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from saints to shibboleths: image, structure, and identity in Maya religious syncretism

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introduction

At the center of every Maya town in the highlands of southern Mexico and Guatemala stands the Catholic church, often referred to as the house of the saints' images that dwell inside. For the Maya, these saints have long served as local guardians of crops, health, and community well-being, whose benevolence hinges on proper homage from town residents. The people of Santiago Chimaltenango, a Mam-speaking Maya town in western Guatemala, even go so far as to say that their Catholic patron saint is a Maya like themselves. This article examines how and why these people have come to imbue a Catholic saint with their native "Mayanness" and, more generally, what this reveals about religious syncretism and the nativism underlying it among the highland Maya of southern Mexico and Guatemala.

Anthropologists have long characterized Maya religious syncretism as a seamless fusion of native and Christian elements (cf. Thompson 1954:5; Wisdom 1952:120). Ironically, however, they tend to see in this fusion either some enduring, if ineffable, Maya culture (cf. Thompson 1954:26; Vogt 1969:586–587), or a relative, yet decisive, Catholic evangelization (cf. Ricard 1966:274–282; Wolf 1957:166–167). On one hand, authors who take a primordialist perspective seek the essential Mayanness behind this folk religion. Eva Hunt's (1977) brilliant structuralist analysis of Mesoamerican symbolism posits a "symbolic armature" that, although now "buried," continues to motivate Maya religious life based on "a quadripartite, yearly, agrarian, solar calendric cycle . . . deeply embedded in a root paradigm of ecology, agrarian schedules and invariant astronomical events" (1977:248–249). Similarly, Victoria Bricker (1981) argues that Maya myth and ritual synchronize—and thus syncretize—episodes of ethnic conflict in Maya history according to the dictates of an enduring "substrate" in Maya culture of cyclical time and calendrical prophecy. On the other hand, historicists argue that Maya syn-

Local concepts of Catholic saints in the Mam (Maya) town of Santiago Chimaltenango in the western highlands of Guatemala reveal that syncretism there represents not an indiscriminate seamless fusion of Maya and Christian religiosity but a highly differentiated recombination of conventional forms that serves primarily to articulate the moral and physical—and thus ethnic—boundaries of the community. The symbolic reassortment of saints with other local images of community, in particular ancestors and "earth lords," shows syncretism to be an essential property of local identity, not simply a quaint or arbitrary survival of the Maya past. Contrasts with antecedent saint cults in 16th-century Spain demonstrate the "Mayanness" of this syncretism; comparison with saint cults in other Maya communities relates syncretism more closely to local contexts of community morality than to enduring "deep structures" of some primordial Maya culture or to a "false consciousness" born of persistent colonialist oppression. [Maya religion, religious syncretism, saint cults, Guatemala, ethnic identity]

cretism simply reflects the exigencies of Spanish conquest and colonialism. Robert Wasserstrom (1983:20, 77, 102–103) sees Maya Catholicism in Chiapas as a genuine, pragmatic response to imposed marginality, serving initially to establish and then to assert Maya rights as good Christian subjects of Castile, and later as a means of soliciting divine deliverance from rapacious colonial overlords. The Guatemalan historian Severo Martínez Peláez (1979) goes even further, asserting that no syncretism occurred at all; instead, colonial oppression alone "created the Indian" (1979:594; cf. Friedlander 1975; Hawkins 1984; W. Smith 1977).

Unfortunately, the terms of this debate obscure the very crux of syncretism, which lies precisely in its paradoxical conjunction of both persistence and conversion, nativism and opportunism (cf. Edmonson 1960:194). Consequently, in this paper I focus not on "globally determinant" cultural or historical patterns but on the dialectical process of Maya syncretism itself (cf. Rojas Lima 1983). I take this process to be grounded in the social context that most immediately motivates it—the local community—much as Nancy Farriss does in her masterful history of colonial Yucatan (1984). She argues there that syncretism pertained more to the realm of public community religion than it did to personal observances or universal cosmology. She infers that the Yucatec Maya conceptualized life as a collective enterprise of survival based on public rituals of reciprocity between mortals, gods, and nature (1984:6). When Christian evangelization banished the old gods from public purview, the Yucatec Maya of necessity turned to the tutelary Catholic saints allowed them by the missionaries in order to sustain the community rituals that they considered so basic to their survival. Through a "creative process of reconstruction," and the normalization of these innovations from one generation to the next, the saints gradually lost their status as surrogates for Yucatec gods, but the idea of community-based devotions, not divine salvation, continued to govern Maya relations with their saints (Farriss 1984:309–314, 324–333).

Of course, any attempt to rectify primordialist or historicist reifications of Maya religious syncretism by focusing on the importance of community risks succumbing to equally reified assumptions about "community." Far from denoting some insular, homogeneous whole, however, I see community as a problematic social nexus within which people constantly negotiate the immediate existential concerns and possibilities of their lives, conditioned by the wider economic, political, and natural ecology of which they are a part. In the Maya case, two features ground community, although they never absolutely bound it: first, Maya communities center strongly on circumscribed local places in which presumed ancestral affinities, primary access to land, and immediate interpersonal familiarities inhere; and second, the historical coincidence of ethnic Spaniard and Maya with the hierarchy of conqueror and conquered, master and servant, Ladino (hispanicized *mestizo*) and Indian, motivates opposed social categories that, when seen in light of one another, obscure very real internal variability and equally real external conjunctions between the two groups. That is, local Maya community places also entail antagonistic racist stereotypes of self-ascribed, as well as other-attributed, distinctiveness that tend to elide both actual differentiation within communities and abiding commonalities between them. I take Maya religious syncretism to be at least in part constituted by, and thoroughly constitutive of, the cultural conventions by which Maya negotiate these community-cum-ethnic boundaries with themselves and with others.

To develop this argument, I first examine the cultural construction of contemporary Maya saints in the highland Guatemalan town of Santiago Chimaltenango. I then contrast these patterns with their antecedents in 16th-century Spain, drawing on comparative evidence from saint cults in other Maya communities (Fig. 1) to substantiate the historically emergent—rather than timelessly enduring—"Mayanness" evidenced by such syncretism.[1] Second, I relate saints to other Maya images of community, especially ancestors and "earth lords," to explore in greater detail precisely how the Maya have appropriated these once-Catholic figures and what this syncretism implies about Maya conceptions of their own identity. In this way, I hope to demonstrate that the particulars of both image and structure in Maya religious syncretism attest

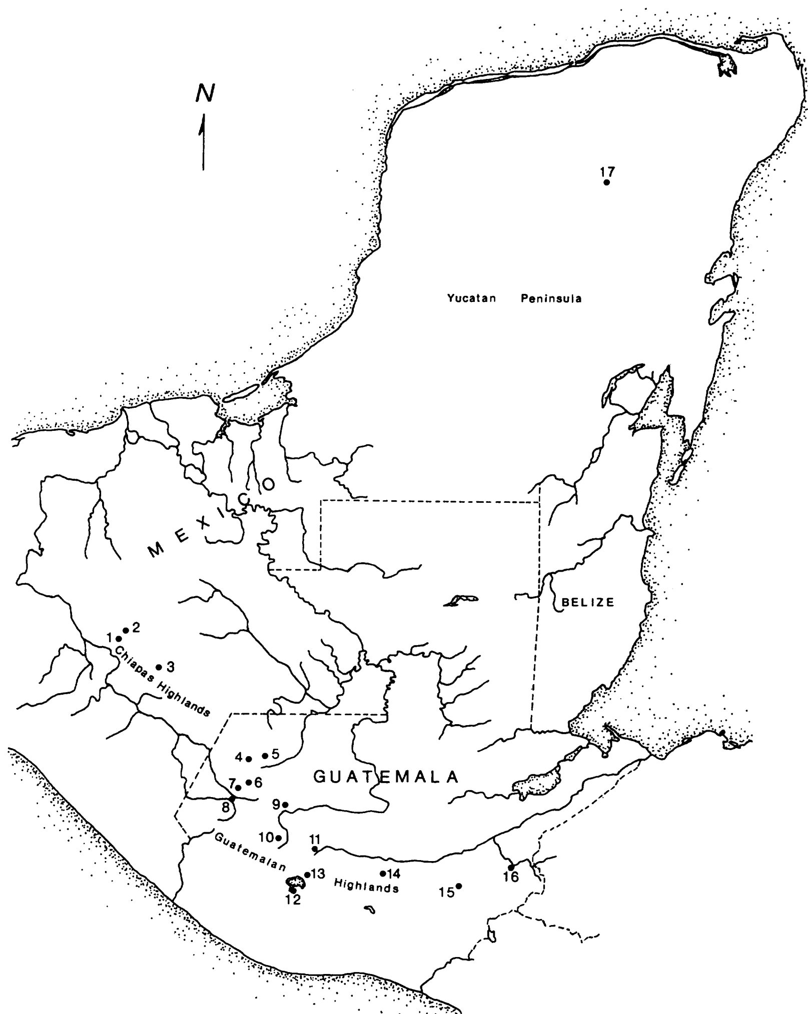

Figure 1. The Maya communities that constitute the major sources for this study (numbered roughly from west to east).

Language	Town and Principal Ethnographic Source
Tzotzil	1. Zinacantan (Vogt 1969, 1976)
	2. Chamula (Gossen 1974, 1975)
Tzeltal	3. Amatenango (Nash 1970)
Kanjobal	4. San Miguel Acatán (Siegel 1941)
	5. Santa Eulalia (LaFarge 1947)
Mam	6. Todos Santos (Oakes 1951)
	7. Santiago Chimaltenango (Wagley 1941, 1949; Watanabe 1984)
	8. Colotenango (Valladares 1957)
Aguacatec	9. Aguacatán (Brintnall 1979, McArthur 1977)
Quiché	10. Momostenango (Tedlock 1982)
	11. Chichicastenango (Bunzel 1952)
Tzutujil	12. Santiago Atitlán (Mendelson 1965)
Cakchiquel	13. San Andrés Semetabaj (Warren 1978)
Pokomam	14. Chinautla (Reina 1966)
	15. San Luis Jilotepeque (Gillin 1951)
Chortí	16. Jocotán (Wisdom 1940)
Yucatec	17. Chan Kom (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934)

to ongoing, opportunistic struggles for local identity that have forged Catholic saints into the shibboleths of a paradoxical, yet nonetheless genuine, Maya ethnicity.

why Santiago is an "Indian"

The people of Santiago Chimaltenango, or Chimbal, as they call their town, live on the rugged southern slopes of the Cuchumatán Highlands in western Guatemala. They eke out a livelihood by subsistence corn farming and local cash-cropping in coffee, petty trade, and migratory wage labor on Guatemala's coastal plantations. The town's 3500 or so souls speak Mam, one of Guatemala's 20-odd Maya languages, and, in contrast to other Maya, reside mostly in a nucleated town settlement rather than in dispersed hamlets. Local public and economic life lies firmly in Chimalteco hands, with Ladinos constituting less than five percent of the town's population—many of them transient schoolteachers and their families. Charles Wagley (1941, 1949) first carried out research in the town in 1937, and I did so in 1978–80, with brief return trips in 1981 and 1988 (Watanabe 1981, 1984, and In press).

Like many Maya towns, Chimbal first appears in Guatemalan history as a tribute-paying village and later as an administrative and ecclesiastical subjurisdiction of the colony (Watanabe 1984:47–50). Despite this past, however, the town today evinces an emphatic local identity, reflected in its own particular style of Maya speech, ethnic dress, and local custom. Although these patterns have undergone rapid, increasingly repressive change during this century (Watanabe In press), Chimbal remains highly endogamous, and Chimaltecos retain an abiding sense of ethnic distinctiveness. The town's patron saint, Santiago (Saint James), constitutes an important expression of this local sovereignty. In the guise of a sword-wielding figure mounted on horseback, Santiago Matamoros ("Saint James the Moorkiller") originally served as the saintly protector of Guatemala's 16th-century Spanish conquerors, but Chimaltecos no longer associate their Santiago with the Spanish conquest, instead regarding him with a virtually exclusive proprietary eye.

Chimaltecos possess two wooden images of Santiago, a large one that presides permanently over the altar in the church, and a smaller white-skinned, black-bearded figure riding a burro-like white horse. They dress this smaller image in the typical men's garb of the town, and they say that, like any good Chimalteco, he has a "wife," Saint Ann, whose feast day closely follows his in late July. Appropriately, her image wears the handwoven red blouse and navy blue skirt of a good Chimalteco woman. Chimaltecos pray to these saints in Mam, not in Spanish. During important fiestas, they carry the images in processions around the town church and plaza. Each year, Santiago visits two neighboring towns to pay his respects to their patron saints on their feast days, just as these saints return the courtesy at Christmas, Corpus Christi, and the feast of Santiago.

Formerly, Chimaltecos performed extensive rituals for the saints, both publicly to validate their local sovereignty and individually to ensure personal health and well-being (Wagley 1949). A strong sense of reciprocity infused Chimalteco relations with Santiago. In return for his protection, Chimaltecos would feed their saint ritual offerings of incense, flowers, candles, and shot glasses of rum, so that he would not starve (cf. Wagley 1949:69). Although many of the old devotions have now given way to more worldly pursuits and to the orthodoxies of Catholic and evangelical Protestant missionization, Chimaltecos still claim the special protection of Santiago. Some even say that it was the repeated visitations of their saint, mounted on a fearsome white charger, that delivered Chimbal from the Guatemalan army's counterinsurgency occupation of late 1982–83 and spared them the brutal massacres suffered by towns all around them (cf. Manz 1988).

Consequently, Chimaltecos continue to celebrate processions with their saint. During fiestas, the small image of Santiago on horseback still sallies forth from the church to survey his do-

main. The way that the figure moves serenely above the crowd on the shoulders of his celebrants, bowing ceremoniously to the other saints, presents Santiago as an active participant in, not merely the object of, these devotions. Although no Chimalteco ever said as much to me, it is almost as if they are helping him to perform the old prayer rounds that mortal Chimaltecos now forgo—bearing him from station to station, playing his music for him, making his prayers and offerings, launching his skyrockets into the heavens. Despite the creeping disenchantment of everyday Chimalteco life, processions still precipitate a sense of closeness between townspeople and their Santiago—and thus among themselves as well.

Chimaltecos further naturalize Santiago through accounts of how he came to live in Chimbal. They tell of when the first Chimaltecos found Santiago in the mountains, in a place where even today no one lives because it has no water. After building the church that still stands at the center of town, these ancestral Chimaltecos fetched Santiago to his new home. The next morning he was gone. Searchers eventually found him back where they had first encountered him and once more returned him to the church. Again he fled to his old place but this time, when they tried to carry him back to town, Santiago made himself so heavy that no one could lift him. Exasperated, the ancestors beat him with whips to get him into the church, leaving gouges on his back that can still be seen today. Santiago has dutifully abided in the church ever since (Watanabe 1984:82–83). Although he is neither the mythic founder of the town nor even originally Chimalteco, Santiago attests to those ancestral Chimaltecos who first discovered him, built his fine house for him, and finally domesticated him. Older than living Chimalteco memory, saint and church substantiate otherwise shadowy Chimalteco ancestors for their living descendants.

Santiago has thus come to look, act, and belong in the community like any Chimalteco. The exact import of this transformation, however, in itself remains unclear. On one hand, Chimaltecos iconographically and mythologically repudiate saint and church as images of the Spanish conquest, yet, at the same time, their devotion to Santiago testifies to their utter encompassment by a Catholic evangelization predicated on that conquest. Given this contradiction, Chimalteco patterns of saint worship must be compared with their antecedents in Spain as well as with saint cults in other Maya communities in order to clarify both the nature of this evangelization and the meaning of Maya syncretic accommodation to it.

Castilian and Maya saints

Contemporary Maya saint cults originated with the Spanish conquest of the New World and have their roots in the local worship of Catholic saints in 16th-century Spain, since Catholic evangelization of the Maya occurred mostly during that century. By the early 17th century, basic parish structure and administration of Maya towns had been firmly established, and American-born and -ordained creoles, not *peninsulares* from Spain, made up the majority of the Guatemalan clergy (Oss 1986:45, 65, 159–160, 181). Given George Foster's (1960:232–234) observation that initial adaptations in situations of culture contact exert a kind of "founder effect" on subsequent cultural developments, such "cultural crystallization" of the colonial Guatemalan church would suggest that 16th-century patterns of Spanish Catholicism most directly influenced the formation of Maya saint cults.

William Christian (1981) argues that religion in 16th-century Spain constituted a local, as opposed to a universal, Catholicism concerned with the welfare of relatively small agricultural communities afflicted by epidemics, pests, droughts, and tempests. Such misfortunes bespoke God's wrathful intervention in human affairs, which saints or the Virgin Mary might assuage to varying degrees—although at times townspeople apparently suspected disgruntled saints themselves of inflicting the harm.

Villagers established covenants with the saints in two ways, through vows and through shrines. In times of crisis, villagers collectively vowed devotion to a particular saint in return

for saintly intercession before God. Such vows committed the community to fasting or refraining from work on the saint's day, to constructing a new image or chapel for the saint, or to sponsoring processions or public charities in the saint's honor. These corporate vows and annual acts of reciprocity and commensality reaffirmed the community's covenant with the divine, while also literally enacting the community's solidarity with itself: celebrations for the saints "actualized, put into physical form, the juridical entity of the community that met in the first place to make the vow" (Christian 1981:59). Townspeople came to call particularly effective or powerful local saints their town "patrons," a status formalized by the Church in 1630 (Christian 1981:92).

If votive devotions served to express local allegiances to certain saints, saint shrines conventionally expressed the affinity of saints themselves for particular local places. After the introduction of saints' images into Spain during the 11th and 12th centuries, devotions formerly restricted to actual saint relics in cathedrals, monasteries, and parish churches proliferated at more proprietary shrines dedicated to local miraculous images (Christian 1981:21). The origin legends associated with these shrines reflect a leitmotif of the "found" saint, most often Mary. In these stories, a saintly apparition or image repeatedly returns to the place where it first appeared or where villagers first discovered it, until finally officials build a shrine there, usually in the countryside remote from town and parish church (cf. Foster 1960:161–162).

These legends entail what Christian (1981:73–75) calls "encapsulated devotional charters"—dialogues between saint and community in which the saint, not ecclesiastical prescription, ultimately dictates the circumstances of local worship. Because the saint is often found by poor or dispossessed shepherds, children, or women, who, together with the saint, finally triumph over town authorities, these legends further validate a local Christian populism by affirming that "the saint has come to serve everyone; that the bond set up between the saint and the town is also a direct bond between the saint and each person of the town, beginning with the powerless" (Christian 1981:82). Castillian saint cults in the 16th century thus appropriated and embraced particular saintly guardians and imbued the local landscape, whether urban or rural, with a sacred geography of shrines known and proven for divine deliverance from disaster. In forging covenants with the divine, saint worship also expressed for many Castilians their equally binding commitment to the lands and people that sustained their communities.

In the New World, Franciscan, Dominican, and Mercedarian missionaries aspired to instill in the Maya a similar Christian humility and Spanish civility by resettling the largely rural Maya into *congregaciones*—nucleated, Spanish-style communities centered on church, plaza, and town hall (cf. Farriss 1984:158–164; Lovell 1985:76–94; Oss 1986:14–37). The friars met with some success, for by the early 17th century the Dominican chronicler Antonio de Remesal could note the industry with which the Maya of Guatemala produced altarpieces and saint figures for their churches. Many churches housed ten or more images—doubtless testament to Maya faith, Remesal presumed, especially since Guatemala was "less rich than the rest of the Indies" (1966:181; cf. Oss 1986:121, 150–152).

Nonetheless, the historical circumstances of the Mayas' initial encounter with Christianity clearly distinguished these cults from Castilian ones. First, unlike Castilian devotions, Maya covenants with their saints originated neither in vow, sign, nor miracle, but were dictated to them by the founding missionary-friars (cf. Farriss 1984:310; Oss 1986:109; Wasserstrom 1983:28, 30–31). At the same time, a chronically shorthanded clergy left many Maya communities without resident priests, placing primary responsibility for Christian instruction and supervision on minimally trained native *fiscales* or *maestros* (cf. Clendinnen 1987:47; Orellana 1984:197–199, 203–205; Ricard 1966:97–98; Watanabe 1984:57–58). In contrast to Spain, where priestly presence in town and parish church left local saint cults to claim countryside shrines, absent priests enabled many Maya to claim for their own their local churches and the saints inside them. Given the triumph of their saint-worshiping conquerors, the Maya needed little doctrinal sophistication to recognize—and come to value—the apparent efficacy of the

saints. Indeed, saint images in themselves undoubtedly proved more compelling to the Maya than did garbled sermons on transubstantiation, the Holy Trinity, or Christ's passion—subtleties often well beyond either missionary mastery of Maya tongues or neophyte predisposition to discern (cf. Gage 1958:236–237). The resulting cults made neither formal Christian doctrine more intelligible nor its necessity more apparent.

Not surprisingly, then, Chimalteco devotions to Santiago, like saint cults in other Maya communities, today evince a more profound parochialism than did saint worship in 16th-century Spain. Cosmologically, Maya saints have become decidedly local personages relatively independent of the remote, almost inaccessible figure of God. Many Maya still regard their saints in part as *abogados* ("advocates") who intercede for them before God, but instead of Christian divine grace, these saints tend to represent "genuinely creative or protective powers" in their own right (Bunzel 1952:267; cf. Gillin 1951:83; Valladares 1957:192). Local myths clearly depict the saints, and often Christ, as local culture heroes or creators notably lacking in Christian virtues (cf. Gossen 1974:313, 316, 337, 343–344; LaFarge 1947:50–65; Mondloch 1982:119–123; Nash 1970:198–210; Reina 1966:2; Valladares 1957:29–30; Vogt 1969:356–360; Wagley 1949:51–52; Warren 1978:35–39). Maya saints also appear to intervene in earthly affairs mostly to punish transgressions against their persons—usually some real or supposed ritual neglect—rather than to uphold universal Christian principles or to enact divine covenants (cf. Bunzel 1952:166; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:108; Wagley 1949:53–54; Wisdom 1940:417, 420; Vogt 1969:361).

Although Maya may suggest that images with the same name could be "brothers" (Wagley 1949:52–53; Wisdom 1940:413), or that all saints are kinsfolk of Christ (Gossen 1974:43), the saints of different towns constitute distinct personages who exercise territorial sovereignty over their own communities and moral suasion and sanction over their townspeople (cf. Gillin 1951:83, 85–86; LaFarge 1947:104–107; Nash 1970:198, 204–206; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:107–110; Reina 1966:18; Wagley 1949:53–54; Vogt 1969:361). Consequently, Maya rarely pray to saints of other towns, and Maya dealings with their egoistic saints have never given way to more universalistic devotions to Mary and Christ, as did local religion in Spain after the 16th century (Christian 1981:182, 185, 199, 206). Instead, Christ and Mary have entered local cosmologies as the sun and the moon, with images of the Virgin often characterized incongruously as the "consorts" of local male saints (cf. Colby and Colby 1981:38–39; Gossen 1974:21; LaFarge 1947:104, 106; Mendelson 1965:103; Mondloch 1982:120; Nash 1970:198–203; Valladares 1957:192; Vogt 1969:367–368; Wagley 1949:52–54; Wisdom 1940:392, 399*n*, 400*n*, 411–412).

Ritually, Maya saint cults further emphasize local sociality over divine covenants. Like Chimaltecos, other Maya dress and care for their saints, sometimes arraying them in the typical Maya garb of their town (cf. Gillin 1951:83; Vogt 1969:353; Wisdom 1940:449). Similarly, they attend their saints in annual processions (cf. Bunzel 1952:252; Valladares 1957:193), while some towns also take their patrons to visit one another on the host saint's feast day (cf. Farriss 1984:151, 331–332; Gillin 1951:97–100; Valladares 1957:175, 193; Vogt 1969:362–365; Wagley 1949:82–83; Wasserstrom 1978). Maya feed the saints offerings of incense, flowers, candles, and rum, and they sponsor ceremonial meals of which the saints symbolically partake (cf. Bunzel 1952:251, 292–293, 302; LaFarge 1947:73–74; Moore 1973:84; Nash 1970:208, 302; Vogt 1969:361, 486, 495). Although Maya may offer money to the saints (Nash 1970:302), food—both actual and metaphorical—remains the primary ritual medium, emphasizing the mutual sustenance on which the survival of both saint and Maya depends (cf. Farriss 1984:321–324).

None of these devotions, however, stems from vows to the saints in any penitential sense. Whatever penance there is lies in the ongoing obeisance to the saint of the community as a whole and in the future oblations of its members that this assures. Personal prayers beg forgiveness for past offenses and deliverance from future ones, but they promise nothing beyond

the usual offerings that accompany the entreaties themselves (cf. Bunzel 1952:292–293; Laughlin 1980:250–252; Vogt 1969:361–362). Similarly, public devotions to the saints reflect neither individual nor collective vows but rather the obligations prescribed by each community's annual cycle of fiestas. Responsibility for the saints remains "standardized" (Nash 1970:207) and "utterly impersonal" (Reina 1966:163)—literally *cargos* or "burdens" that individuals must shoulder because they live in the saint's town, not because the saint personally inspires them to serve (cf. Bunzel 1952:164–165; Farriss 1984:329; Watanabe 1984:163–164). Maya appeals to their saints thus serve more to affirm an ethic of local reciprocity, social propriety, and moral accountability in this world than to seek the divine grace of redemption in the next (cf. Bunzel 1952:162, 293–294; Colby and Colby 1981:122–123, 138–141; Farriss 1984:328; Koizumi 1981:21–56; Mendelson 1965:96–101, 116; Nash 1970:287–288; Redfield 1941:115–116, 127–131; Reina 1966:163; Vogt 1969:222; Wagley 1949:67; Warren 1978:65).

Maya myths of saintly origins complete the localization of these once-Catholic figures. As in Chimbal, the Castilian motif of "found" saints abounds. In some cases, the saint simply appears (Reina 1966:172) or falls from the sky (Wisdom 1940:415). In others, God or Christ sends the saint directly to the town (Gossen 1974:316; Warren 1978:49)—often without mention of the Spanish conquest (Gillin 1951:77; Nash 1970:5) but not always (Warren 1978:40–41). In still other tales, the hapless, wandering saint arrives and asks local Maya authorities, whether mortal (Vogt 1969:356) or supernatural (LaFarge 1947:61, 63), for permission to live in the town. Such acquiescence to local sovereignty also transpires in the seemingly more typical tales of Maya who find the saint in the countryside and bring it into the town. As with the discovery of Santiago, these accounts often end with villagers punishing the saint to make it "behave" properly. In Zinacantan, town elders pour hot water over San Lorenzo to silence him because they dislike "talking saints" (Vogt 1969:356); in Amatenango, they throw their evil image of San Pedro out of the church and then behead him for his witchcraft (Nash 1970:205).

These narratives systematically invert the canons of Castilian saint legends. First, although saints originate in the "wilds" in both genres, Castilians interpret this as God's "divine participation in the landscape" (Christian 1981:208); for the Maya, it signifies the saints' alien origins. Second, Castilian saints eventually settle into countryside shrines, whereas Maya saints take up residence in churches at the centers of towns: saintly comings situate Maya Catholicism centripetally in particular communities, not centrifugally in nature wherever divine providence chooses to manifest itself. Third, Castilian villagers build shrines where the saints—not church authorities—dictate; Maya literally and mythically "encapsulate" (cf. Vogt 1969:582, 586) the saints within the moral compass of their communities. Finally, Castilian tales associate "found" saints with the poor or powerless, not with ancestors or other primordial sovereigns, as Maya tales do. Rather than reiterate a populist covenant forged by the saint between the meek and the divine, Maya encounters between saint and mortal substantiate the social and moral sovereignty of the community. Maya transformations of Spanish hagiology clearly emphasize the social over the sacred, the local over the transcendent, the immediate over the eternal.

Maya saint cults thus contrast in two ways with the 16th-century Castilian devotions from which they spring. First, Maya saints themselves appear to be at once more accessible and at the same time more worldly and willful than Castilian saints. Rather than Christian vice or virtue, they display all-too-human idiosyncrasies. Second, Maya devotions localize the saints by socializing this saintly willfulness through the very ethic of local reciprocity and commensality that the Maya trust to affirm their own ongoing but contingent relations with one another. Confronted by stranger-saints who turn up in the mountains or who arrive unheralded in their communities, Maya use cult ritual and legend to make the saints live in their towns in plain view of everyone, just as they themselves must do. More than just divine intercessors for their communities, Maya saints conventionalize the immanent sociality—and moral authority—of the communities that incorporate them into their midsts. Largely shorn of any Christian eschatology

of divine salvation, the community enactments that served as the means to deliverance in Castilian saint worship have become an essential end of Maya devotions.

Santiago's transformation from Christian saint to Chimalteco shibboleth thus exemplifies a more pervasive parochialism that cosmologically, ritually, and mythologically differentiates Maya saint cults from their antecedents in 16th-century Spain. These differences, however, reflect neither sterile negations of the Church Triumphant that engendered them in the first place nor anachronistic Maya worship of "idols behind altars" (cf. Brenner 1929). Instead, the ongoing "Mayanness" of these cults derives from the fact that despite—or perhaps because of—a sovereignty decreed for them by conquest of "fire and sword," the immigrant-saints could never freely occupy the Maya landscape as they had done their Spanish homeland. From the very beginning, Maya conventionalizations of the saints involved local Maya ancestors and earth lords who simply refused to leave.

ancestors

Chimalteco myths of Santiago's origin suggest an intimate relationship between the ancestors who initially discovered and then socialized him, and the saint's enduring Chimalteco nature. In many other communities, ancestors constitute an equally vital link between saint and living Maya. The Maya call these ancestors "mother-fathers" or "grandfathers,"[2] although these figures rarely represent named ascendants of specific kin groups—evidence of the general attenuation of Maya blood relations beyond the immediate extended family. Ancestors most often betoken social affiliations based on land and locale rather than on strict descent (cf. Bunzel 1952:18, 269–270; Davis 1970:83–84; LaFarge 1947:24, 114–116; Reina 1966:227; Vogt 1969:144, 301; Warren 1978:67). Many Maya consider these generic community forebears the primordial claimants of lands now held by the living, and periodic offerings to them validate rights to these estates as well as ensure the land's fertility (cf. Bunzel 1952:17–18; Davis 1970:84; McArthur 1977:17; Vogt 1976:111–112). In some places, ancestors further serve as "terrible avengers of all kinds of wrongdoing" (Bunzel 1952:268; cf. McArthur 1977:11; Vogt 1969:300–301; Warren 1978:67), watching over their descendants from nearby mountain peaks (Vogt 1969:298), from caves (LaFarge 1947:59; Nash 1970:19, 22), or even from the large crosses that stand before local churches (Brintnall 1979:91). Hardly blameless paragons, however, ancestors are often said to have committed innumerable unexpiated wrongs against the "World" and each other, for which their descendants suffer the consequences of sickness and misfortune (cf. Bunzel 1952:146; Koizumi 1981:25–27; Tedlock 1982:142; Valladares 1957:258; Wagley 1949:76).

Despite their vague genealogical status and all-too-human failings, Maya ancestors still evoke the essential continuity and regenerative power of their communities: some Maya regard children as "substitutes" or "replacements" for deceased relatives whose souls the ancestral gods have reincarnated in the newborn (Vogt 1969:272–273); others name infants after their grandparents so that they may respect, remember, and emulate them (cf. Colby and Colby 1981:53*n*; Warren 1978:57); still others identify the ancestors' earthly remains with the spiritual "breath" that lives on in their descendants (Tedlock 1982:41–42). As keepers of the land and givers of life, as the dead in the grave, ancestors fuse local affinities and generational continuity to the very landscape itself.

This nexus of place and past in turn joins ancestors to saints. Just as the saints came long ago to inhabit ancestral places, so the ancestors came first to associate with these strangers. Out of this primordial encounter arose *costumbre,* a term literally meaning "custom" but used generally by Guatemalan Maya to refer to the ritual precepts originally set down by the ancestors (cf. Warren 1978:56–57, 67–73). By reenacting the devotions that first bonded ancestor to saint, saint to community, *costumbre* in the present affirms ancestral acts in the past. The ritual

advisors who school each year's cargoholders in their responsibilities to the saints constantly invoke ancestral precedents to justify the strictures of *costumbre* (cf. Bunzel 1952:230, 249; Mendelson 1965:53–54; Nash 1970:102; Reina 1966:112–113, 119–120; Warren 1978:66–69; and, less explicitly, Cancian 1965:42–44; LaFarge 1947:134; Oakes 1951:57, 60; Wagley 1949:85 ff.). It often becomes impossible to tell whether these rituals serve more to honor the saints or to obey the ancestors (cf. Brintnall 1979:92; Bunzel 1952:249–250; McArthur 1977:6; Mendelson 1965:94; Reina 1966:18, 108, 120).

Ruth Bunzel (1952:250) once pondered why such continuity should be "reiterated in the one aspect of life in which the break with the past has been so dramatic." Far from reflecting some "false consciousness" conjured up by colonial Catholicism, however, this conflation of saint and ancestor in fact reflects actual historical convergence: one of the most widespread practices in colonial Maya Catholicism involved individually sponsored saint cults called *guachibales,* in which wealthy Maya bequeathed to their heirs both the responsibility and the wherewithal to perform annual celebrations for a particular saint in their memory (cf. Hill 1986:64–67; Oss 1986:89). Although the fees charged for masses said during these celebrations constituted a major source of parish income and thus clearly served priestly interests (cf. Gage 1958:234–241; Oss 1986:111–112), this fusion of saint worship with public remembrance of the dead also fit well with a corporate Maya religiosity in which personal salvation, however defined, depended on collective memorials performed by one's descendants (cf. Farriss 1984:322, 328; Wasserstrom 1983:77). Robert Hill (1986:66–67) has even speculated that the term *guachibal,* derived from the Cakchiquel "to take another form," may itself have alluded to a deeper association between saint image and the soul of the deceased sponsor. Indeed, some Maya today explicitly liken their long-suffering ancestors to "saints" in their own right (Menchú 1984:81; cf. LaFarge 1947:46).

Equally suggestive, the Maya continue to honor their dead each year during the Catholic feasts of All Saints and All Souls on November 1 and 2. On these days, Maya everywhere entertain the dead with food, music, and drink. At altars in their homes and at gravesides in the cemetery, the living feast their dead in ready, often drunken, communion (cf. Bunzel 1952:213, 272; Fought 1972:291–294; LaFarge 1947:77–78; Siegel 1941:72; Vogt 1969:481; Wagley 1949:109–110). Although some communities follow more closely the Spanish custom of commemorating only the recent or remembered dead rather than the ancestors in general (Nash 1970:136; Reina 1966:171; cf. Foster 1960:201; Wisdom 1940:455), it remains unclear to what extent this reflects purposeful disregard of the ancestors or simply the biases of living memory (cf. LaFarge 1947:78). In any event, one essential difference distinguishes Maya from Catholic observances: Maya prayers and oblations engage the dead directly rather than offer penance on behalf of their souls in purgatory (Bunzel 1952:273; Wisdom 1940:454–255; cf. McArthur 1977:12–13). The living present the dead with food; then, having partaken of its essence, the dead in turn "leave" food for the living. Cosmologically, such commensality enacts recurrent cycles of mutual nurturance between living community and generative ancestor rather than the soul's final progress toward eternal salvation. As with the saints, the ritual intent remains immediate, social, and regenerative, not eternal, ethereal, and redemptive (cf. Farriss 1984:322–323; Mendelson 1965:93–94; Taussig 1980:157, 167).

Thus, while Maya ancestors clearly anchor local communities to place and past, they embody less a primordial Mayanness than a sense of enduring continuity between the dead and those now living. Within this continuity, the opposition between Maya ancestor and Christian saint ceased long ago to be absolute—Maya ancestors became "Christians" as much as Catholic saints became "Indians"—and Maya conventions duly reflect this. Nonetheless, despite the *costumbre* that binds them, Maya saint and ancestor persist as distinct images of community: saints occupy church and town, whereas ancestors both figuratively and literally inhere in the place where church and town stand. Neither figure, however, can now do without the other: alone, each contradicts itself—the stranger-saint who precipitates community, the life-

giving ancestor whose now lifeless bones lie in the cemetery on the edge of town. Mythically, ancestors appear to antedate the coming of the saints, yet only when the saints arrive are towns founded, churches built, and orderly social life established (cf. Gossen 1974:140, 320, 324; LaFarge 1947:61–62; Reina 1966:172; Vogt 1969:356; Warren 1978:39–40); experientially, saint rituals and churches now constitute the most immediate proof of past ancestral accomplishments. Thus, neither the ongoing sociality of the town and saints nor the self-generative fecundity of the land and ancestors by itself composes a sufficient image of community. Eternal land and ancient church, saint's image and ancestor's grave, all must serve as indispensable conventions of Maya community.

earth lords

The seemingly unholy, or at least incongruous, alliance between saint and ancestor derives, of course, from Maya confrontations with the new forms of mortality, morality, and community instituted by Spanish rule after the conquest. Catholic evangelization and forced resettlement imposed, then polarized, contrasts between town and place, saint and ancestor, Christian civility and native devilry. Maya iconography reflects this social and cultural encompassment in a third image, one of capricious power and unbridled egoism: that of the earth lord. Also referred to as "owners" or "guardians" of the mountains, these figures invariably appear as fair-skinned Ladinos, rich in money, clothing, livestock, and land. They dwell in caves, inside mountains, or under the earth, controlling water and rainfall, the land and all its products. Ritual offerings must compensate them for any use of these resources. Ever needful of workers, these earth lords enslave Maya souls by making Mephistophelean promises of worldly success or, more rapaciously, by inflicting on the living illness, chronic misfortune, and death (Mondloch 1982:111–112; Nash 1970:18, 23–24; Oakes 1951:74–77; Siegel 1941:67; Vogt 1969:302–303; Wagley 1949:56–58, 60; cf. Gillin 1951:106; Reina 1966:181–182; Wisdom 1940:408).

In Chimbal, townspeople know the earth lords as *taajwa witz,* Mam for "owners" or "masters" of the mountains. From nearby peaks, these *witz* (or "mountains," as Chimaltecos most often call earth lords) once presided over Chimalteco field and forest as the givers of maize and the rain that made it grow. Snake, cloud, and lightning symbolism clearly identified them with old Maya rain gods (cf. Vogt 1969:302). As personifications of the enduring landscape, Chimalteco *witz* also once served to validate Chimbal's territorial sovereignty through the yearly rituals performed for them by town officials (Watanabe 1984:157–160). Despite associations with land and livelihood, however, Chimalteco tales invariably characterized *witz* as *tii moos* ("imposing Ladinos"), often dressed in colonial-style Spanish clothing and speaking only Spanish. Whether accosting Chimaltecos on lonely mountain paths far from town or confronting shamans at midnight seances, these *witz* evinced an unpredictable, often ruthless nature. Their great wealth enabled them to intrude in Chimalteco affairs only when it suited them—at times capriciously benefiting poor, humble Chimaltecos, at others greedily spiriting away human souls to work for them inside their mountains. As with the saints, recent years have witnessed a waning in Chimbal of many rituals that formerly beseeched *witz* or sought their leave to farm or hunt on their land, but *witz* remain familiar images—if perhaps no longer vital personages—to Chimaltecos, images enlivened by the Ladino demons that still haunt nightly darkness and dreams, and by the felt proximity of the *witz*-like Ladino Devil himself (cf. Wagley 1949:56*n*).

Thus, just as Santiago has become a Chimalteco and Chimalteco ancestors have become good, saint-worshiping "Christians," so Chimalteco *witz* have metamorphosed into imperious Ladinos closely resembling Ladino plantation owners in status, speech, wealth, and their peremptory—or at best paternalistic—attitudes toward Chimaltecos. Whatever their guise in pre-Hispanic times, *witz* have perhaps always embodied the impassive, contingent—and therefore

morally indeterminate—providence of the actual mountains on which rain falls, corn grows, and the living abide. The Ladinization of these presences, however, clearly precipitates the latent ambiguities of nature into more purposive negations of social, moral, and material reciprocity—a transformation that in itself dramatically conventionalizes the Maya experience of conquest and colonialism (cf. Taussig 1980).

This transformation also reflects the more immediate indifference, if not outright hostility, that Chimaltecos have come to expect from outsiders—from the Ladino bureaucrats and schoolteachers who intrude in their community; from the Ladino overseers on Guatemala's coffee and cotton plantations where Chimaltecos toil as migrant laborers; from the Ladino shopkeepers in the cities who sell them needed goods; and most recently, from the Ladino commanders of Guatemala's counterinsurgency army. The history of Chimalteco, indeed of Maya, relations with the Ladino world chronicles a living conquest of intrusion, extraction, and expropriation in which Ladinos more often than not have dictated the conditions—if not the actual outcome—of Maya survival (cf. Lovell 1988). Consequently, Ladinos tend to presume a categorical superiority over all "Indians," regardless of local cultural or linguistic differences among Maya themselves, while Maya tend to make more concentric distinctions between their individual communities and all other outsiders—but especially dominant Ladino authorities (cf. Colby and van den Berghe 1969:179–180; C. Smith 1987:208–211). These boundaries entail abiding ethnic antagonisms that imbue purely cultural differences in language, dress, livelihood, and residence with mutually derogatory racist stereotypes: to Maya, Ladinos are categorically lazy and untrustworthy; to Ladinos, all Maya are brutish and uncivilized.

Despite such obvious and pervasive antipathy, however, the double transposition of Catholic saint into Chimalteco shibboleth and local *witz* into Ladino devil implies neither that all Chimaltecos are saints nor that all Ladinos are devils. Instead, close scrutiny reveals that Chimalteco saint and *witz* differ little in their essential natures. Both, after all, are white-skinned foreigners who come from the mountains, and neither represents a paragon of unmitigated good or evil: Santiago can be cranky and unresponsive, just as *witz* can exhibit a capricious generosity. What differentiate saint and *witz* most clearly are the social relations that Chimaltecos deem possible with each. Santiago lives in the church at the center of town, readily accessible to townspeople. Chimaltecos can actively engage him, tacitly sanctioning their demands with the ritual offerings and assistance on which he depends. Far from innate or inherent, Santiago's Chimalteco-ness emerges from the mutual sociality between saint and town that makes this otherwise imperious figure open to Chimalteco appeal.

In contrast, *witz* brood inside solitary mountaintops, intervening in local life only when they, not Chimaltecos, please, impervious to the moral suasion of reciprocity. Consequently, *witz* become Ladinos not necessarily because Ladinos are naturally evil, but because, like Ladino strangers, *witz* dwell outside the community, indifferent—if not actively inimical—to the local sociality of Chimalteco life. That is, like Santiago's Chimalteco-ness, the Ladino nature of *witz* remains relational, not essential. As conventionalized social interlocutors, both Chimalteco saint and *witz* polarize, without epitomizing, the disparity between social relations within and outside of the community. Their ethnic transposition dramatizes the moral accountability—and its limitations—that living as neighbors should at once rightfully presume and promote.

Iconographically, then, Chimalteco *witz* suggest that Maya earth lords at once sharpen the respective meanings of saint and ancestor while at the same time uniting them against a backdrop of negative sociality. On one hand, earth lords are Ladino foreigners like the saints, but unlike the saints, they refuse encapsulation into the community. Their amoral intractability parodies the willful but domesticated nature of the saints, accentuating both the moral imperatives of town life and the dangers that lurk beyond its bounds. On the other hand, earth lords dwell in the mountains like the ancestors, at least partially associated with natural powers of regeneration, yet they remain ethnically distinct Ladinos. Unfettered by bonds of blood or local reciprocity, earth lords caricature ancestral powers of life and death, consuming Maya souls

rather than nurturing them. The amorality of their ethnically ascribed Ladino-ness emphasizes the significance of ancestry in Maya communities. In sum, earth lords circumscribe the realm of saint and ancestor by opposing the saints spatially, inverting the ancestors ethnically, and negating both morally (Table 1). In the world beyond the town dwell neither saints nor ancestors, only mockeries of them.

recombinant patterning in Maya syncretism

Close examination of Maya saints, ancestors, and earth lords reveals historically relativized images that inextricably bind Maya to where and with whom they worship. Furthermore, the syncretism linking these images constitutes neither a simple rearrangement of discrete symbols within some fixed cultural structure nor an indiscriminate seamless fusion of images. Instead, the syncretism of Maya saint, ancestor, and earth lord involves an emergent symbolic reassortment that continually alters the very cultural structure in which it occurs.

On one hand, initially foreign saints have come to precipitate what I would call Maya "cults of community." Territorially, the saints conventionalize ethnic and jurisdictional boundaries, not the immanent divine; morally, cult rituals affirm local standards of propriety, not universal Christian virtues; politically, Maya incorporation of the saints into church and chapel at the center of town dramatizes the moral—if hardly political—sovereignty of their communities, not unequivocal Christian faith. The mere presence of the saints in town and church thus conventionally substantiates a saintly conversion to local bonds of reciprocity that at once attests to the ability of the community to socialize these powerful strangers and at the same time authenticates the community's moral authority to do so.

On the other hand, Maya ancestors originated the *costumbre* that first mastered the saints and so established local community life, but in so doing they also converted themselves and their descendants to saint worship. That is, Maya myths depict the ancestors embracing the saints not necessarily as surrogates for old Maya gods but as new presences who first entered Maya towns as wandering strangers or figures found in the mountains. The ancestors then built them the very churches around which present communities coalesce. In a sense, then, rather than dictate the present from the past as primordial Mayas, ancestors more often simply recapitulate—and thus validate—present circumstances as rooted in the past. The continuity that they embody remains more emergently historical than mythical or even genealogical.

Lastly, earth lords personify the Ladino-cum-natural world over which communities of saints and ancestors never exercise final control. Although irreducible, the distinction here between local communities and the larger world remains to a certain extent relative and self-limiting, because the same mountains that oppose earth lord to saint also belong to the ancestors, whose presence there qualifies purely centripetal notions of sociality; nor can the surrounding land harbor only evil when it is also the sacred *Mundo* ("World") that nurtures all life (cf. Bunzel 1952:264; Carlson and Eachus 1977:41–42; McArthur 1977:16; Mendelson 1965:93–94; Tedlock 1982:41–42). That Maya should nonetheless still liken earth lords not only to Ladinos but also to the absolute malevolence of the Christian Devil attests to the perceived disjunction between community and Ladino morality (Hinshaw 1975:124–125, 127; Wagley 1949:56*n*; Warren 1978:47; cf. Taussig 1980:96).

Table 1. Distinctive features of saint, ancestor, and earth lord.

	Saint	Ancestor	Earth Lord
Social Contiguity	+	–	–
Ethnic Continuity	–	+	–
Moral Reciprocity	+	+	–

The syncretism of saint, ancestor, and earth lord thus serves to situate Maya communities morally, historically, and physically. Saints substantiate the ongoing vitality of local life; ancestors anchor the ever-changing present in the undeniable precedents of the past; and earth lords personify inescapable encompassments by natural as well as human realities. Having themselves been transmuted from 16th-century Catholic saints, deceased Maya forebears, and eternal "spirit owners," however, these images remain neither static nor immutable, but constantly interpenetrate one another (Fig. 2). For example, Maya prayers to the ancestors often come to address earth lords as well (cf. Bunzel 1952:310; Vogt 1976:111–112), just as prayers to the saints are sometimes made at mountaintop shrines otherwise dedicated to ancestors and earth lords (cf. Mondloch 1982:116–117).

In the Quiché town of Chichicastenango, ancestors have actually come to resemble earth lords as the implacable owners of family lands and houses—proprietors from whom the living must constantly implore protection and forgiveness for domestic transgressions (Bunzel 1952:269–270). The Tzeltal of Amatenango go even further and characterize similar punitive house spirits not as ancestors but as earth lord-like Ladino children. Like ancestors in Chichicastenango, these spirits require offerings to protect the souls of house occupants from evil, especially witchcraft (Nash 1970:11–18). The Tzotzil Maya in Zinacantan also conflate ancestors and earth lords by saying that their ancestral gods live inside nearby sacred mountains in

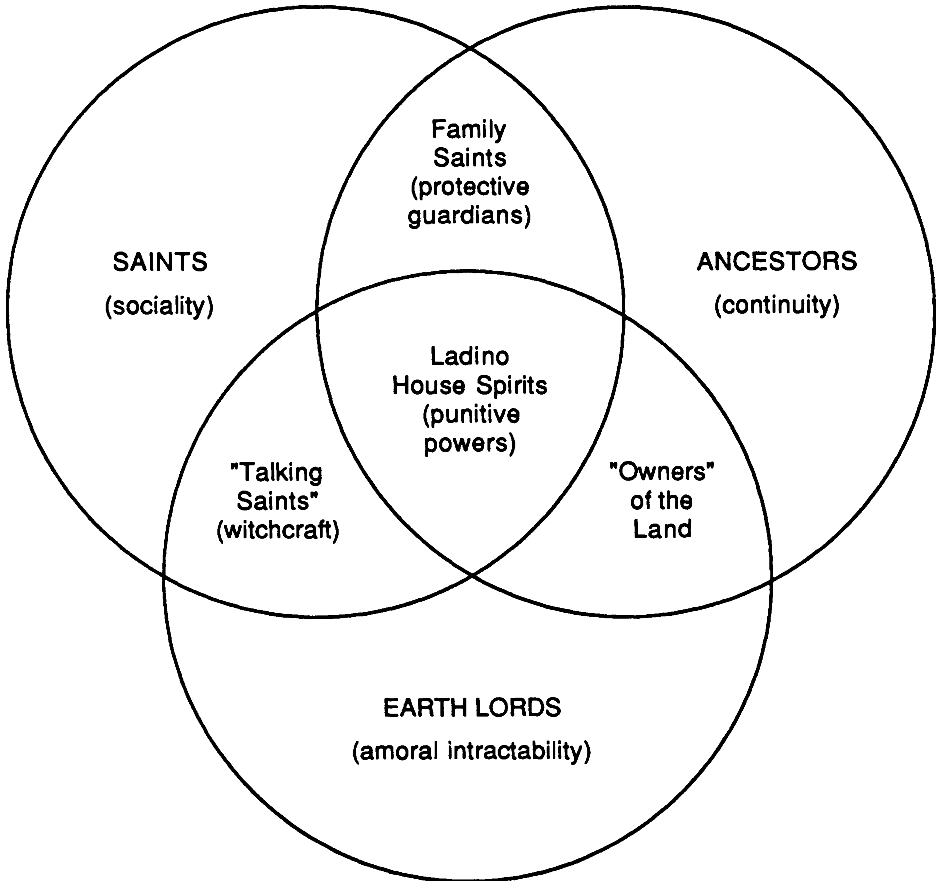

Figure 2. Recombination of images in Maya syncretism.

earth lord-style Ladino houses (Vogt 1969:384). This systematically inverts both the terms and the relations found in the other two cases: Quiché and Tzeltal houses with spirits inside them become transformed into the sacred abodes of Zinacanteco ancestral spirits themselves, while the Ladino-like behavior of house spirits becomes the Ladino house style of Zinacanteco-like ancestral gods.

Saints also figure in such permutations. While saints in Chimbal and elsewhere serve implicitly as metonyms for Maya ancestors, guardian family saints explicitly take the place of ancestral or Ladino house spirits among the Chortí of eastern Guatemala (Wisdom 1940:414–415, 417). Similarly, in Zinacantan again, individually owned "talking saints" contrast with publicly held saints in church and chapel; these "talking saints" emerge from the earth associated with earth lords, prognostication, and personal welfare rather than with God, Christ, and the common good (Laughlin 1969:175–177; cf. Vogt 1969:365–366). Finally, in Santiago Atitlán, a distaff saint called Maximón—a masked wooden figure dressed in local Maya style but identified with Judas Iscariot and the Spanish conqueror of Guatemala, Pedro de Alvarado—has come to embody sexuality, fertility, and natural cycles of regeneration, while "earth owners" have taken on the guise of "angels" bearing the saints' names of Martín and María (cf. Mendelson 1965; Tarn and Prechtel 1981).

Far from random confusions, such apparent anomalies at once mediate and further relativize saint, ancestor, and earth lord by dissociating and then systematically recombining their spatial, ethnic, and behavioral attributes. This ongoing reassortment of symbolic features into new images demonstrates how indispensable—yet elusive—the proper constitution of local Mayanness actually is: ancestors without reciprocity become Ladino house spirits; saints without sociality become witches; remote ancestral "owners" verge on becoming earth lords. Hardly an indiscriminate seamless fusion, the recombinant patterning of Maya syncretism situates ethnic distinctions between Maya and Ladino in the emergent morality of social accessibility, mutual familiarity, and the enduring associations that ancestral places circumscribe. More than some quaint or arbitrary index of Maya ethnicity, the syncretism of saint, ancestor, and earth lord constitutes an essential property as well as expression of these local Maya identities.

conclusion

Maya images of saint, ancestor, and earth lord clearly reveal that syncretism here constitutes a highly selective recombination of symbolic forms, not simply an indiscriminate homogenization of Maya and Catholic faiths. In one sense, syncretism does indeed relativize any "pure Maya" versus "imported Hispanic" distinctions: native ancestors become Christian ritualists; local earth lords metamorphose into diabolical Ladino devils; Catholic saints take on Maya garb, speech, and temperament. Despite this, such symbolic reassortment reflects highly motivated conventionalizations of local place, propriety, and permanence, not merely innate congruencies between Maya and Hispanic religion. The recombination of saint, ancestor, and earth lord systematically molds the Maya cultural and social landscape into ethnic enclaves of community and country, neighbor and stranger, Maya and Ladino. More than fortuitous accretion or amalgamation, Maya syncretism purposively engenders as many meaningful contrasts as it subsumes.

Such recombinant syncretism in turn suggests the emergent rather than determinant nature of the cultural structure linking saint, ancestor, and earth lord. This structure remains inclusive, open to transformational incursions from the likes of saints, God, the Devil, and creeping doubt. Moreover, even the most canonical images often appear to subvert the very relations linking them. Ancestors socialize stranger-saints into the community, but they themselves commit sins against the *costumbre* that they lay down. Saints, despite their incorporation into the community, retain a transcendent willfulness that sanctifies yet also relativizes the sociality that binds

them to ancestral places. And finally, the brooding presence of earth lords at once confirms and threatens the communitarian ethic articulated by saint and ancestor.

Contrary to those who give primacy to an underlying "deep structure" of Maya culture (cf. Bricker 1981; Hunt 1977), I would see in these indeterminacies the conditional rather than generative nature of such inherited constructs: "structure" circumscribes possibilities but constitutes a constantly emerging process rather than its own primordial essence. What endure for the Maya are the immediacies of a struggle for meaningful social existence—that is, for a community—rendered in local languages of received but continually reinterpreted conventional forms. It neither denies the relevance of structure to say that it emerges only through historical circumstance nor belittles Maya religion to say that it abides in the hazards of trust, decency—and hope—in Maya life.

Recombinant image and emergent structure bring me, finally, to the Maya identity embedded in both. Syncretism reveals this Mayanness to be neither the direct survival of primordial Maya attachments nor the ordained outcome of colonialist domination. Instead, the ritual conflation of saint and ancestor, and the ethnic transposition of Maya saint and Ladino earth lord, conventionalize an historically emergent social identity precipitated by moral propriety in the here and now of particular local places. Such propriety, however, remains relative rather than absolute, as images of willful saints and capricious earth lords attest. Far from being homogeneous, the ethnic communities that result each constitute at best a problematic consensus of individual wills and contingent affinities. Yet images as well as individuals remain bound up in compelling local concerns and commitments, if for no other reason than to fend off greater, or simply unknown, perils in a larger world that has always taken and seldom given. The dialectical process of syncretism mirrors as well as motivates this oppositional stance of Maya ethnic identity.

The syncretism evident in Maya saint, ancestor, and earth lord thus proves neither so seamless nor so spurious as some have supposed. Although indubitably shaped by both tradition and hegemony, syncretism proves that the Maya have survived an often perilous, always uncertain world as more than tradition-bound anachronisms of a long-vanished civilization or as helpless victims of class oppression. In an inconstant world where even saints lack altruism, the Maya have pragmatically and opportunistically sought their worldly salvation in the ever-contingent affinities of place and past that so long ago made Catholic saints the shibboleths of enduring local identities.

notes

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[1]I need to issue two caveats here. First, the use of sources so disparate in both time and space intends neither to imply nor to substantiate the existence of some pan-Maya culture. I do assume, however, that these communities share basic historical and cultural affinities (cf. Vogt 1964, In press) as well as formal similarities in world view (cf. Watanabe 1983) that justify such comparisons. As used in this article, "Maya" refers to the peoples speaking genetically related languages of the Maya Family, living in communities ranging from the Yucatan Peninsula on the north to the Pacific piedmont of Guatemala on the south. Second, this article attempts to outline the cultural space within which Maya religious syncretism occurs, and as such it constitutes neither a full ethnographic analysis of the place of religion in Maya life and history nor an exhaustive treatment of Maya religion as a whole. In addition to the "public" saint cults discussed here, there exists what I would call a "cult of the soul" (Watanabe 1987:300–301; cf. Farriss 1984:287–289, 296) that focuses on such things as crops (cf. Wagley 1941:31–44), divination (cf. Tedlock 1982), and curing (cf. Fabrega and Silver 1973), which I have dealt with in part elsewhere (cf. Watanabe 1989).

[2]León Valladares (1957:195) suggests that the Coloteco (Mam) term *Man-Txu* ("Father-Mother") refers to a supreme deity who, being of both sexes, "has no sex and is [therefore] an absolute being." Miguel León-Portilla (1963:80–103) argues the same thing for *Ometeotl* ("God of Duality"), one manifestation of

the supreme god of the Nahua, but he also notes that such duality makes this god the creator of all—including human—life, in a sense, then, perhaps a "cosmic" ancestor.

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