local community and those from outside the community can tell us much about the purely local adaptations that may be taking place. Thus, now that some evidence of continuity in the ritual practice and sacred geography of ancient and

contemporary Maya has been presented, I will discuss the sites themselves. In addition to the continuities (and changes) that can be observed through analysis of the physical and spiritual aspects of these sites, I will review their current utilization and their importance in the practice of *costumbre* in Ch'aqa'Ya'.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE SACRED SITES OF CH'AQA'YA

#### INTRODUCTION

In May, after returning to Ch'aqa'Ya' and reacquainting myself with the community and many old friends, I settled into a room at the family compound of Don Fidel, the primary spiritual guide, or daykeeper, for those who practice *costumbre* in the community. Don Fidel has eight children; the three oldest are sons who are now married and have brought a total of six grandchildren into the family. As with most residents of Ch'aqa'Ya', the family lives together, and they have continued to build additional homes on their land as the family has expanded. I was given a room below the main family compound in a building that is under construction to house the ever-growing family. After stretching an extension cord to the room and supplying me with a lamp and a mattress, the adult family, although very welcoming, went about the daily business of life with relatively little attention to my presence. The children, however, were my constant companions when I was present, and much of my time at the family's home was spent amusing the children. As Don Fidel is well known, not only in Ch'aqa'Ya', but neighboring communities as well, many people seek his services. It was very rare that there were not people waiting in the courtyard to visit with him or to have him conduct a ceremony on their behalf.

When I knew Don Fidel fifteen years ago, his home consisted of two living areas attached to a small room that contained his altars. This room served as his consultation room as well as contained the *mesa* (offering table) where ceremonies were conducted. Now he has a new ceremonial area in which he has constructed a large mesa for ceremonies and the room containing his altars is reserved solely for consultations. Often it was hours before I ever saw him leave this room except to come to the door to usher in the next people waiting to see him. Therefore, when I was not locating and mapping sites or visiting other friends in the village, I spent much of my time simply living as unobtrusively as possible in the compound while waiting to visit with Don Fidel. At times I mingled with those who came seeking his services, however people were often leery of my presence (although apparently Don Fidel would assure them of my trustworthiness, as people were much friendlier when they were departing) and I did not want to intrude on what, by nature, are very personal matters.

On the fifth day of my stay the appropriate calendar-day arrived to conduct the initial ritual that would allow me to begin my work mapping sites. As noted previously, Don Fidel felt the day *No'j* (a day that is associated with the knowledge of the ancients) was the proper day to make a sacrifice ensuring respect was shown to the *espíritus* prior to visiting sacred locations. Don Fidel spent the five days previous to this ceremony teaching me the basics of the Maya spiritual system that he practices (much of which I have described in previous chapters). He was impressed with the background knowledge I had acquired by reading the ethnographies of other researchers, just as I was amazed by the continuities and similarities between the things he told me and the research others have conducted in often distant (or ancient) communities. He advised me that he would

not have the time to accompany me to the sites, and we would conduct any further ceremony necessary at his home. Because he could not guide me during the day, with his permission I found another local resident to lead me to the altars themselves. Although I had others guide me to sites at times, and later visited many sites alone, a friend with whom I had become close in previous years was my primary guide. Santiago is now in his mid-sixties, and although it was necessary for him to work in his *milpa* at times, his sons and daughters were generally available to handle such work when he was spending time with me. Santiago recently (five years ago) converted to Protestant Christianity and thus does not currently practice *costumbre*, however his parents (now in their 90s) still do. After a lifetime of practicing indigenous religion he was very familiar with the sites, their locations, histories and other information concerning them. As I will briefly discuss later, his seeming ambivalence about his conversion and the beliefs that he still has concerning *costumbre* often produced comments when visiting sites that were in and of themselves very informative concerning the processes of religious change occurring in Ch'aqa'Ya'.

Over the next month, Santiago and I spent two or three days a week visiting (often multiple times) and mapping sites in the Ch'aqa'Ya' area. I would then discuss these sites, their significance and histories (as well as elicit other relevant information concerning them) with Don Fidel during the times I was able to visit with him. I also came to know two other daykeepers, as well as other practitioners of *costumbre*, through the Kaqchikel language program in which I was a participant during the month of July. I learned much from them concerning their knowledge of ritual I was observing and the nature of the sites I was visiting.

In the chapter below I will describe the sites themselves as well as some of the information I gained concerning these sites. I will also discuss some of the differing interpretations of the sites offered by the different individual daykeepers, as these varying interpretations are somewhat central to the analysis presented in the following chapter. Don Fidel also gave me a nationally published edition of the 260-day sacred calendar as correlated to the Gregorian calendar for 2009-2010; this includes a section that explains the day-name *nawales* and their interpretations as agreed upon by a council of daykeepers (published by the *Fundación Centro Cultural y Asistencia Maya/C.C.A.M.*). I have consulted this at times in the following descriptions, although only rarely as Don Fidel noted that this was only a guide and was not in fact very useful in day-to-day practice. (He told me that only those practitioners that did not have the true ‘calling’ to practice actually used this guide in ritual practice, but that it would serve as a useful foundation of information for me.) As well, Don Kawoq (who takes his name from this calendar day-name due to the date of his birth), a daykeeper with whom I am acquainted through the Kaqchikel language program, has published three books. At times I have gleaned information from these, although in general there was no need to do so as the information I report comes straight from conversations with him. Don Tojil is another practicing daykeeper I came to know who was also generous in answering my questions concerning ritual practice. All three of the *ajq'ija'* with whom I spoke had different interpretations on some matters. However it was accepted by each that this would be the case and each practitioner respected the individual interpretation of the others. Maxwell and García Ixmata's report describing Kaqchikel sacred sites also includes a section listing the attributes for the different day-names and at times below I have included information



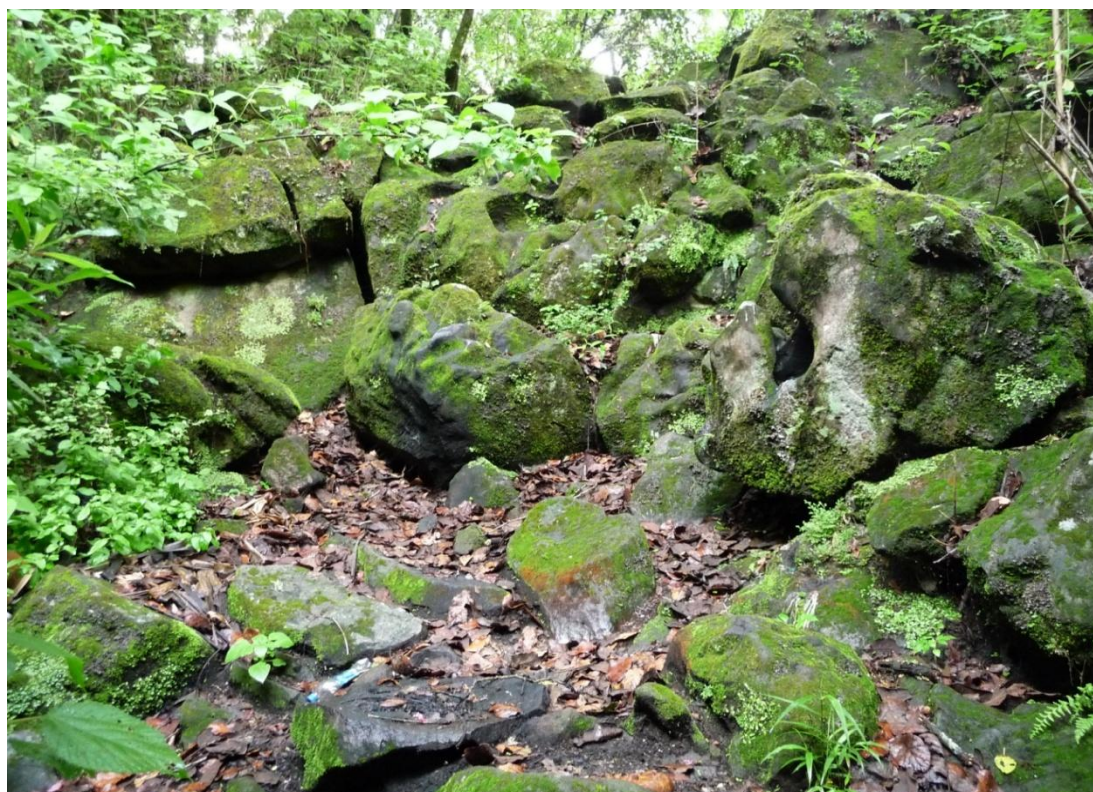
from their work. However the great majority of the day-name interpretations and site attributes came from personal interviews with the daykeepers themselves. In the descriptions below I will emphasize what I see as interpretations particularly relevant to local conditions; this will set the stage for the analysis that follows.

The sites are listed and described in no particular order. Translations are provided for the altar names when available, although when questioned as to the meanings of certain names (Ax Tax, for example) I was often only told this “is the name” and it does not translate. As well, when questioned as to the name of the altar at his home, Don Fidel simply repeated that it was a *Tz’ikin* and *Ey* altar and was named as such. At times I have listed the site names by both their local spelling (which I use in this report) as well as more contemporary spellings utilizing a standardized Kaqchikel orthography developed by linguists in conjunction with native speakers, with the local spellings being listed first.

## **AX TAX**

This site is located below a large basaltic outcrop that tumbles 40-50 feet steeply down a hill. The rock is highly eroded into various shapes that either resemble small pillars or semi-circular basins (figure 16); Santiago and Don Fidel both refer to these as *ollas* (pots). This site is specifically associated with the *antiguos* by Don Fidel, as he says the rocks that make up the site take their strangely shaped appearance from their use in the buildings of the ancients. The area encompassing this site and the altar of Las Campanas (described below) is thought to have been the location of a church built by an ancient, even mythical people. This church, and in fact the *antiguos* themselves are not associated with the archaeological site located nearby. The community represented by the

archaeological remains was inhabited by the *antepasados*, whom local residents acknowledge as their ancestors.



**Figure 16.** The sacred site of Ax Tax. These rocks, although referred to locally as *ollas* (pots) are said to take their form due to their use in buildings of the *antiguos*.

There is an approximately six foot square area in front of this outcrop with a flat stone placed in the center to serve as a mesa. I visited this site four times and on two occasions there was new ash from recent sacrificial burnings and discarded corn husks (used to wrap the incense used in sacrifices) were observed around the clearing. This altar is associated with the daybearer *Tijax*. According to Don Fidel the site is often utilized for protection against bad accidents or mishaps. The other daykeepers with whom I spoke associate *Tijax* with petitions for good health, as *Tijax* is the day-name patron for doctors or curers (Maxwell and García Ixmata 2008:42). Don Kawoq in particular noted that an altar associated with *Tijax* is where one would conduct curing ceremonies. He also

associated this site with psychological well-being, and this is noted in the *C.C.A.M.* calendar as well. When I spoke with Don Fidel to clarify the nature of this site he agreed that petitions here are generally related to health issues, but in particular with accidents that might occur in the *milpa* or in other aspects of one's working life. Thus while there is a general agreement of the daykeepers as to the site utilization, Don Fidel's particular interpretation of the altar emphasized physical injury that might occur in agricultural work and exhibits an interpretation more tailored to local life.

### LAS CAMPANAS



**Figure 17.** The altar of Las Campanas. The ringing sound of supernatural bells is said to emanate from this sacred location. Note the offering of money inside the “bell.”

This site, associated with the daybearer *Tz'i'*, is located on the slopes of the *volcancito* (small outcrop/mountain) Las Minas a few hundred meters southwest of Ax



Tax. Although these are separate sites with distinct characteristics, both are identified by Don Fidel as being on the same sacred ground. The altar consists of a large boulder with an abscess in the shape of a bell in its center (figure 17). This bell-shape measures about a foot in diameter, is approximately eighteen inches deep, and is striking in that it is very symmetrical; there is a smaller (6" diameter) depression located about two feet to the side of the bell shape that is also almost perfectly round. The smaller depression is identified by Santiago as the *sello* (lit. stamp), or official seal, of the bell's maker. There is a small altar and burn circles from previous ceremonies in front of this boulder. As noted, Don Fidel reports that this location was a church of the *antiguos* (in combination with the site described above). As these ancient residents had no metal, this boulder served as their bell (hence the site name, which translates as "the bells," although this more specifically refers to the sounds said to be heard emanating from this area). He noted that many of the rocks in this area (including those of nearby Ax Tax) were once part of this church.

According to Don Fidel as well as Santiago, people frequently conduct ceremonies at this altar. I visited this site four times and each time observed evidence such as flowers, burnt incense and money that had been placed there since my previous visit. I did not observe offerings of money at any other outdoor altars as it is generally only offered at indoor shrines devoted to Maximon, an enigmatic saint-like figure that is the primary intermediary to the supernatural for area daykeepers. Lore related by both Santiago and Don Fidel holds that one can sometimes hear the sound of bells when passing this sacred ground. When I discussed this altar with Don Fidel, he elaborated on the bell sounds heard emanating from this area as well as the popularity of this altar. He reported to me that ceremonies conducted at Campanas were generally petitions to ask

for the ringing of these bells. He said that the spirits here will ring the bells in order to call people to places specified by those conducting the ceremony. Don Fidel specifically noted that petitioners were often trying to attract people to their *tiendas* (stores) or other businesses. A person conducting ritual at this altar might be asking for a large turnout at other gatherings as well (for example a town meeting) but ritual here is generally related to business ventures at the present time. He noted that in the past this altar was more frequently utilized to summon community members to important gatherings rather than places of business.

Don Fidel's description of this altar's function is at odds with the information I was given by the non-local daykeepers concerning the petitions they would make at this site. A source (the calendar and guide to Maya spirituality distributed by C.C.A.M.) given to me by Don Fidel also offered a different potential function for this altar. According to this source, one might ask for forgiveness for negative thoughts as well as offenses against *Madre Naturaleza* (Mother Nature) at a *Tz'i'* altar and they are important in struggles against the negative forces in one's life. This calendar also relates the importance of the *nawal Tz'i'* concerning matters of justice, especially when one is petitioning for the fair application of justice. Don Kawoq and Don Tojil both note the association of this *nawal* with justice, as is also reported by Maxwell (2008:32). Don Tojil even related that petitions here could have a darker side. One could perform ritual at *Tz'i'* altars either in the hopes of avoiding jail or in an attempt to send someone to jail. Don Kawoq also emphasized the role of this *nawal* in dealing with legal problems; he told me ceremonies might be conducted here in order to assure that the authorities apply the law in a just manner. However, on one occasion when I asked more specifically about

this Don Kawoq told me that it was *justicia espiritualidad* (spiritual justice) and not “material justice” to which he was mainly referring. He noted that *Tz’i’* altars are places to communicate with the “universe.” At such a site you might not specifically pray for harm to befall others but you can make the *espíritus* (i.e. the universe) aware of those who have harmed you in the hopes that they will receive their due justice, emphasizing the “cause and effect” nature of the world and using the concept of karma to better explain himself.

When I later related the associations reported by the other *ajq’ija’*, Don Fidel agreed with their interpretation although he emphatically stressed the local interpretation of the site’s significance. Therefore, a very local adaptation is evidenced in the utilization of this altar. A clue as to the adaptation of the altar into its present use, however, may be seen in Maxwell and García Ixmatá’s notation that *Tz’i’* altars can also protect both the spiritual and material well-being of an individual, family, or community (2008:32). In such a manner it appears there may be an antecedent for the transformation of the spiritual purpose of this altar in response to local concerns. Because of the association with the ancient mythical church and its bell, the past utilization of the altar to summon people to gatherings of community importance might be seen as protecting the well-being of the community.

This altar is one of the few where I noted evidence of the darker side of *costumbre*. On one visit to this site I saw empty chile pepper cans. In Maya spiritual practice things that have pleasant odors or tastes are used to petition for positive results, substances such as chiles are utilized in order to ask for negative consequences to befall others. This may be linked to the ambiguous interpretations given by both Kawoq and

Tojil of the potential utilization of *Tz'i'* sites: depending on which side of “justice” the petitioner stands the ceremony can be equally as applicable. This double sided nature of *Tz'i'* altars is also noted in Maxwell and García Ixmata’s report, in that the animal familiar (a dog) of the *nawal Tz'i'*, while protective of property, can be associated with lasciviousness and gluttony (2008:32).

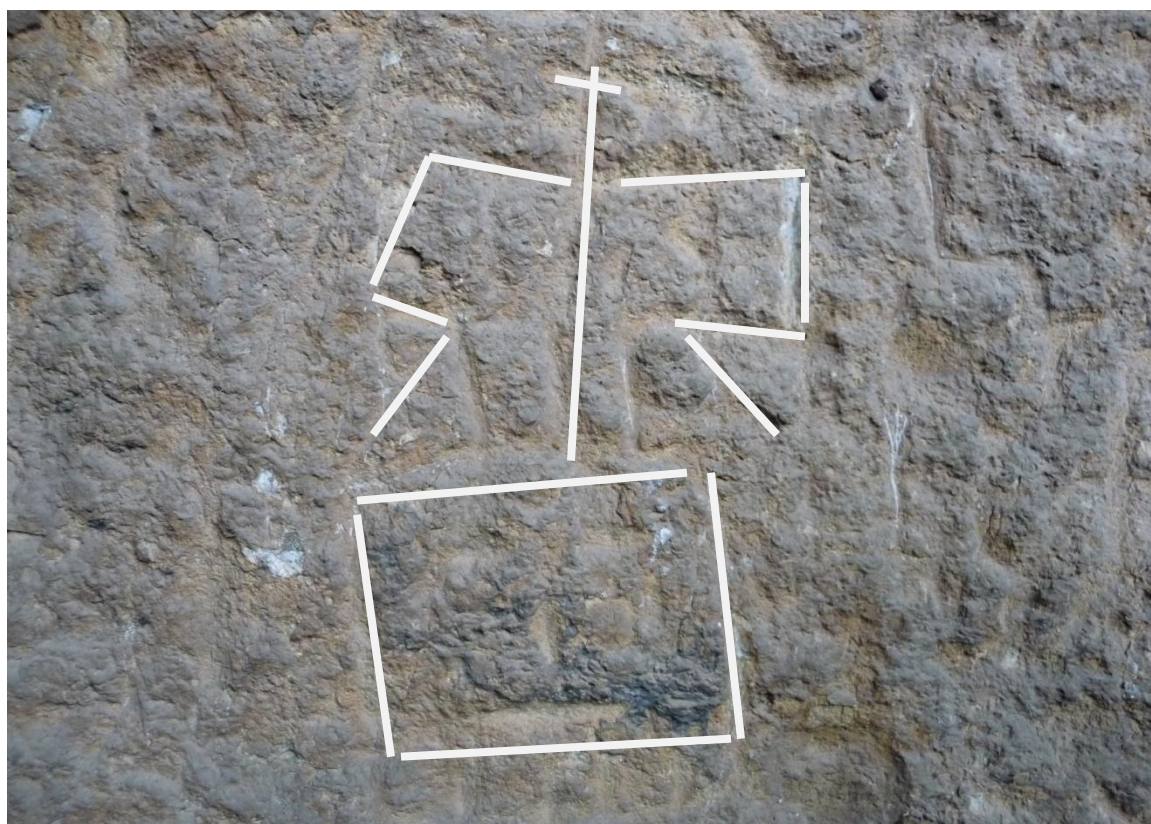
### CHUAXIC/CHWA XIK'



**Figure 18.** The *mesa* located below the petroglyphs at Chuaxic. Above the large boulder a number of carvings in the cliff face spread over an area approximately ten feet square.

This site is located southeast of Ch'aqa'Ya' at the base of a forty to fifty foot vertical rock face. Below this rock wall a large boulder serves as an altar (figure 18). At various locations on the cliff face are a number of petroglyphs of geometric designs, as well as some anthropomorphic figures. There was previously a carving of a large bird

that I viewed in the 1990s but has since disappeared due to increased erosion of the rock, although a smaller (one foot high) bird-like figure remains (figure 19). The local spelling of the site is the same as the name of a small nearby *cacerío* (outlying community), however in contemporary Kaqchikel the spelling of *Chwa Xik* translates to “at the hawk/in front of the hawk,” thus probably referring to the previously existing carving.



**Figure 19.** A petroglyph at Chuaxic. Photos do not adequately capture the engraved images however, when viewed in person this appears to be a bird-like figure (my highlights) emerging from a human head (a face is barely visible in the rectangular head).

Interestingly, not many people on the trail to this site seem to know of its existence (on our first visit Santiago had to question a number of the local residents in order to locate the path to the site) even though the surrounding *cacerío* appears to take its name from this place. Don Fidel reports that he does not visit this site for ritual activity, and, in fact, thought that presently no one did. He was not surprised, however,



when I reported finding minor evidence of activity. He reports that this site was utilized more often in the past. He also noted that this altar sits at the border of the neighboring spiritual precinct of Santa Cruz la Laguna and daykeepers from that community may utilize it. Minimal evidence of *costumbre* was noted on only one of the three occasions that I visited the site. However, a nearby resident related that there was a large gathering of *costumbristas* here at some point in the recent past. This gathering included a marimba band and food at a home down the hill from the altar, which is located about 150-200 feet up a steep slope from the inhabitable level land below. It was reported to me that this was the site of community-wide gatherings in the past as well, although it seems the recent gathering was the exception rather than the norm in present times.

This altar is associated with the daybearer *Kawoq*. Don Fidel related that *Kawoq* altars are especially useful in ritual associated with *Madre Tierra* (Mother Earth), although he differentiated between this *Kawoq* altar and Pa Xot that is located closer to Ch'aqa'Ya' and is more heavily utilized. He associated the Pa Xot altar with petitions for health, especially women's health; he specifically noted the difference between these two altars, although an obvious parallel might be drawn between women and "Mother Earth." Don Kawoq linked this daybearer to women and their "development," saying that this might be an altar a pre-pubescent girl would be brought to ensure her safety and health as she transitions into adulthood. I see an interesting connection in the relation of Fidel's association with "Madre Tierra" and Kawoq's interpretation of these sites as important in women's health. Maxwell and García Ixmata also report the link of *Kawoq* altars to "women and their life-force" (2008:34). This might be related to the general pattern I observed in site utilization in Ch'aqa'Ya'; it seems that the rural character of Ch'aqa'Ya'

and its position as a community still primarily involved in agricultural activities may be indicated in site interpretations more related to the regeneration of the land itself rather than human life and (although these can be viewed as essentially the same thing).

As well, in analysis of this site and others, I have also noticed a pattern that I will further discuss later. It appears those sites associated with the material remains of the ancient community that once existed here are rarely utilized anymore although a greater frequency of use in the past was reported by those with whom I spoke.

### **CHUICHUIMUCH/CHWI CHWI MUCH**



**Figure 20.** The altar atop the mountain of Chuichuimuch. This altar is very important in ceremony associated with rain, and thus is vital to local agriculture. The green pine boughs indicate very recent ritual activity and abundant evidence of material from previous ceremonies is located around the clearing.

This mesa is situated at the crest of the highest point (8782 ft by GPS reading) in the survey area and quite a distance west of Ch'aqa'Ya', as it is located on the border of land considered to be the upper reaches of the neighboring community of San Jorge. The mountain of Chuichuimuch is also identified as the western sacred mountain that guards the community of Ch'aqa'Ya'. The altar itself consists of a few flat rocks at the base of what is now only the large stump (three to four feet in diameter) of a tree (figure 20). When I visited this *mesa* in the mid-1990s there was a large tree with at least four separations in the trunk immediately behind the mesa. A cleared area of approximately ten feet now surrounds this stump. Santiago, who is presently an *Evangélico* (Evangelical Christian), tells of the serious sickness that befell the landowner when he cut this tree. Although Santiago now ostensibly denies belief in *costumbre*, he has related such stories a number of times, telling of the *consecuencias* (consequences) of showing disrespect to the *espíritus*. This leads him to be cautious when visiting sites as well.

This altar is associated with the *nawal Iq'* and is considered very important in ceremonies associated with rain. The *volcán* (the word used locally to refer to mountains) Chuichuimuch, atop which it sits, is known locally as the *Tanque de Dios* (Tank of God) and said to be filled with water. The peak is continually surrounded by cloud cover during the rainy season as well as much of the time for the rest of the year. Numerous springs emerge from this mountain and supply the water needs of a large area of the upper northern rim of Lake Atitlán. Santiago described this altar as an *imán* (magnet) for rain (he also once likened it to an antenna), saying ceremony here will draw clouds and bring the rain that refills the reservoir inside the mountain. When I visited the site, there was evidence of recent activity as the pine boughs placed around the mesa itself were still

green. Although I only visited Chuichuimuch once, I observed a large amount of ash and other evidence of numerous ceremonies here; there were piles of discarded incense wrappers in various stages of decay located around the site that appeared to be from ceremonies conducted at different times. As well, discarded piles of pine boughs of different ages were located around the altar and it appeared that these were replaced from time to time. Santiago and Don Fidel also report that activity is frequent here.

Once again, the regional and/or individual differing interpretations of various daykeepers are evident. For Don Fidel and the community of Ch'aqa'Ya', as noted above, this altar is very specifically utilized in the bringing of rain. Fidel explicitly relates such altars solely to the *aire* ("air," commonly used in Ch'aqa'Ya' to describe many climatological occurrences) and the rain that is necessary for *buenas cosechas* (good harvests). The word *iq'* is generally recognized to mean "wind" in Kaqchikel (Maxwell 2008:30). In fact, this Maya word is also associated with "breath" or "wind" in the Lacandon language, a Maya dialect far removed from Kaqchikel (R. Jon McGee, personal communication. However Don Tojil made no mention of *aire*. For Tojil the nawal *Iq'* symbolizes *fertilidad* (fertility), especially in a reproductive capacity. According to him, the animal familiar of *Iq'* is the rabbit, which he associated with (sexual) reproduction. Maxwell's report links the nawal *Iq'* to "breath" and "life" (2008:30). These interpretations can easily be related to rain, as precipitation is an obvious necessity in the fertility (and life) of cropland. Tojil noted this himself, saying that *Iq'* altars could be associated with good harvests (i.e. fertile ground). Don Kawoq relates *Iq'* altars to a "purifying air" and, more specifically, to protecting (purifying) the *medio ambiente* (environment). He also, however, makes a connection to fertility in that



he says these altars can be important in the protection of pregnant women. Thus, the utilization of this altar can be seen to have a very specific local use that seems linked directly to the economic and subsistence activities of the community of Ch'aqa'Ya', yet is related to the interpretations of altar utilization in other communities. This example again points toward the factor of locally adaptive variability inherent in the belief system of Maya spirituality.

### CHUIKO'ON/CHWI KO'ON



**Figure 21.** The sacred site of Chuiko'on is marked by this simple cross.

This mesa is located at the crest of a sharply rising mountain that dominates the southern skyline above Ch'aqa'Ya'; it is identified as the southern mountain guardian of the community. The crest of Chuiko'on (the name of the mountain as well as the mesa)

overlooks the entire lake basin to the south and the community and surrounding *aldeas* (secondary communities) of San José Ch'aqa'Ya' to the north. It is readily identifiable from anywhere on the lake, especially as the last fifteen years have seen the construction of four cell phone and television transmission towers on the mountain. The altar consists of a simple white cross about two feet high with burn circles a few feet away to both the east and west (figure 21). Don Fidel reports that the mesa used to sit under the area now covered by the towers, but was moved during their construction. Santiago reported that the cross itself is made of wood, and that the present stucco covering was added by workers constructing the towers. When I asked Santiago if the cross was Christian, he said simply that it is a cross but that it is for *sacrificios* to the *Mundo* (the embodiment of the all-encompassing sacred force of *costumbre*). Don Fidel corroborated this statement, noting the similarity of this symbol in both Christian and indigenous belief.

The *nawal* of this altar is *No'j*. As previously noted, Don Fidel related that *No'j* altars are often utilized for petitions concerning wisdom, knowledge, or intelligence, especially as granted by the ancients. Don Kawoq echoed this interpretation of *No'j* altars, reporting as well that these sites were linked to *conocimiento* (knowledge). Don Tojil also associated *No'j* with wisdom and knowledge, although he emphasized that *Ajmaq* sites were more appropriate to petition for the wisdom of ancients and that *No'j* sites had more of a contemporary association. Don Fidel, however, also related that these sites were useful in attempts to either rid oneself of negative thoughts or ask for positive thoughts.

This site is identified by local residents as a long time *mojon* (boundary marker) between the community of Santa Cruz la Laguna and Ch'aqa'Ya'. Hill and Monaghan

report the *mojones* in Sacapulas, another highland Maya community, are often located on prominent mountains and are the locations of religious observances (1987:64), just as is the case in Ch'aqa'Ya'. They feel that the location of the *mojones* in Sacapulas have remained essentially the same since pre-Columbian times (1987:65). The name of the site is also of importance in the colonial era transcriptions of Kaqchikel culture history, as Chuiko'on is a placename that appears in the *Xajil Chronicles* or *Anales de los Cakchikeles* (Judith Maxwell, personal communication). As noted, it is located in such a spot as to be visible to not only both San José and Santa Cruz but to many other communities around the lake as well. Although apparently rarely utilized at present, Chuiko'on seems to retain importance for the local community because of its function as a boundary marker and as a centering site for the community. Don Fidel reports that he rarely visits the site, and the two times I visited it there was only a small amount of old ash from ceremonial fires evident. Santiago told me that he thought there was activity here *de vez en cuando* (from time to time), however he said it was more heavily utilized in the past. He reported that as recently as the last few decades there were community-wide festivals linked to this altar. During the archaeological investigation in the 1990s it was reported to researchers that a site within the boundaries of the ancient community below was the starting point for processions to a nearby ridge. Reportedly these processions drew people from surrounding communities and were accompanied by marimbas, taking place in November or December to honor the ancestors (Sabom-Bruchez 1997:89). I theorize this to be the (unnamed in the report) ridge and, more specifically location, that these processions ended. However, it appears that this site shows little utilization today and much like *the mesas* associated with archaeological



remains, I see this site as possibly being accorded its present sacred status out of respect for the past role it played in the community life.

## K'OXOL



**Figure 22.** The altar site of K'oxol. Very important to the local sacred geography, the site nonetheless showed little use during my time in the field. The boulder at the center of the photo is said to have been struck by the lightning of the mythical figure K'oxol.

This altar is located on a small hill to the northwest of *cacerío* Las Minas and east of the Ch'aqa'Ya' town center. It is associated with the daybearer *Ajmaq*. This *nawal* is seen as the aspect of the divine most closely linked to the spiritual power of daykeepers. The site consists of several flat rocks located approximately five feet in front of a boulder standing three feet high (figure 22). When I visited this altar there was evidence of ritual activity (candle wax, very weathered corn husk wrappers), although it did not appear



recent and no new ceremony had been performed when I visited this site on subsequent occasions. Santiago tells me that this altar is important in ceremonies petitioning for rain, although it was not until later during my fieldwork that Don Fidel told me more of the site's mythology and specifically made such an association.

Local lore holds that this area is home to Kāq K'oxol, a red dwarf whose sighting can foreshadow one's death. Kāq K'oxol is also the mythological being associated with the *suerte* or 'gift' that daykeepers possess establishing their strong connection with the *espíritus*. This figure is represented in the dance dramas of the *Baile de Conquista* (figure 23), a so-called 'traditional' dance performance that is an important part of the annual patron saint-day celebrations of many communities. In this drama he is represented as an advisor to the Maya warrior Tecun Uman, a figure who ultimately dies when he resists Spanish conquest. A third primary figure in the *Baile de Conquista* is the *Rey Quiché* (Quiché King), who acquiesces to the Spanish and becomes a puppet leader for the Spanish victors. Kāq K'oxol, rather than dying or converting to Christianity, flees and takes refuge in the mountains to preserve Maya knowledge of the gods and the divine (and thus culture). However, this figure's rather ambiguous role in the drama leads to divergent views on his position in Maya cultural history. One interpretation holds that K'oxol is a traitor to the Maya people who leads Pedro de Alvarado to their hiding place as well as gives the Quiché warrior Tecun Uman false reports on Spanish activity and withholds other information of strategic importance. This interpretation seems to be in line with the perspective of those who no longer practice *costumbre*. Don Tojil, while acknowledging this view, related that K'oxol is a powerful shaman who does forecast the Spanish victory over the Maya, but as noted, rather than dying or converting to

Christianity he flees into hiding. Don Tojil specifically termed K'oxol a “protector of the indigenous” in his role in the drama.

Another Kaqchikel teacher in the language program in which I participated later told me of a similar site near his hometown of Tecpán. He did not specifically know the location, but was aware of its existence and the association of a “red dwarf” *duende* (spirit owner) with this site. He reiterated that K'oxol is a *duende* of the forest who gives one the *suerte* that is required of a daykeeper.



**Figure 23.** The “red dwarf” K'oxol as represented in the *Baile de Conquista*. Although his role in the drama is ambiguous, he is seen as a guardian of Maya culture. He is also considered the patron deity of daykeepers; his hatchet is one means by which he “strikes” the gift of divination into their bodies (often as manifested by lightning).

When I asked Don Fidel to elaborate on this information, he added that this hill is where, at some undetermined point in the past, K'oxol “shot” his *rayos* (lightning bolts)

and gave the location its power. Don Fidel specifically noted that this site is an *Ajmaq* altar because of the large rock of the *antiguos* that is here; this large rock was the specific location where K'oxol shot his *rayos*. Although the association with the ancients was never made completely clear, Don Fidel reiterated that K'oxol (who, because of his mythical status, may be associated with the *antiguos*) specifically gave this rock its power by means of a lightning strike. The lightning bolts of K'oxol are considered to be one way in which the power of an *ajq'ij* is conferred, and thus it may be a similar situation with the particular boulder located here, especially when linked to the *Ajmaq* (and thus *ajq'ij*) association. He noted it is this rock that determines the sacred nature of the site (it is the *nawal Ajmaq*) not the location. The boulder itself is the portal, not the location.

On a later occasion when we were again speaking of this association and he repeated the story, he noted that this is why the altar is associated with rain, as the thunderstorms that bring K'oxol's lightning also bring rain. Once again, while not at complete odds with interpretations of other non-local daykeepers, the site is given distinctly local attributes. No other sources or either of the other daykeepers gave any interpretation associated with rain. Don Tojil and Don Kawoq both report *Ajmaq* altars as *mesas* to ask for the forgiveness of sins, especially from the ancestors, as well as locations to communicate with the ancestors. They also link *Ajmaq* sites to the spiritual power possessed by daykeepers. Don Fidel as well notes the importance of this site with the 'gift' of daykeepers and in communicating with the *difuntos* (the dead), especially noting it as a location where one can ask forgiveness of the ancestors for any wrongs committed. Thus all three have very similar interpretations although there is also a distinctly local interpretation in that this altar is associated with rain.

## DON FIDEL'S ALTAR

This is an altar representing both the *nawal Ey* as well as *Tz'ikin* and is located on Don Fidel's property. The altar is in a small building he constructed for the purpose of protecting a circular *mesa* about three feet in diameter with projections (appearing as a Maya cross) at the four cardinal directions. He erected this concrete altar after a period of time during which he says he tried to build over the ground but could not do so until he recognized the need to construct a *mesa* here. Although he told me this area was sacred before he returned to Ch'aqa'Ya' following his training as a daykeeper and purchased this land, he said that the true nature of the site itself was hidden from him until the *espíritus* deemed the time right to reveal themselves. He told me that in the past there had been instances in which animals had avoided the location and even become ill and died after wandering into the area; he felt this was due to the spirits being displeased with the fact that the site was not being properly tended. He then had problems trying to build on the specific ground where his *mesa* is (now) located until the truth of the site was revealed. He did say that he knew *sacrificios* had been conducted here previous to the time he came to own the land.

The room in which this mesa sits also houses a low niche containing five stones of about a foot in diameter that he says are his personal *nawales*. Three are micaceous rocks that are representatives of the *nawal Tz'ikin*, while two represent the *nawal Ey*. He sought out these sacred stones for four days in the mountains after a "fire" (he indicated a height of about two feet and described a thin flame that danced about in front of him) came to him in the middle of the night and instructed him to search out these *nawales* and build an altar for them on his property. He reported that this dancing flame awoke him

from his sleep (he specifically told me that this had not been a dream) and informed him of the general area to which he needed to travel. He then spent four nights in the mountains until the *fuego* (fire) returned again to reveal the exact location of the sacred rocks, after which he brought them to this altar.

Unless otherwise instructed by the *espíritus*, this mesa is where Don Fidel performs much of the *trabajo* (“work,” often a synonym for the ritual associated with *costumbre*) on behalf of those who come to visit. Don Fidel’s family has prospered, especially as his adult sons are now mechanics and homebuilders (he related that he made sure they learned trades while growing up). It is only his ten year-old son Domingo that he says has the *fuerza* (force) to follow him in his calling as a daykeeper. Don Fidel has continued to reinvest his sons’ money in land as well as tools and infrastructure for their businesses. Thus the family is seen as prosperous and there are many who see him as a daykeeper particularly appropriate to approach with petitions to the spirits concerning financial or business matters. His altars are particularly suitable for such matters as well. The *nawal Ey* is associated with new beginnings or undertakings; Fidel reported that the altar is often petitioned concerning new business ventures. The *nawal Tz’ikin* is almost solely associated with money. Although many of those who visit him do so to request healing ceremonies and aid with various ailments (physical or otherwise), it seems that many visit him for financial matters. The interpretations of *Ey* and *Tz’ikin* by the other daykeepers are very similar, and these *nawales* often seem to be associated with financial aspects of life. However, *Ey* altars do not appear to have the more explicit association with economic matters that Don Fidel noted, although such matters are surely a part of the ceremony conducted elsewhere concerning “new beginnings.”



## JOLOM ACHI



**Figure 24.** The engraved face that marks the altar of Jolom Achi. This small carving sits atop a large boulder that reportedly served as a ceremonial platform in the recent past.

This *No'j* mesa is located on the western boundary of the archaeological site in the *cacerio* Las Minas. The site consists of a large boulder (approximately ten feet square and ten feet high) which has a small (eight inch) finely carved human head (Jolom Achi translates as “man’s head/head of man”) located on its west corner and facing east (figure 24). Santiago says that this is so the face views the rising sun. At the base of the boulder is a small mesa of flat rocks with evidence of recent activity. Sabom-Bruchez identifies this boulder as a dance platform upon which “yearly” ritual dances were performed and reports the claims of local residents that these dances were (in the 1990s) still performed. This altar and Las Pilas (discussed below) were reported at that time to still be very

important in the ritual lives of local residents (Sabom-Bruchez 1997:90) although I witnessed no ceremonies at this altar during my time with the archaeological project.

I visited this site four times and only noted candle wax that indicated ritual activity; this wax was present the first time I visited the site and was the only evidence apparent three months later when I left the field. However, Santiago reports ceremonies are conducted here “once in a while” and one can petition for *cualquier* (whatever) here. He also stated that in January of 2009 there was a large gathering of people here, but that this was not a regular occurrence. There is a companion carving of a similar face (figure 25) approximately 200 feet to the south atop another boulder, although it is not as finely worked and there is no evidence of ritual activity.



**Figure 25.** The companion engraving to Jolom Achi. Although indistinct, a head or face is visible.

As this is a *N'oj* altar like Chuiko'on, it too is locally associated with wisdom or knowledge, particularly of the ancients because of its obvious association with an ancient

community (recognized by local residents). As I described in the previous chapter, I feel this site to possibly be one of four directional guardians of the ancient community, the companion carving mentioned above is directly to the south of this one, and the site of a further monument that has now been sold and removed (Las Pilas, further discussed below) is located to the east. Sabom-Bruchez reports that Las Pilas and Jolom Achi were seen as the male and female aspects of a sacred pair (1997:90). Further analysis of site layout that was conducted upon returning from the field actually leads me to believe that a previously utilized site might be the northern companion to these three identified locations. The 1997 archaeological report describes a structure identified through excavations (Str-SJC05-01) upon which locals reported ritual occurred. This ritual was associated with yearly festivals that concluded with the procession to the ridge above town (Sabom-Bruchez 1997:89-90) that I previously discussed concerning the site of Chuiko'on. Thus this structure may be the fourth site in this set of directional guardians. As I noted above, even my friends seem reluctant to reveal more information about the potential fourth altar in this set, despite the fact that I am trusted, and this may be due to the disappearance of the monument of Las Pilas in recent years.

On one occasion when we visited this site Santiago showed me depression in the ground where he said a *gringa* had come with an *aparato* (apparatus/machine) that could see below the ground and had excavated a large (3ft high) *olla* (pot/vessel) shaped in what he described as a beehive form; this pot was full of money according to him. When describing this pot and its color and shape he was very specific, sketching a picture of it in the dirt; from his description I almost had the impression he had seen it. He told me



that the face carved into the rock above was a *signo* (sign) that treasure had been buried here. Sabom-Bruchez recorded the same information in her report (1997:91).

As noted in the description of Chuiko'on, there is general agreement on the interpretation of *N'oj* altars by all of the daykeepers with whom I spoke. Aside from the altar's association with the archaeological site and thus a more explicit connection to the wisdom of the ancients (rather than wisdom or knowledge in general) there seems to be little local variation in the interpretation or potential utilization of this site.

## PA PUERTA



**Figure 26.** The *mesa* located above the cave site of Pa Puerta. (See also figure 5.) Both altars are considered to be the same sacred ground and are located only feet from each other. The small alcove in the boulders at the center of the photo contains offerings of candles and an area for ceremonial fires can be seen at center right.

This location, associated with the daybearer *Iq'*, consists of a series of altars placed along the crest of a ridge to the south of Ch'aqa'Ya' that overlooks the lake. One altar consists of a four foot boulder atop two rocks that stand about three feet high (figure 26). This creates an alcove that contained votive candles and some evidence of recent burn offerings both times I visited the site. On a large boulder (approximately twenty feet in diameter) about fifteen feet to the west of this was evidence of candle wax; about ten feet below on a small precipice overlooking the lake is the shallow cave (a four foot by six foot overhang containing several flat rocks) for which the site is named (translated "at the door/gate," the name probably refers to the general idea of caves as portals to the Otherworld). As described above, this site is very important in petitions for rain. As with the altar of Chuichuimuch, in Ch'aqa'Ya' the *nawal Iq'* has a locally specific utilization that seems more attuned to the needs a primarily agricultural community.

The subsidiary altars above the overhang showed evidence of recent ceremony both times I visited and there was plentiful debris from multiple ceremonies evident at the main altar as well. The cave itself shows ash from multiple small fires. Don Fidel reports this altar is very powerful and often utilized although he rarely travels here. He noted that many of the residents who have *milpa* fields near here probably use the altar (it is located in a high area with no nearby homes, although many villagers have maize fields in these high areas). He also relates that due to its geographical position midway between Santa Cruz and San José it is probably used by *costumbristas* from Santa Cruz as well.

Santiago reports that he found a *jarra* ("jar," by this he was referring to an indeterminate ceramic vessel) about six to eight inches high of a bird-like figure here (that his children later broke and he no longer possesses) and thus this altar may have

archaeological significance, but once again, I theorize that its continuing utilization is due to its association with rain, especially as might be indicated by the local interpretation of *Iq'* altars that differs substantially from that of other daykeepers. Santiago also related a story of an incident that occurred here one afternoon as he was making charcoal, even showing me the depression in the ground that remained from the pit he used. He said that a “gringo grande” (motioning as high as he can reach) with crazy hair and long beard (again motioning to this effect) appeared while he worked. Santiago related that this figure said nothing to him and simply jumped off the cliff, disappearing into the air. When I inquired as to what this signified to him, Santiago simply shrugged and noted that this must have been an *espíritu* because this *mesa* is a very powerful place.

## PA MINAS



**Figure 27.** The main cave at Pa Minas. Through this low opening a cave travels approximately fifteen to twenty feet into this outcrop.

This *Tz'ikin* altar is a cave within a volcanic outcrop that rises approximately fifty feet up a ridge. As previously noted, the cave (Pa Minas translates as “at the mines,” an obvious reference to this cave site) gives both the mountain located nearby and the community that surrounds it their names. On the east side of the outcrop is a main cave (figure 27) that can be accessed through a low (two foot) opening. In front of this is a level shelf about ten feet wide that contains the evidence of numerous burns. The cave sinks about ten feet and travels approximately twenty feet into the rock; it contains various small niches upon which candles can be placed as well as a rear alcove for sacrificial offerings. A smaller secondary cave about ten feet deep is on the north side of the outcrop (figure 28) and also holds remains of sacrificial ceremonies. This site exhibits evidence of frequent activity and Santiago reports that there are “always” people here. Don Fidel reports as well that this is the primary altar (aside from the one at his home) where he performs ritual, often at the behest of visitors from other communities; he notes as well that this site is often visited by *ajq'ija'* from other areas. He identifies this as the central altar in the sacred geography of Ch'aqa'Ya' in both its location at the center of the spiritual landscape as well as its frequent utilization. It is locally believed that this was a location where precious metals were mined by ancient Maya, which Don Fidel links to its identification as a *Tz'ikin* altar. This *nawal* seems to be universally and emphatically associated with business, finances and money in general. As noted above, the other daykeepers also offer this interpretation. Don Kawoq, when I informed him this was a frequently utilized site, agreed that this is often the case with *Tz'ikin* sites. He also told me of a site known as Minas in his community that is associated with stories of ancient gold and says *Tz'ikin* sites are often associated with *piedras preciosas* (precious stones).





**Figure 28.** The secondary cave at Pa Minas. A sacrificial fire is burning during a visit to the site with a daykeeper.

This site is located close to the homes of many of my friends as well as next to a main path through the community and thus I passed Pa Minas daily. When there was not ongoing ceremony (I would first approach the site carefully before entering the clearing) I generally spent a few minutes noting the offerings that had been left since my last visit. There were always new votive candles and other evidence of ritual. My investigation, either through direct observation that there was ongoing ceremony or by noting other evidence of ritual, bore out residents' claims that this altar is very heavily utilized. While I doubt there is ritual conducted daily as some locals claim, it is obvious this altar is visited at least a few times a week.

## PA XOT



**Figure 29.** The altar site of Pa Xot. The large flat rock at center probably gives the site its name (which refers to a *comal* or griddle). Smaller flat rocks behind this are utilized for candle offerings and a burn circle for sacrificial fires can be seen in the foreground.

This *Kawoq* altar is atop a small knoll and consists of a large (approximately three by five feet) flat rock behind a small burn circle (figure 29). The crest of the knoll consists of an approximately fifteen foot diameter cleared area dominated by this large flat rock. There are six smaller (one foot diameter) rocks arranged to the east of this upon which candles have been burned. Directly behind these features is the remaining upright of a weathered cross buried in naturally accumulated loam to the level of the crosspiece. On my initial visit, there was evidence of very recent activity. This is the only altar where I observed food remains in the sacrificial fire (although orange halves were noted around

a burn at Pa Puerta). This evidence may be reflected in the name of this altar, which translates to “at the *comal*/griddle.” This food and the discarded incense wrappers Santiago says are *comida de San Simón* (food of San Simón/Maximon – an enigmatic figure not officially recognized by the Catholic Church but very important in *costumbre*). San Simón is thought by many anthropologists to represent a pre-Columbian deity (e.g. Hart 2008, Stanzione 2003). Santiago informed me that this altar shows regular, if infrequent, use. I visited the altar twice and only observed the same sacrificial remains both times, although the offering was of a significant amount of material. As well, the interval between my visits was rather brief (three weeks) and I was unable to return to the site at the end of my fieldwork period as I had with others.

As noted above, *Kawoq* altars are related to women’s health by the other daykeepers and “Mother Earth” by Don Fidel. The particular association of food to this altar is interesting (Pa Xot- “at the griddle”) and deserves further research. In speaking of this altar, Don Kawoq made an interesting comment when he learned of the large flat rock that dominates the site. He asked if it was in the shape of a turtle, as this is the animal familiar associated with the *nawal Kawoq* and he noted that the Maya glyph for turtle is shaped much like a *comal*. As noted above he interprets *Kawoq* altars as being for the protection and development of women although he also made some mention of justice (especially spiritual) when talking of this daybearer. Also previously discussed, although this site is associated with *Kawoq*, as is the site of Chua Xic, Don Fidel made the differentiation between this site being linked to the health and protection of women (especially mothers) as opposed to the greater emphasis on *Madre Tierra* he notes for Chua Xic.

## LAS PILAS

This site is located in the main agricultural/milpa area of the community of Las Minas and is presently not used by Don Fidel or other *ajq'ija'*. At some point in the mid-1990s the monument for which the site is named disappeared from this location. Sabom-Bruchez reported ritual was carried out here prior to the removal of the monument and that each May a shrine of pine boughs was constructed around the monument (1997:91). Previously, an approximately two foot diameter boulder with a finely carved face on the front and a basin on top (as if for holding liquid – hence the name, as a *pila* is a basin for washing) was located here. Don Fidel identifies this as a site associated with the daybearer *Ajpub'* and reports that the *espíritu* of the site remains here although the monument is gone, however no ritual is presently performed. He reports that *Ajpub'* altars are utilized to petition for, in effect, “good karma,” as a person might conduct ritual here to make the *espíritus* aware of good deeds they feel might deserve recognition and/or reward. Don Tojil relates that *Ajpub'* altars are utilized in petitions related to leadership roles; he gave the example of someone performing ceremony here to ask for election to a government post. This interpretation has interesting implications given the past community located here. Don Kawoq related these altars to the maintenance of either community or individual spirituality, but specifically noted the association to community given Pilas' previous location and seeming role as a focal point of the Las Minas area. He also noted that these altars are often associated with “spiritual warfare” and when I asked him to clarify this statement he asked of the site's history. When I told him the monument had been removed by outsiders, he noted that this might in fact be an example of a spiritual battle between those in the community and outsiders.



Local residents told of how a truck with many men arrived in the middle of the night to remove the monument. Many people in Ch'aqa'Ya' told me they believe it was sold to an *extranjero* (foreigner) to be placed in his garden. My local guide also told me that the landowner who sold the altar stone suffered *consecuencias* (consequences) for his actions. Soon after he sold the monument his legs and ankles began to swell to the point that he could no longer walk. After this the man was reputed to have drunk himself to death. Santiago told me that this was due to the *espíritu*, or *nawal* (spiritual guardian of the site) having been *enojado* (angry) because of the man's actions.

As introduced above, this carved boulder may also have served as a boundary marker for the ancient community once located in this area and appears to exhibit a directional patterning in relation to the other altars bordering the archaeological zone. This location, as I have posited for others, seems to be accorded sacred status as a result of its very literal and visual connection (even if now gone) to ancestral Maya. If, as theorized, this altar was once a boundary marker of the elite residence or some other spiritually protected area, the ancient function may well have carried into present time as is exhibited in the continued respect for the site.

### **XQAYÖM/CHUI XQAYÖM/CHWI XQAYÖM**

The owners of the land upon which this altar is located are *Evangélico* and have not allowed access to this site for some time, thus I was only able to gain a general location for the altar and I did not personally visit the site itself. Don Fidel identified this as both the northern sacred mountain in the spiritual landscape of the community as well

as the northernmost sacred site that completes the directional patterning of the local spiritual precinct. Xqayöm is identified by Don Fidel as the site of an *Ey* altar.

## **CHANGING PATTERNS IN SITE USE**

In this review of the sites I documented during the course of my research I hope to have provided an overview of not only the sites themselves, but an introduction to some of the differing patterns of site use evident in Ch'aqa'Ya' as opposed to that of other communities (as exemplified by the potential utilization of these altar *nawales* by other daykeepers). I will now address in more detail the distinct local functions of these sites. It appears that community-specific functions at some of these altars have affected the degree to which they are now ritually utilized. Recent change in the frequency of ritual activity at certain sites is reported by local residents (and I have observed evidence that corroborates these reports) and it seems modifications in the economic strategies of those who visit them may account for these changes. Thus I will now describe the general trends I have identified concerning such transforming ritual practice as well as attempt to provide a description of the processes that might account for this change.

## CHAPTER 6

### CHANGING SITE UTILIZATION

#### INTRODUCTION

As I have introduced in the previous chapters, during my research I documented changing patterns of site utilization. At this point in my research I am primarily interested in two different but related aspects of site usage: the manner in which sites may be differently interpreted and used in Ch'aqa'Ya' as opposed to other communities, and the recent changes in the frequency of individual site use. To gather information concerning the former issue, I interviewed daykeepers from outside the community as to the petitions for which certain sites (or, more specifically, their associated *nawales*) might be most propitious and contrasted this to reports of the local utilization of the sites; this revealed disparities between local and non-local interpretations of certain daybearer attributes. To determine the frequency of ritual activity at sites I relied mainly on information supplied by Don Fidel and other local residents. Through these reports, as well as my own observations, I found there have been relatively recent shifts in those altars at which ritual is often conducted. Some of the altars that were reported to be heavily visited in the recent past are now rarely, if ever, utilized while others appear to exhibit increased regularity of use in the last ten to fifteen years. However, I will begin by discussing the issue of the variation I observed concerning the means in which certain altars function

locally as compared to their use in other areas. I will then show how the changes in the level of activity at some of these altars are related to this variability, as the frequently petitioned altars in Ch'aqa'Ya' have locally specific functions that seem to factor into their continued use. These local interpretations are often economic in nature, as it appears that the rapid integration into a market economy system that Ch'aqa'Ya' is undergoing is the main factor in changing site utilization. It is this aspect of sacred sites and the ritual conducted at them that is particularly relevant to my analysis concerning the variability inherent in Maya spirituality. The 'leeway' intrinsic in the interpretation of site attributes appears to allow for modification of ritual in response to economic (as well as other) changes, thus functioning to keep local ritual practice (at least as evident in Ch'aqa'Ya') relevant to current conditions in the community.

As discussed above, because individual sites possess different attributes depending on their spirit guardians some are more propitious for certain types of petitions as compared to others. However, these attributes are not specifically defined. The twenty day-names themselves have a relatively broad range of attributes. While these traits are all thematically linked there is some room for each site or day-name to be individually interpreted, although sites are generally similarly interpreted by the social group or community that primarily uses them. In comparison to the interpretations of other daykeepers with whom I spoke, some of the explanations of site uses and attributes that I garnered from Don Fidel show community-specific functions in the petitions made at these altars. Such distinctive local utilizations seem to account for the continued use of altars in Ch'aqa'Ya' that are rarely found elsewhere.

In a survey of Kaqchikel sacred sites, Judith Maxwell and Pablo García Ixmata (2008) conducted an investigation that ultimately covered twenty-eight communities and resulted in the documentation of over seventy-five sites. During this research they not only determined site locations but ascertained the day-name associations of these sites as well. This chapter draws heavily on their work, as it is by far the most extensive research conducted to date specifically concerning sacred sites among the highland Maya. Although this survey did not expressly address the level of activity occurring at the sites that were investigated, and in fact some of the sites documented are not now utilized, the presence or absence of sites in the spiritual landscape of other communities can give some idea of those sites that might be presently, or at least recently, important in ritual practice. In their research, Maxwell and García Ixmata established a four tier hierarchy of daybearer patrons based on the frequency of day-name associations they found at altars in each community. Those daybearers found most frequently make up the first tier while those least commonly identified make up the fourth tier. Below I list not only their findings as to the frequency of the altar day-name associations they located, but also the interpretations of the attributes (or the petitions for which these altars are most appropriate) they gathered for these daybearers (2008:30-35, 41).

In Maxwell and García Ixmata's work, those daybearers associated with the most altars are *Tz'ikin* (patron of economic success/aid), *Tijax* (associated with physicians, healers), *Ajmaq* (linked to the ancestors and mediation or atonement of sin), *B'atz'* (representing unity, human relations and skill), and *Kan* (wielder of justice, strength and rejuvenation). These make up what they call the "first tier" of altars. Maxwell and García Ixmata feel these define an ideal balance for life, as every community needs the spiritual

bases these daybearers provide: economic security (*Tz'ikin*), health (*Tijax*), communication with ancestors and a means to seek atonement/forgiveness (*Ajmaq*), preservation of the social fabric (*B'atz'*), and justice (*Kan*).

Those altars comprising the second tier are *Kej* (male vitality, transportation, success in the hunt), *Toj* (payment, atonement, rain), and *Kamey* (death, rebirth, new beginnings). The daybearers *No'j* (understanding, learning), *Aj* (fertility, regrowth, abundance), *Kawoq* (women's work and strength, vitality, overcoming difficulties), *Iq'* (wind, life force), and *Tz'i'* (justice, protection, loyalty, potency) comprise the third tier. The daybearers with the fewest altars dedicated to them are *Ajpub'* (leadership), *Imox* (abundance, mental energy), *Q'anil* (beginnings, fertility), *Aq'ab'al* (rest, new beginnings), *I'x* (leadership, women), *K'at* (interrelatedness), and *Ey* (travel, new undertakings).

## DIFFERENTIAL LOCAL INTERPRETATION

In documenting the sacred sites of Ch'aqa'Ya' I found that many of the altars I recorded were rare in other communities according to Maxwell and García Ixmata's research. I initially thought this might be due to the relative (until recently) isolation of Ch'aqa'Ya'. I felt that as other areas became increasingly westernized, indigenous spiritual practices may have begun to play a less important role in the daily lives of residents, while in rural areas such practices were better preserved. When I spoke to Don Kawoq he was surprised when I told him of the number of sites I mapped in Ch'aqa'Ya'. I mentioned to him that I thought many of the sites I documented had been preserved because the community was rural and relatively remote. He agreed and noted that the

further away from the “capital” (Guatemala City and the only truly urban area in the country) and especially from tourists, the more spiritually “pure” the area, explaining that in areas where people lived “traditional” Maya lifeways more attention was devoted to properly caring for the *espíritus*. He related that places like Iximché, an archaeological site that draws tourists and is also sacred to contemporary *costumbristas*, are more difficult locations to conduct ritual. At these sites it takes much more effort on the part of the daykeeper to establish a connection with the divine and “open the portal” of communication with the spiritual world. He related that at more remote locations sacred energy is more concentrated. However, while the village’s rural character may factor into the spiritual configuration of Ch’aqa’Ya’s sacred landscape, there seem to be other factors that underlie the local presence of sites that are rare in other communities.

In Ch’aqa’Ya’, only four of the fifteen daybearer associations I identified for area altars are in Maxwell and García Ixmata’s top tier, while eleven of the *nawales* I documented at local ritual sites are rarely found in other communities. Most of the altars in Ch’aqa’Ya’ (including those where ceremonies are most frequently conducted) are from the third and fourth tiers as recognized by Maxwell and García Ixmata. For example, two of the most frequently utilized altars in Ch’aqa’Ya’ are sponsored by spirit guardians that are from Maxwell and García Ixmata’s third tier of altars. Chuichuimuch is a mountaintop altar associated with the *nawal Iq’* and Las Campanas is a locally important *Tz’i’* altar. Not only are both of these altars very active ritual sites in Ch’aqa’Ya’ and yet rarely found in the survey of surrounding communities, but both (especially Las Campanas) also show significant variance from the ways in which such altars are typically interpreted in other communities. It appears they exhibit adaptation to

local conditions and that this is a primary factor in their continued utilization. Although they are described above, a brief review of these two altars can exemplify the point I hope to make and help to illustrate the processes of both long-term and short-term change in site use that I see occurring in Ch'aqa'Ya'.

As described above, the *mesa* of Chuichuimuch sits atop a mountain (figure 30) seen locally as a reservoir of water (known as the *Tanque de Dios*). My local guide described this altar as an *imán* (magnet) for rain. He said that clouds are attracted here by ceremonies performed at the altar; these clouds then continually refill the reservoir of water inside the mountain. This altar is seen as critical in the survival of the community as this reservoir is said to feed the numerous springs that surround the mountain and supply the water needs of a large area of the northern rim of Lake Atitlán.



**Figure 30.** The *Tanque de Dios*. The peak of Chuichuimuch is often obscured by clouds.



Significant importance lies in the fact that the altar (or, more appropriately, its sacred daybearer guardian) exhibits a distinctly local character in the nature of the petitions made at this location. While local ritual activity at this altar is focused on the mountain's role in providing water, the interpretations of other daykeepers as to the primary utilization of *Iq'* altars differs somewhat. Don Tojil, for example, does not associate the daybearer *Iq'* with rain. For him the *nawal Iq'* symbolizes fertility, especially as concerns human reproduction. Don Kawoq also makes a connection to reproduction, noting these altars are important in the protection of pregnant women. Of more interest, however, Don Kawoq also linked this *nawal* to "purifying air" or wind. In Judith Maxwell's report, this spirit guardian is associated with "life force." She couples this *nawal* with wind as well (2008:42). However, these associations can be easily linked to the altar's local function, as rain is an obvious necessity in the fertility of cropland and the clouds that bring this rain will be conveyed by wind. Thus there seems to be a more specific local interpretation of this daybearer's attributes that is better attuned to the needs of the community. This demonstrates the adaptive variability inherent in the system of Maya *costumbre* in that daybearer attributes, while thematically linked, can be locally interpreted to better address local issues. Moreover, this variability can account for the continued utilization of an altar rarely found in other communities. Many communities have shifted away from strictly agricultural production, however Ch'aqa'Ya' relies almost solely on agriculture as an economic base. Related to this, the great importance of this altar in local ritual life illustrates another main point of my analysis: that the altars presently of primary significance to the community appear to be those that relate directly to the economic and subsistence activities of Ch'aqa'Ya'.

The location of the altar of Chuichuimuch may even point to an implicit understanding of larger ecological processes, at least as embodied locally. The sacred nature of the mountain might actually factor into the continued preservation of the springs (called *nacimientos* – birthplaces/sources) originating at the mountain (figure 31). It was reported that until recently a socially-enforced prohibition of timber cutting on the mountain (due to its sacred status) was generally observed. This may have functioned to preserve the forest cover necessary to condense the moisture-laden air from the Pacific (a mere 40 miles away) at this altitude of 9000 feet. However, paralleling the conversion of many landowners to Protestant sects, large areas of the mountain are now deforested.



**Figure 31.** One of the numerous *nacimientos* (springs) that emerge from Chuichuimuch.

The second *Iq'* altar (Pa Puertas) located in the Ch'aqa'Ya' spiritual district also appears to show a general understanding of local environmental conditions. This site overlooks the entire lake basin, especially the high volcanoes that ring the southern rim of

Lake Atitlán where these same air currents condense to form the thunderheads that bring monsoon rains, thus this location is a particularly appropriate place for an altar dedicated to rain. However, this begs the (very interesting) question as to how and when these sites might have been deemed sacred and whether their locations were specifically chosen for an *Iq'* designation or vice versa (whether an *Iq'* designation might have been specifically chosen for their locations). This is far beyond the scope of present research, though, and is a matter for future investigation.



**Figure 32.** Fresh flowers at Las Campanas. I visited this site multiple times and it was rare when I did not observe new offerings.

Another site exemplifying the variable interpretation of site attributes allowing for adaptation to local conditions is Las Campanas. As described above, this heavily utilized site (figure 32), associated with the daybearer *Tz'i'*, consists of a large boulder containing a bell-shaped hollow that is said to have served as a bell for a church of the “ancients.”



Ceremonies conducted at Las Campanas are generally petitions to ask for the ringing of this bell, which then calls people to places specified by those conducting the ceremony. Although rituals might be conducted to ask for a large turnout at other gatherings, Don Fidel reports that ritual here is now generally related to business ventures.

It is apparent that the locally-specific interpretation of the manner in which this altar is best utilized plays a large part in its continued popularity. The other daykeepers with whom I spoke reported the association of the *nawal Tz'i'* with “justice” and the resolution of legal problems; this is also noted in Maxwell’s report. However Maxwell further relates that the daybearer *Tz'i'* can protect the material and spiritual well-being of an individual and/or community. This demonstrates a way in which localized site use can develop. An association with the protection of a community’s well-being provides a point of origin for Las Campanas’ present ritual use. When linked to the mythological society believed to use this as a bell, a function such as calling together important gatherings is coupled to community well-being. This then links community well-being to the more economically inspired use of the shrine practiced today. Although the altar has a local economic interpretation, it appears there might have been an antecedent that allowed for the development of its present spiritual purpose. This shows the importance of the variability in the definitions of site attributes in determining local ritual practices. Such variability in altar attributes could allow for a gradual change in the spiritual purposes of individual altars as they become adapted to local situations over longer periods of time. In the case of the altar at Campanas, local mythology or culture history, in combination with the wide interpretation inherent in day-name characteristics, has allowed a locally specific site use to develop. Furthermore, the role individual interpretation plays in ritual

practice can engender the current “re-purposing” of this altar to a more economically oriented role that parallels a local shift to a market based economy. It is, in fact, the short-term increase in the utilization of this altar that is dramatic. Here the interpretation of the individual spiritual practitioner may be seen as coming into play, as he or she responds to community or individual needs. As a market economy becomes prevalent, the re-purposing of this altar allows it to remain relevant to the life of the community.

Thus it appears that the variability inherent in interpretations of various *nawales* allows for local conditions to be mediated in the realm of the sacred. This accounts for the continued importance in Ch’aqa’Ya’ of some altars that appear rare in other communities, and as well as illustrates a further point I wish to make. One reason altars associated with certain daybearers may not be heavily utilized (or even part of the spiritual landscape, for that matter) in other communities might be due to greater accessibility to other resources that now fill the needs these altars once did. For example, in the case of the daybearers *Iq’* and *Tz’i’* discussed above, if other interpretations focus on such things as justice and human reproduction, these needs might be met by secular institutions now more prevalent with increasing integration into the global community. Better access to health care may presently fill the role that petitions at *Iq’* altars once did and civil/criminal courts may now function to alleviate the need for petitions at *Tz’i’* altars (although a convincing argument can be made that present court systems are by no means unbiased toward rural Maya). Whatever the case, the above discussion of these two altars demonstrates the deep influence of economic factors in local ritual practice and brings up a main point I wish to make concerning the ritual life of Ch’aqa’Ya’.

It seems apparent that the differing needs of specific communities might account for different configurations in their spiritual landscapes and that altars rarely found elsewhere are still very important in Ch'aqa'Ya' because of their relevance to contemporary community life. In particular, it seems the primary altars in the spiritual landscape of Ch'aqa'Ya' all appear to be used in manners directly related to economic or subsistence activities, thus paralleling the recent shift in the community's economic base to one that is more market economy driven. Don Fidel reported to me (and this was borne out by my observation) that in addition to the altar at his home the sites of Pa Minas, Chuichuimuch, and Las Campanas are those sites primarily utilized in Ch'aqa'Ya'. To this list I would also add the site of Pa Puertas due to the evidence of continued ritual activity I observed when visiting the site, even if Don Fidel does not often conduct ritual at this altar. The spirit guardians of these five locations are thus the *nawales Iq'* (Chuichuimuch and Pa Puertas), *Tz'i'* (Las Campanas), *Tz'ikin* (Las Minas and the altar at Don Fidel's), and *Ey* (located as well at Don Fidel's home). Although the altars of Pa Puerta and Chuichuimuch are associated with the *nawal Iq'* and this daybearer is not generally linked to subsistence activities in other areas, these altars are very important locally due to their importance in ritual involving rain. The other altars where ceremonies are frequent are also tied to subsistence concerns, or more specifically, business ventures. Pa Minas, as a *Tz'ikin* altar, is associated with money or financial matters. Don Fidel's altar is also associated with *Tz'ikin* as well as the daybearer *Ey*, which is linked to new ventures or beginnings – often as related to financial ventures in ritual performed by Don Fidel. The altar of Las Campanas (*Tz'i'*), as discussed above, also exhibits a local interpretation related to business. Therefore, the primary altars presently most important

in the sacred geography of Ch'aqa'Ya' are all explicitly tied to market economy concerns. Of course, it must be noted that any of these altars may be utilized for other ceremonies (especially in the case of Don Fidel's altar – it is very often used for ceremony unrelated to financial or subsistence matters), however, the main point to be made is that their primary associations are chiefly economic in nature.

Even some of the less frequently visited altars in the local spiritual landscape also appear to show interpretations specific to Ch'aqa'Ya' that are at least indirectly related to subsistence or economic activities. For example, the altar at Chua Xic is associated with *Madre Tierra* as opposed to motherhood in general (as *Kawoq* altars generally are, according to other daykeepers). This seems to show a local concern more tied to the regeneration of the Earth in general, as opposed to specifically humans, due to the rural agrarian nature of Ch'aqa'Ya'. As well, Don Fidel once commented that the altar at Ax Tax is especially linked to petitions concerning accidents occurring in an agricultural context, rather than the overall association with health that is understood to be a common attribute of *Tijax* altars. These local interpretations appear to be related to Ch'aqa'Ya''s continued reliance primarily on agriculture as an economic base.

The altar of K'oxol is another example of how local subsistence concerns might be influencing site use. In this case, a mythological being is associated with the site and provides a connection to the local importance of this altar in ceremonies petitioning for rain. Don Fidel told me this hill is where, at some undetermined point in the past, the mythical figure of K'oxol “shot his lightning bolts” and gave the location its power. He noted this is why the altar is associated with rain, as the thunderstorms that bring K'oxol's lightning also bring rain. This altar is sponsored by the daybearer *Ajmaq*, a spirit

guardian particularly linked to the ancestors, and even more specifically to the knowledge of the ancestors concerning spiritual understanding. While there is a recognized connection between K'oxol and lightning noted by other daykeepers, and a possible link to the deity Tojil (associated with rain) in colonial times (Judith Maxwell, personal communication), no other sources gave any interpretation that the guardian *Ajmaq* is associated with rain. Don Tojil and Don Kawoq both define *Ajmaq* altars as locations to ask for the forgiveness of sins, especially from the ancestors; Don Fidel echoes this interpretation. Both men are also very clear about the association of this *nawal* with the spiritual power of daykeepers. Don Fidel as well emphasizes this connection, as not only are *Ajmaq* altars in general related to daykeeping but the figure of K'oxol is specifically associated with the 'gift' of the daykeeper. Thus they all have very similar interpretations yet there is a local reading of this altar's use due to its association with rain. While not at complete odds with interpretations of non-local daykeepers, the site has distinctly local attributes that link it to subsistence activities. This connection to agricultural concerns seems to factor into the site's (although minimal) utilization, as the only time I observed evidence of ritual here, Santiago noted that this altar was important in rain rituals.

## **CHANGING FREQUENCY OF SITE USE**

I am also interested in recent shifts in the frequency of ritual activity at specific sites. Thus, in addition to analyzing the specific interpretations of altars that situate them in arenas more attuned to local concerns, and which help account for their continued importance in local ritual life, I also worked to ascertain recent changes in the frequency of ritual performed at individual sites. Patterns in the degree of altar use indicate the recent shift to a market-based economy has definitely influenced the frequency of ritual



performed at some sites. It is apparent ritual at some altars that are economically associated has greatly increased in the last two decades while altars not linked to economic activities show greatly decreased use. Meanwhile, altars that have long-term association with economic activities appear to have remained constant in their utilization.

For example, the altars at Chuichuimuch and Pa Puertas are currently locations of heavy ritual activity and apparently have a long history of frequent use. Due to their association with rain, this would be consistent with the role of agriculture as the primary economic base of the community, both now and in the past. Don Fidel and other local residents report that the altar of Las Campanas, due to its (re-purposed) role in attracting people to places of business, definitely shows an increase in utilization over the last two decades. Although local residents report the *Tz'ikin* altar at Pa Minas, due to its association with money, shows greater incidence of use than in the past, the clarity of these reports is indeterminate as Don Fidel reports this site has “always” been heavily utilized. The other altar that is often visited in Ch'aqa'Ya' is the sacred site at Don Fidel's home that represents the *nawales Ey* and *Tz'ikin*. The potential importance of his altar in rituals concerning business ventures has been well described. I never questioned him as to the personal matters of those visiting him, however Don Fidel admitted a shifting pattern toward ceremonies concerning economic matters in the petitions of those consulting him. While many people who visit him are there to request healing ceremonies or other aid, it seems that a great number now visit him for financial matters. At this point in my research, I have refrained from questioning him too closely about the exact nature of the petitions of those who seek his services, yet he has stated that he will answer any questions I have and I plan on addressing this issue more specifically in the future.

The decreasing frequency of ceremonies conducted at some sites also reveals definite patterns paralleling changes in the community. Along with the greater level of ritual activity at altars associated with economic factors there is an apparent shift away from more communalistic ritual practice to ceremony that might be better viewed as individualistic, as would be expected with a shift to a market-based economic base. For example, as compared to the ritual at Don Fidel's altar that rarely involves anyone but the primary participants, or the activity at Las Minas or Las Campanas that is frequent but only involving individuals (or individual families), the *No'j* mesa of Jolom Achi, located in the heart of the Las Minas community, is reported to have been a location of community-wide gatherings as recently as the late 1980s. The site of Chuiko'on, located on the mountain directly overlooking Ch'aqa'Ya' is also said to have been a site of large gatherings in the recent past. It is possible that community-wide festivals occurred involving processions to this site. However, while group ceremonies were reported at these altars as recently as the last few decades, both of them show little utilization today. Interestingly, both of these altars are associated with the daybearer *N'oj* and thus locally linked to the wisdom of the ancients. I believe that the decrease in ritual at these sites could indicate an emphasis on the more specialized knowledge associated with commercial activities as opposed to knowledge that may have been more important concerning broader community issues. The fact that entrepreneurial ventures are often individual concerns appears to factor into this pattern. However, it should be noted that I did document accounts of recent large gatherings at the sites of Chua Xic and Jolom Achi although the reports of my local guide indicated these ceremonies were anomalies rather than regular occurrences.

A further pattern is evident concerning a shift in the sites utilized for ancestor veneration. Much of what might be specifically termed ancestor worship now appears to take place at pilgrimage sites. These more powerful sites are located some distance from Ch'aqa'Ya'. Don Fidel relates that he often visits these sites to conduct rituals for clients wishing to express gratitude to the ancestors for petitions that have been answered. In a chapter three I described one such ceremony on behalf of "Phil." However, apparently much of the ritual conducted in gratitude to the ancestors previously took place much closer to the community. Although Don Fidel notes that often when he travels to these sites it is for such offerings of gratitude, he also emphasized that they are utilized in rituals concerning other matters conducted for people who have such great need of assistance from the *espíritus* that it necessitates ceremony at a more powerful altar.

Additionally, I observed that those local altars specifically associated with the archaeological remains of the ancient community that once existed in Ch'aqa'Ya' presently exhibit the least use of any of the local altars I documented. There is agreement among those with whom I spoke that these altars were much more heavily patronized in the past. Such use was also reported by Sabom-Bruchez (1997) during her research in the community. At present, the site of Jolom Achi (a carved face on a large boulder), Chua Xic (an altar below a rock wall covered with petroglyphs), and the site of Las Pilas (previously a large monument in the shape of a human head that has now been removed) are only visited very rarely for the purpose of conducting ritual, if at all.

A very interesting relationship I observed that may factor into this pattern of decreased use is evident in that those daybearers whose attributes are not specifically associated with the *antepasados* seem to have more leeway in interpretation than those

that are expressly linked to the ancestors. The interpretations of the daykeepers with whom I spoke all seem to correlate closely on those spirit guardians that are more explicitly associated with the ancestors. There seems to be less room to vary from a more straightforward reading of the attributes of sites sponsored by these *nawales*. For example, *No'j* sites (associated with the wisdom of the ancients) and *Ajmaq* sites (linked specifically with ancestors) are interpreted in almost the exact same manner by all the religious practitioners with whom I am acquainted. There seems to be less opportunity for individual interpretation on the part of the daykeeper as concerns the ritual petitions deemed appropriate for these daybearers, thus site functions may be less able to remain relevant to current conditions in the community. However, other *nawales* not expressly associated with the ancestors, such as *Tz'i'* (Las Campanas), are interpreted very differently by those daykeepers from outside the community of Ch'aqa'Ya' as compared to Don Fidel. These altars with a broader range of attributes seem more heavily utilized; this is possibly due to a greater variance in interpretation that better allows them to remain relevant to the rapidly changing world in which petitioners find themselves.

## DISCUSSION

It is through observing the above patterns of site use that I base my essential point. Those sites that remain active are those that can be adapted most effectively to current conditions. It appears the variability inherent in site attributes engenders this adaptability. The position of the daykeeper is also such that ritual modifications in site use can further be tailored to local circumstances, and thus remain relevant to not only the life of the individual but the community. Furthermore, I propose that both the variability in site attributes and the role the daykeeper's interpretation plays in determining

necessary ritual actions are facets of a continuous structural framework – the cultural logics – of Maya spirituality. Because *ajq'ija'* must determine the ritual specifically tailored to a client's needs, individual interpretation is fundamental to the system. In fact, the duty of the daykeeper is “to negotiate the spiritual interrelations of the calendar day, the day-spirit of the altar, the day-spirit of the client, and that of the celebrant himself” (Maxwell 2008:15). This obviously requires a level of individual interpretation. Maya religion, at least as exemplified in Ch'aqa'Ya', appears to be built on these aspects of the belief system that allow it to remain relevant to changing lifeways. I see the system of Maya belief as one in which, as long as change is enacted within the context of a structural framework of belief, the interpretation inherent in this system allows for ritual practice to continually adapt to changing local conditions. Yet, at the same time, this framework allows the belief system as a whole to maintain continuity. Moreover, it seems the very systems that allow for adaptability (site variability and individual interpretation on the part of the daykeeper) are part of this structural framework.

In an interesting conversation with Don Kawoq concerning the interpretive aspect implicit in the role of Maya religious specialists, he specifically made an observation concerning his perspective on this role. He noted that it is not really “divination” that a daykeeper performs but “interpretation”. He compared the insights a daykeeper receives from the *espíritus* to a “seed” in that they are but signs the daykeeper must interpret to cause them to “grow.” The task of the daykeeper is to make sense of this seed of insight as it relates to the lives of those who consult him. In speaking with another daykeeper I also discussed the differences I observed in individual ritual as well as the different interpretations each had concerning the petitions most appropriate at specific sites. When

I asked of these differences in practice between religious specialists, Don Tojil explained to me that because each daykeeper has his own individual connection to the divine, and is influenced by different spiritual forces, each will have slightly different interpretations. This was the common agreement among the daykeepers, and by means of such a perspective each expressed complete confidence in the interpretations of the others. Don Tojil and Don Kawoq, in particular, often stated that Don Fidel's interpretations of the local altars in Ch'aqa'Ya' holds more importance than their own, noting that he best knows the local spiritual landscape.

As I have noted at various times in previous chapters, there is also quite a bit of variation in individual practice. Often times the manner in which a daykeeper invokes the spirits or calls out the individual day-names varies greatly. Sometimes various ritual offerings are seen by different *ajq'ija'* as representing distinct things. The interpretation of the assorted qualities of the smoke of sacrificial fires is also very often quite different among practitioners. And the means by which individual daykeepers practice divination differs greatly. However, in the eyes of each individual daykeeper, they are all working with the *espíritus* and equally concerned with maintaining the reciprocal balance with the divine that is of such singular importance to their system of spirituality; that the particular means by which this is accomplished differs is of little import. Each daykeeper has his own means to most effectively communicate with the world of the sacred and is guided in this effort by his own spiritual influences. Thus daykeepers recognize no incongruity in this variation in individual practice. However, this aspect of Maya spirituality has implications that extend beyond just the personal practice of the daykeeper.

It is obvious the role the daykeeper plays as an interpreter of the spiritual world allows for ritual decision-making that mediates between the sacred and the day-to-day lives of the faithful. However, on a broader scale it seems that this also allows for mediation between the world external to a community and the lives of those inside that community. The individual agency inherent in the system allows for community-specific adaptation as the world changes in specific ways for respective individuals and their communities. The variation inherent in the attributes of the daybearers further allows for this interpretation to more effectively respond to external conditions. Thus, while continuities with ancient belief and ritual remain important in current practice there also appears to be a system that can address external circumstances affecting local lifeways (albeit often as concerns systems expanding far beyond local communities). The system has variability built into it (both in the site attributes themselves and the interpretation inherent in the role of the daykeeper) that allows for locally-specific alterations to the local spiritual landscape without disrupting the overall continuity evident in the system.

Although this would require significant further research (and may be a topic of future investigation) I am predisposed to think that all communities might have once had a full complement of the twenty day-name altars within their spiritual landscape. As communities became more specialized and adapted through time to the particular environmental and socio-cultural niche in which they are situated, certain daybearers (thus altars) might have begun to hold a more primary position in the spiritual landscape of that community. With the drastic changes that occurred during the Conquest, possibly only those altars of the most importance to a local community at that time were preserved in the local sacred geography. This may have been accompanied by a transformation in

site use so that certain altars could then fill the roles left vacant by altars removed from the overall system, resulting in the broad (often overlapping) complexes of attributes linked to the daybearers. A similar process would be occurring today due to the effects of globalization and may even be exacerbated by the fact that certain altars are now cut off to public access. As various circumstances further continue to disrupt the spiritual landscape, only those altars most relevant to the immediate conditions of community life would continue to exist. Moreover, and related to this, an aspect of Maya spirituality that might factor into such transformations in the spiritual landscape is the concept that spiritual guardians can, in effect, remain dormant. They are still present at sacred sites and these altars can be 're-opened' if ritual is again performed. Sacred locations may, in effect, be 'stored' until conditions necessitate their reactivation. Although I lack the historical data to understand the effects this feature of the belief system might have had on the sacred geography of Ch'aqa'Ya', it is another facet of the structural framework of highland Maya religion that might allow for effective adaptation to local conditions. This is yet one more area of research I hope to address in future investigations.

When I first returned to Ch'aqa'Ya' I was surprised and dismayed to find it seemed materialistic ideas had taken such a hold that even Don Fidel's religious practices were dominated by these matters. After beginning my visits to the sites themselves, I soon saw that site use seemed to be shifting in a manner that correlated to economic factors as well. However, after spending even a brief amount of time in the community I realized how dramatically the material world of the community was changing and began to recognize that ritual life was in fact shifting, but only inasmuch as was necessary to respond to changing community needs. Altar utilization was changing in response to the



needs of those who patronize these sites; in the same manner, Don Fidel's personal practice changed as he responded to the needs of those he served.

During my past years in Guatemala I was introduced to a daykeeper who was reputed to only practice his craft due to the personal profit he could gain; I had heard there were others like him. When I first returned to Ch'aqa'Ya' I wondered if Don Fidel too was only practicing in order to gain wealth. As the first few days and even weeks went by and he hinted as to people's reasons for visiting him, my suspicions grew even more, as much of the ceremony that he was conducting appeared associated with material gain. However, I soon recognized that his practice was only changing in response to the needs of the community. The fact that Pa Minas, a widely known *Tz'ikin* altar reputed to be powerful in petitions for financial matters (and where he conducts much of his *trabajo*), is located nearby also appears to factor into his renown for such ritual. As well, Don Fidel's family has become somewhat prosperous due to the diligence of his sons in various business enterprises and the family's material success seems to be one of the reasons he is seen as a particularly effective daykeeper to consult in matters concerning finances. Thus Don Fidel's personal practice has shifted in accordance with the economic changes the community is undergoing, paralleling the transformations in site utilization that has resulted in the altars most closely tied to economic factors being the most heavily utilized. Even those altars not strictly related to economic enterprise exhibit functions that more directly align with financial need or are being repurposed to functions more relevant to the community's shift to a market economy; this appears to be a primary factor in their continued use. Thus, much like Maxwell theorizes the most frequently encountered altars in her survey cover the basic needs of community life (2008:42), it

appears that as Ch'aqa'Ya' is undergoing substantial and rapid change in economic conditions, the altars most closely associated to economic and subsistence matters are those most heavily utilized.

During the fifteen year period comprising my association with Ch'aqa'ya' I have been able to directly observe the rapid change to a market economy that recently occurred. I clearly recognize the vast differences in interaction with the world beyond the community that have taken place. Thus, an initial explanation I feel can account for the differing patterns of site use I observed in Ch'aqa'Ya' is related to the fact that Ch'aqa'Ya' has only very recently begun to integrate with larger economic systems outside of the community. The other daykeepers come from communities that are more urbanized (or are closer to urban centers). These areas have been tied to a larger national economy and exposed to the effects of globalization for a period of time that has allowed for a greater integration with the outside world. As Ch'aqa'Ya' is only in the initial stages of these changes those altars that might more directly help to mediate this rapid process of change are those that are presently the most important. Conversely, a matter I will further investigate in the future concerns the rarity of these same daybearers in other communities. I feel this may be due to attributes that link them to aspects of life now increasingly filled by institutions more prevalent with modernization (for example, altars important in health matters may be less utilized as Western medicine becomes more available). However, this idea must await the future multi-community survey with which I hope to address such issues.

Therefore, although there is much continuity evident in the spiritual landscape of Ch'aqa'Ya', there are also definite processes of change occurring as well. Many aspects

of local religious life exhibits striking continuity with other communities, both ancient and contemporary. The ritual is similar as well as the belief in an all-encompassing force with whom humans have a reciprocal relationship. The geographic patterning shows definite continuity and archaeological associations to ancestor worship are evident. However, the sites showing the highest frequency of use are directly applicable to economic factors and those associated with the ancestors are slipping into disuse. Along with this change, explicit ancestor worship seems to have shifted to other geographic locations. Whereas previously in Ch'aqa'Ya' the altars associated with the material remains of the ancient Maya were more frequently utilized, it now seems that ancestor veneration ritual is more emphasized at pilgrimage sites, especially those at large archaeological sites such as Uatatlán containing very visible reminders of past Maya civilizations (figure 33).



**Figure 33.** Sacrificial offerings at Uatatlán. At left a small niche in a temple contains a sacrificial fire. At right another temple shows offerings of flowers and candles. Most ancestor worship has shifted to large sites such as Uatatlán.

Despite the changes I have described in this chapter, there is a basic framework of belief and practice centered on the reciprocal relationship with the divine that makes up the Maya spiritual worldview. This worldview can account for the continuity in Maya religious tradition evidenced in both ancient and contemporary practice. The basic system of belief, the ritual utilized to actuate this belief, the locations at which ceremony is conducted, and many other aspects of contemporary spirituality not only exhibit continuity with ancient belief but, in fact, appear to be a vehicle for this continuity. Further, it appears that by according sacred status to certain altar sites located at the cardinal directions and situating the local community at the focal point of the metaphorical cosmos community specific variances and the resulting adaptations to ritual life can be sanctified. As the world is continually re-created through ritual, these adaptations to religious practices, as well as other elements from the external world, can be integrated into local belief systems. This allows the religious system itself to remain relevant to contemporary life and thus persevere. However, because the structural framework of the system is replicated, Maya spirituality still exhibits the continuity with ancient practice that is observed today.

## CHAPTER 7

### GEOGRAPHIC PATTERNING AND WORLD RENEWAL

As I have shown in the previous chapters, while I identified much of the ritual life of *costumbristas* in Ch'aqa'Ya' that shows substantial evidence of continuity with pre-Columbian religious systems, my research also indicates that (local) Maya ritual practice is presently undergoing considerable change. Significant changes in site utilization, site attributes and even specific ritual activities appear linked to shifting subsistence and economic strategies. The characteristics and locations of the sites I identified exhibit continuity with ancient belief, and often the ceremonies performed at them correlate directly with evidence of pre-Columbian ritual, yet ritual life also seems to be responding to external pressure related to the increasing capitalization of the local economy.

However, as I outlined above, although it seems that shifting subsistence strategies are driving specific aspects of changing ritual practice I have shown how certain components of the belief system function to resolve potential contradictions between contemporary conditions and ancient religious practices, thus allowing for the lasting continuity Maya religion and ritual exhibits. Moreover, it appears that present-day similarities to ancient practice point to long term adaptive system of belief; the continuity is in the structural framework itself, rather than the various traits preserved. I see this framework as the true enduring aspect of Maya religion. Further, a long history of such

adaptive structures means local Maya populations would have previous experience integrating belief and practice imposed by dominant outside influences into already existing belief systems. The resulting transformations in ritual life would be most evident on a local level, as local populations struggled to survive in changing political, economic, social, and environmental circumstances. I believe this same process is occurring today in Ch'aqa'Ya'. While past changes were a result of more explicitly ideological influences, today changes in ritual appear to be paralleling the re-positioning of local economies into a more global context. Previous dominant ideologies would have been based upon religious belief, in contemporary times the new "ideology" is an economic one. Although the currently increasing conversion to the movements of Catholic Action, Charismatic Catholicism and Evangelical Protestantism show the continuing influence of external religious systems on Maya spirituality, these are also tied to shifts in social, political, environmental, and economic changes. However, it is the change in extant religious and ritual life that has pre-Columbian roots, and the effects a rapid integration of Maya communities into the current global economy has on the practice of *costumbre*, with which I am primarily concerned in this work.

I feel the above work has made it clear that the system of *costumbre* is much more dynamic than is often presented in many previous studies of Maya religion. *Costumbre*, in fact, seems emblematic of the cultural resilience of the Maya in general; it is the present-day existence of a dynamic and vibrant belief system that best exemplifies the strength of the heritage of the Maya. Through centuries of conquest and oppression this system has continued to thrive, remaining strong even today despite predictions that integration with the globalized world would spell the end of an autonomous Maya

culture. In fact, in my view, it should be clear there has never been a truly “autonomous” (at least as envisioned by some researchers) Maya culture that blended with later dominant cultures, just a dynamic one that has persisted in its own adapting way through the centuries. I believe the autonomy (such as there is) of Maya culture may best be evidenced in a structural framework that is characterized by a mode of adaptation and transformation integral to the structure itself.

Utilizing the approach I have employed above, one that recognizes the relation of current ritual changes to transformations in other aspects of the social and economic fabric of today’s Maya communities, allows for a clearer perspective on contemporary Maya religion. I hope to show that Maya spirituality is a distinctly indigenous system, one that incorporates those external elements (and yet remains structurally the same) necessary to the continued existence, both on an individual and societal level, of a viable system of belief. This best frames the change I observed in Ch’aqa’Ya’: as the external world is increasingly integrated into local life ritual practice is changing in response, yet this change only occurs within a continuous framework of belief. In the future, observation of the ongoing processes of change such as I observed in Ch’aqa’Ya’ (and the insight that can be gained from such observation) might also be used to better understand past developments that occurred in similarly dynamic religious systems existing among pre-Columbian and colonial-era Maya groups.

In presenting this analysis I have not only identified continuity in religious belief between the ancient and contemporary Maya, but I have also shown the continuous framework of belief within which changes in Maya ritual life are situated that allows for such continuity. An overarching framework of belief, primarily based on a reciprocal

relationship with an all-encompassing divine force, constitutes a structural system that continues to inform Maya ritual belief. As long as changes are situated within this context, they do not violate the integrity of the belief structure. The manner in which this relationship is actuated – the ritual practice itself as well as the attributes and locations of the sacred sites at which this ritual is carried out – also exhibit continuity. These aspects of belief are primary components of the structural system – the cultural logics – within which the Maya religious system, at least as observed in Ch'aqa'Ya', can replicate itself while still maintaining relevance to contemporary conditions. However, these beliefs and practices only comprise the foundation (albeit important ones) of a system that allows for the long term maintenance of continuity such as is apparent in Maya ritual.

A foundation of belief based on a reciprocal relationship with the divine is not sufficient in and of itself to allow for the apparent continuity in local ritual practice. While certain elements of belief such as reciprocity are important in preserving and reproducing a coherent religious structure, it appears that the geographical layout of sacred locations is, in fact, the primary vehicle for the continual adaptation and regeneration of a viable system of belief. As I see it, the concept of community “centering” and the metaphorical model of a larger cosmic order this concept establishes is necessary to the continued replication of Maya religion in the face of changing external circumstances. The sacred geography itself is an integral part of the cultural logics of Maya spirituality.

In ancient Maya ritual it is thought the center established through directional patterning symbolically created a sacred space in which the rulers could most effectively communicate with the divine. This center (the axis mundi) was crucial to ancient Maya



religion as it linked the worlds of gods and humans. This was the point where the reciprocal relationship by which both humans and their supernatural counterparts were supplied with the sustenance necessary to both was carried out. Links to creation mythology sanctified this directional patterning. The axis mundi symbolically represented the location at which the original creators first ‘raised up the sky’ and created the physical world of humans. Therefore, through ritual performance a symbolic center that replicates this original creation event could be re-created, allowing for communication with the divine; through this re-creation the ancient Maya kings, as intermediaries to the world of the divine, could link themselves to the regeneration of life and the cosmos of humans. The axis mundi allowed for the continued renewal of the cosmos through ritual. This belief, both as concerns community centering as well as the world renewal actuated through the axis mundi, also appears to be evident in Ch’aqa’Ya’. In the above report, I have shown the overall importance of symbolically situating the community at the center of the metaphorical cosmos, as I have identified the numerous geographic locations that make up the sacred landscape and serve to figuratively “center” the community. The significance of the axis mundi is also apparent in individual rituals. Don Fidel initiates each ritual by opening a ‘portal’ to the divine. As explained to me by Don Fidel, such a portal can only be defined by reference to the four directions: the center established through situating the physical world in the sacred space circumscribed and demarcated by these sanctified directions creates this sacred connection.

It was a concern with locating the sacred sites located in Ch’aqa’Ya’ and identifying continuity with ancient ritual that was a point of origin for my research. As I have established, I did find the site locations do exhibit continuity with models in the

sacred geography of the ancient Maya, especially as concerns the four sacred directions and the “center.” This aspect of the sacred geography in ancient Maya belief was vital to ritual practice necessary to the regeneration of the physical world; I feel that site layout continues to play a central role in the reproduction, adaptation, and thus continuation of contemporary belief. Rather than simply representing evidence of links to the past or continuity in and of itself I feel such layout is in fact integral to the maintenance of religious continuity.

I have previously described the means in which local ritual, although centered on the needs of the participants, is fundamentally concerned with the maintenance of a reciprocal relationship with the divine. Through offerings to the *espíritus*, spiritual practitioners not only petition for their specific needs, but ensure the perpetuation of the orderly functioning of the cosmos as well. The cultural logics of Don Fidel’s practice dictate that the maintenance of a reciprocal bond with the divine is a primary obligation of humans. This ensures the constant replenishment of the sacred force that permeates the cosmos and a continual world renewal. Necessary to this world renewal is the centering of the metaphorical cosmos through the location of sacred sites at the world directions. Moreover, through the continual symbolic renewal of the world ritual modifications made in response to local conditions can be incorporated into the belief system. It is within such a framework of belief that I posit change can occur allowing for communities to adapt to their own local conditions while yet exhibiting the continuity in belief that is apparent in Maya religion.

Thus, it appears that the geographic patterning evident in the sacred landscape of Ch’aqa’Ya’ is far more than some ‘survival’ of past Maya belief. It is, in fact, an integral

part of a dynamic and continually adapting Maya belief system. Not only does the local model of directional orientation exhibit the continuity I first sought to document, but further, it is part of the framework of the belief system that allows for this continuity and is in fact crucial to the regeneration of the ritual landscape of Ch'aqa'Ya'. Edward Fischer notes that such frameworks of cultural logics are persistently reinforced through processes of socialization and social interaction in any number of forms – historical narratives, social mores, peer behavior, or cultural metaphor, for example – and yet are also redefined through these very processes (Fischer 2002:16). I would further posit that concepts of sacred geography are also firmly reiterated through not only, as Fischer notes, historical narratives or cultural metaphor, but even more so by the actual physical landscape itself. Many residents walk past the central altar of Pa Minas each day and the mountains of the sacred directions dominate the skyline above the community. Thus these physical surroundings continually function to regenerate, even if at a level below conscious thought, the concept of the community as a sacred space at the center of the cosmos. The terrain itself becomes an agent (as an element of the underlying cultural logics of local belief) in the reproduction of the belief system and further reiterates of the importance of the sacred landscape within an ever-adapting spiritual system. The physical geography does in effect coincide with the sacred geography, reaffirming the underlying cultural logics in a visible, even visceral, way.

In the final analysis then, the primary point of the above report lies in understanding the dynamic nature of the ritual system I observed. It appears that the very structure of contemporary Maya spirituality (at least in Ch'aqa'Ya') is built upon a framework of belief that not only guides adherents in their understanding of the world

around them, but as well holds the very means by which this structure can both replicate itself and at the same time remain relevant to that world. I first returned to Ch'aqa'Ya to investigate continuity in sacred geography, and while I found such continuity, I also observed significant ritual change associated with the contemporary spiritual landscape. Yet it seems this very continuity is represented by various aspects of Maya spirituality that are not only primary elements of the cultural logics underlying the belief system, but in fact constitute a vehicle by which change and community specific variances in ritual behavior can be sanctified while yet maintaining a continuous religious tradition.

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## **VITAE**

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This thesis was typed by Mike Saunders.