Destiny’s Saints: a Re-Emergence of Divination, Prophecy-Making, and Devotion to Saints in Chajul, Guatemala

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Consulting specialists that deal with destiny are increasingly visible in Chajul, an Ixil Maya town in highland Guatemala, among whom profecías ("prophets") are the most frequently visited. These kinds of specialists, many of whom are women identifying as members of Evangelical churches, are known to provide expert advice on important life decisions and plans, among which migration is one of the most frequent. Besides profecías, the mama’ or daykeepers also perform divinations based on the Ixil ritual calendar and ceremonial life surrounding Christian saints. Despite their claimed religious affiliations, all these specialists communicate and consult Christian saints, the Holy Spirit, and earth-beings who dwell within the landscape. This intensified concern in destiny consultation seems to extend to the attention given to figures of Christian saints, including some not historically associated with Chajul, or ones that have lost attention throughout the years. Based on ethnographic data and recent anthropological literature on relational and non-naturalist ontologies, this paper argues that some of the changes observed within different approaches to destiny reading in Chajul are best understood as elements of Ixil ontology, rather than shifts between religious affiliations.

Keywords: Ixil Maya, indigenous ontologies, destiny, saints, earth-beings
Profecías (“prophets” or “prophecy makers”) are currently some of the most frequently visited types of ritual specialists in the Ixil Maya town of Chajul, which is located in the department of Quiché in the northwestern highlands of Guatemala. These kinds of prophets are known to address questions about destiny and provide expert advice on important life decisions and plans of their clients. The profecías work both with issues concerning the everyday lives of the inhabitants of the three Ixil municipalities – Chajul, Nebaj, and Cotzal – and to address concerns with increased migration to the U.S.A. and the resulting Ixil community there. Many profecías are women identifying as members of Evangelical churches which have been increasingly present and gaining visibility in Guatemala since the mid-20th century. Besides profecías, the mama’ or daykeepers also perform divinations; however, theirs are based on the Ixil ritual calendar, communication with earth-beings (e.g. mountains), and the ceremonial life surrounding Christian saints introduced and adapted during Spanish colonization. This spiritual practice based on indigenous cosmovision and Roman Catholicism is typically denominated in Chajul as costumbre. In this context, the Ixil region seems to exemplify the complex relationships between the different religious expressions of Guatemala (e.g. Garrard-Burnett and Stoll 1993; Garrard-Burnett 1998; Molesky-Poz 2006; Samson 2007). Despite their claimed religious affiliations that appear within this heterogenous environment, both types of ritual specialists communicate with and consult Christian saints, the Holy Spirit, and earth-beings who dwell within the landscape surrounding Chajul.

In the last few years, there seems to be increasing interest in destiny-consulting specialists or diviners in Chajul. Attention to destiny was always an important aspect of Ixil ontology. Yet, problems with land, environmental degradation, and the corollary increased migration to the United States have led people to seek more insights from ritual specialists to provide insights about an often uncertain future. Interestingly, this intensified concern with destiny consultation seems to extend to the attention given to certain saints, including some which were historically absent from Chajul, or ones that have fallen out of favor in recent years. I argue that, although the increasing participation in local Evangelical churches can seemingly explain these shifts, the profecías and their relationship with saints and earth-beings illustrate more about Ixil ontology than simple religious affiliations. By combining different practices that may be identified with Catholicism, Evangelicalism, and costumbre, profecías do not necessarily negotiate between religious expressions, but within the order of their world itself.

I first examine these issues of Ixil ontology through the work of Chajul profecías based on my nearly decade-long ethnographic fieldwork in the Ixil region. I then look at recent anthropological work on relational and non-naturalist ontologies, especially analogism as proposed by Philippe Descola (2013). I also draw from other propositions engaged in critiquing dualism and modernity, such as the pluriverse: an analytic tool proposed by Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena (2018:4), that they consider helpful in “producing ethnographic compositions capable of conceiving ecologies of practices across heterogeneous(ly) entangled worlds”.

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Contemporary Prophecy Makers

Profecías claim to base their prophetic work on the act of escuchar la palabra de Dios (“listening to the word of God”), who gives them certain instructions regarding inquiries about present or future life events. People from Chajul (Chajuleños) consult profecías about a variety of issues like health, family, business, or general prosperity, and typically before migrating to the U.S.A. It is considered a good practice to ask for advice multiple times and from more than one profecía—preferably one living nearby and one living in another town. This is to eliminate the possibility of bias caused by simply knowing the family situation of the inquirer or to avoid fraud. In certain cases, Chajuleños have consulted profecías from another town such as Juil or Nebaj, only to discover that they knew details about their personal situation, both in Chajul and of their family members in the U.S.A. Thus, some people learned that legitimate profecías were able to provide advice based on knowledge that they could only possess thanks to their gift, which recipients considered valuable.

Migration to the U.S.A. is one of the most oft-mentioned reasons Chajuleños visit a profecía. They are consulted to establish if the journey should be undertaken, and if so, how and when. For instance, if a profecía advises that the appropriate time has not come yet, it is better to wait and consult her again later. If the profecía advises that the time is coming, then it is preferable to independently consult other profecías to cross-check if the predictions start to align. In this way, an ideal day and time for undertaking the journey is established, and the migrant can be more confident about their success.

There is certainly some mystique surrounding profecías, leading some to mistrust or even suspect quackery. However, even some of the most skeptical (and non-Protestant) subjects I spoke to still used the services of profecías for important family matters, on the grounds that it is good to consult them “just in case”. It must be underlined that these services are not cheap: in 2021 consultation prices fluctuated from a few hundred to a few thousand quetzals (several hundred dollars). Sometimes payments are finalized after the migrant’s journey has been deemed successful. Some people also assured me that there have been cases where attempts to migrate failed because a profecía was not consulted. In one case, a doubtful consultant paid a few thousand quetzals for the combination of profecía services, ceremonies from a mama’, and a Catholic mass. All of these spiritual services were meant to establish correct timing and secure the fate of the oldest son in the family who planned to successfully migrate to the U.S.A.

Traditionally, within Ixil communities, the mama’ – destiny and ritual specialists who perform varied types of divination based on the Ixil calendar – were those who analyze matters of destiny. Calendars like that of the Ixil have been in use in the Guatemalan highlands since before the Spanish invasion, continue to be consulted, and have remained significant to this today (Lincoln 1942; see also Garay 2018). Maya calendars have also been re-implemented within different circles as a part of revitalization efforts, especially after the civil war in Guatemala (see Fischer and Brown 1996; Molesky-Poz 2006; Samson 2007). Benjamin and Lore Colby (1981) use the term “daykeeper” to describe the work and life of an Ixil diviner from Nebaj, with whom they performed extensive interviews. In Chajul, the mama’, also referred to as “sacerdotes Mayas” (“Maya priests”) or guías
espirituales (“spiritual guides”), perform various types of ceremonies that draw from Maya and Catholic spiritual practices, and that are described as costumbre or ceremonias Mayas, depending on the context (also see Watanabe 1992:66; Cook and Offit 2013:xviii-xv; Woodfill 2019:217-218). Typically, these ceremonies are performed at k’atchb’al (mountain altars or sacred places) and involve candle burning and offerings, utilizing certain days of the Ixil calendar and invoking Christian saints (see also Banach 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2023). The importance of such sites for different Maya groups is unquestionable, and the many transformations they have undergone have been described elsewhere from various perspectives (i.e. Bassie-Sweet 2008; Cojti Ren 2020; Maxwell 2014; Woodfill 2019). Mama’ divination is primarily based on the interpretation of the calendar and communication with corresponding nonhuman beings dwelling in the surrounding landscape. The tools they use for divination include seeds (corn and tz’ite seeds) and different kinds of objects inherited or encountered throughout their lives (e.g., stones, pre-Hispanic ceramic sherds and obsidian fragments; Figure 1). In one instance I observed, a Chajul mama’ who was the head of one of the cofradías (see below) used tarot cards for his divinations.

The Ixil mama’ work closely with the remaining cofradías: confraternities devoted to specific saints, of which there have traditionally been ten in Chajul. These ten cofradías are located in the two subdividing town cantones and include: Virgen Rosario Ixoq, Sacramento Corpus Cristo, Salvador del Mundo, Santa Cruz Ixoq, Virgen de Guadalupe; and Virgen Rosario Winaq, San

Figure 1. Varas objects used by a mama’ for divination. All photographs by the author.
Gaspar, San Pedro Apóstol, Calvario y Cristo de Esquipulas, Virgen Concepción y José (Figure 2). Saints and cofradías are typically described in the context of religious syncretism. However, it has been demonstrated that local concepts of Catholic saints are not an indiscriminate fusion of Maya and Christian religions (Watanabe 1990; MacKenzie 1999). According to Watanabe (1990:131), syncretism would rather be an “essential property of local identity, not simply a quaint or arbitrary survival of the Maya past”. Syncretism becomes problematic through ontological lens, because it requires the use of supracultural analytical tools such as “religion.” The practices of Evangelical profecías and their attention to destiny, including existing and “syncretized” (yet new, at least in Chajul), Christian saints connected with earth-beings, further complicate this subject.

One of the most distinctive characteristics between profecías and mama’, or destiny readers and traditional diviners, is that profecías typically identify as Evangelicals while mama’ identify as Catholics. In Chajul, the implication of both affiliations was polarized, at least until recently: identifying with an Evangelical church would impede visiting mountain altars and participation in costumbre or cofradía ceremonies devoted to saints, which Evangelical denominations typically demonize and discard as “idolatry”. Meanwhile, costumbristas would argue that Protestant “sects”, working under North American influence, destroy local culture. This shows the complexity and scale of tensions between these religious expressions (Samson 2007). Despite this, the participation

Figure 2. Cofradía altar with figures of Christian saints (El Calvario, Cristo Esquipulas, Virgen de Guadalupe, Via Cruz) at one of the family houses in Chajul. On the left – a pre-Hispanic urn.
of Evangelicals in rituals involving earth-beings has continued throughout the last few decades, but would be rather rare or clandestine. This seems to have drastically changed within the last few years in Chajul, especially because of the growing popularity of profecías which has been brought up in interviews, but can also be observed in their presence in various spaces, especially visiting the k’atchb’al and Catholic church. For instance, I spoke to two young adult sisters belonging to an Evangelical church in Chajul, Iglesia de Dios Nueva Jerusalem. They work as a sort of spiritual team: they both identify as profecías, but one of them also considers herself a mama’, performing ceremonies at the mountain altars. The day I first spoke to them, they had just returned home from a ceremony at the Paxil cave located in the neighboring community of Xolcuay. These sisters do not see their work as conflicting with their Evangelical affiliation and stated that their pastor does not see any conflict either. They do not go to the Catholic Church, although they do have a home altar where they keep saint effigies of Maximón (San Simón), the Virgen de Guadalupe, San Judas, San Miguel Arcángel, and Santa Muerte (Figure 3). Some of these saints vary greatly from those typically displayed on cofradía house altars in Chajul (as mentioned above) and in the Catholic Church (for Santa Muerte see Calvo-Quirós 2022; for Maximón and San Judas see MacKenzie 1999). Our review of archival documents (Castillo and Banach 2024) and of previous ethnographies (Colby and van den Berghe 1969; Lincoln 1945) indicate that these saints’ popularity is a new phenomenon in the Ixil region. Oral histories provide only brief mentions. Even the Virgen de Guadalupe seems to appear here in a different context than the figure traditionally carried by cofradías (compare Figures 1 and 3).

The first time I saw one of these young women performing a ceremony was in a chapel on Ju’il Mountain, a most revered regional earth-being, when I was visiting the k’atchb’al Xe’ Ju’il (‘burning place at the feet of Ju’il’) with some cofradía members, including its head cargo-holder (current leader), who was holding the figure of the Virgen del Rosario Winaq (male aspect of Our Lady of the Rosary). I had visited this chapel on various occasions throughout the years, but this time was different: where only wooden crosses used to be stood a new figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Even the elders were slightly puzzled because this figure did not belong to their cofradía. The cofradía and the mama’ used to be the ones who most frequently visited this altar, performing ceremonies in honor of the saints and calendric earth-beings. Yet, as they grew older and dwindled in number, they struggled to maintain and protect the chapel from vandalism, which they attributed to some Evangelicals claiming that “satanic rituals” were performed there. As the members of the cofradía later commented, they seemed content to see the altar in use and surprised to witness the young women speaking to it while performing a ceremony at the same time as theirs (Figure 4).

One of the “profecía sisters” also conducted a ceremony at Vi’ Aanima, the town’s cemetery, using plenty of colorful candles and powders, blowing kuxa (cane alcohol) on the altar and the four corners of the chapel. One of the older mama’ who happened to be there with his humble offering of a few white candles was visibly impressed by her presence. Meanwhile, when she heard him reciting the days of the calendar, she tried to repeat some of the days after him. When I spoke to her later, I learned that, unlike older mama’, she did not know the Ixil ritual calendar. She claimed she did not need it for her ceremonies, or for her destiny readings to be effective, but that she would learn some day-names whenever she heard them from elders (Figure 5).

According to respondents, some profecías simply van con los dos (“go with both”), meaning...
Figure 3. Profecía altar with figures of the saints (Maximon, Santa Muerte, Virgen de Guadalupe, San Judas, San Miguel Arcángel).
Figure 4. Members of the cofradía during ceremony at the chapel of Xe’Ju’il. In the background profecía performing ritual for her client.
that they talk to God and practice *costumbre*—talking with and offering candles to earth-beings at mountain altars. Indeed, upon revisiting mountain altars in 2021 I realized that places such as Vi’ Antrees Mountain are now used far more intensively than I had previously observed. Moreover, multiple new altars—attributed to profecías—have been opened on the mountain. Some profecías can be also seen in the Catholic church and at *bosques de oración* (“prayer groves”).

Profecías are known to visit the Catholic church of Chajul in the evening where they, along with other, mostly female pennants, engage in penitentiary rounds on their knees in the atrium. They typically start at the entrance and slowly progress to the main altar with the central figure of *Jesús Nazareno*, sometimes circling back to the door. The ways in which profecías recite prayers is also described by other Chajuleños as idiosyncratic: they produce a loud, wailing lament, and cover their faces with their hair or scarf. Pennant profecías carry candles and tend to stop in front of saint effigies located along church walls, to whom they direct their prayers and sometimes offer unlit candles at their feet. Typically, the two effigies of the *Virgen Concepción* and *Virgen del Rosario* seem to receive the most attention, a lot of candles, and items of clothing (e.g., the *Virgen del Rosario* can be seen wearing a Chajul headband with pompoms). Notably, whereas the use of candles is typically associated with Catholicism and costumbre, a few years ago their use was forbidden from inside the church and restricted to a defined place in the parish patio. While penance rounds have been
Figure 6. Entrance to the Catholic Church of Chajul.
practiced in Chajul for some time, the realization that many of the women engaging in this practice are Evangelical profecías forces a redefinition of the Catholic church atrium (Figure 6).

Similarly, the prayer groves represent an ambivalent space in terms of overlapping affiliations. Many of the bosques de oración in the Ixil region attended by different Protestant churches are related to the earth altars connected to costumbre, sometimes being located in relationship to them. For instance, the prayer grove closest to the community of Juil is a hillside meadow with a path in its middle marked with colorful ribbons. Visitors (again, mostly women) kneel on the grass and walk up the hill, praying, alone or accompanied by their profecías, stopping along the way at stations to recite loud prayers and laments. From the meadow, a picturesque view extends directly in front of Ju’il Mountain: an earth-being who, according to the Ixil oral tradition, is the finder of the first maize seed that was used to fashion humankind (Figure 7).

**Destiny and Analogism**

When looking at the mobility between Catholic and Evangelical practices, or “shifting affiliations” as Linda Green (1993, 1999) defines them for rural Guatemala, we should distinguish affiliation from conversion. Importantly, not all mobilities between Christian churches – sometimes multiple, dynamic but also tentative – imply identity shifts. Sometimes this mobility is simply contextual or adaptive; shifts that Green (1993) connects to responses to social problems associated with, but not limited to, the violencia – the period of state-sponsored military rule and violence – and subsequent intents to regain a sense of community in its aftermath. Speaking with women survivors of that civil war, Green (1993:162,174) describes shifts towards Evangelical churches as

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**Figure 7.** View of the mountain Vi’ Ju’il and bosque de oración decorated with ribbons.
a survival tactic, or “a refuge from suffering and a space in which women are able to reclaim some personal control over their lives”, and not necessarily a rejection of “Maya cosmology”.

While some patterns make sense when we look at this shifting religious affiliation, I believe that observations of mobility transcending religion bring to light fascinating possibilities. When looking at ceremonies involving Ixil profecías, we see that they may draw from the options and tools given by each affiliation: gifts from the Holy Spirit (like prophecy or faith healing), skills to persuade Christian saints, and a relationship with earth-beings dwelling within the landscape alongside human-beings, including communicating with them through the Ixil practice of daykeeping. However, not all these practices should be interpreted as religious. In fact, the separation of religious and secular rituals (and the sacred vs. secular dualism) does not seem to apply in many Mesoamerican contexts. Referring to Edmund Leach (1968:521), who proposes that ritual is a concept rather than “a fact of nature” and should be operational and dependent upon the “user’s background”, Astor-Aguilera (2020) argues that Maya rituals cannot be distinguished as belonging to the non-rational, or sacred realm, rather than the rational one. If we consider profecía practices as other than religious, we can also ask to what degree the concept of religious affiliation is actually relevant in their case. In the case of the Ixil Maya and other Mesoamerican groups, part of the “user’s background” is the process of evangelization and its suppression of what is interpreted as mere belief, including Mesoamerican, heterogenous worldviews. A European perspective focused on institutionalized religions complicates “rational” attempts to explain Maya rituals and ceremonial practices. Recent attempts to “translate Maya rituals” show that many of these actions aim to control the environment and the various natural entities that exist within it, and such practices should be seen as a different ontology rather than a different religion (Astor-Aguilera 2020).

Philippe Descola (2013) classifies ontologies in four major types: animism, naturalism, totemism, and analogism. Analogism, as Descola (2013:201) describes, is

“[...] a mode of identification that divides up the whole collection of existing beings into a multiplicity of essences, forms, and substances separated by small distinctions and sometimes arranged on a graduated scale so that it becomes possible to recompose the system of initial contrasts into a dense network of analogies that link together the intrinsic properties of the entities that are distinguished in it.”

In other words, analogical ways of dealing with the nature of the world imply constant management of intricately interwoven elements that need careful attention, often through ritual practices. Moreover, this world cannot easily be divided along dual affiliations, as its beings and components are non-dual in the first place. These components may also undergo shifts and transformations to maintain the world in order.

Descola (2013) further locates examples of the distribution of analogism in Mesoamerica and the Andes. Of particular Mesoamerican interest – and following López Austin’s (2004:197-220) analysis of the Nahua “animist centers” – Descola highlights the multiple components of human beings. These components can be found within several groups beyond the Nahua in Mexico, including among the Maya Tzotzil, Ch’orti’, and Yucatec. A similar concept, widely described as nagualism, is in fact present in many Mesoamerican cultures and provides a variety of interpretations (see Brinton 1894; Foster 1944; Garza 1987; Helmke and Nielsen 2009; Martínez González 2011; Saler 1969; Stratmeyer and Stratmeyer 1977; Watanabe 1992), with Pedro Pitarch’s (2011) ethnography
of Tzeltal souls perhaps representing its most compelling study. These phenomena have been described in various ways, and have also caused terminological inconsistencies (see Foster 1944; Mosquera Saravia 2017), including in studies on the Ixil region (Banach 2023; Colby 1976; Lincoln 1945). Setting these discussions aside, it is most relevant to underline that some of the “multiple components” investigated by Descola are not the sole preserve of humans. Those components can also be possessed by other beings such as animals, plants, mountains, or even crosses, saint effigies, and houses. A good example would be what a mama’ (with Evangelical affiliation) explained to me: that such elements can be part of a human being as well as a mountain, which, like a person, *tiene su nagual* (“has their nagual”; don Bernal, Ilom, 2016).

According to Descola (2013:226), in analogist ontology, interiority and physicality are “fragmented, in every being, into multiple components that are mobile and partly extracorporeal, the unstable and haphazard grouping of which produces a permanent flux of singularities.” In such a complicated universe composed of indefinitely multiplied differences, there is a constant need for specialists to manage the communication between all those elements, know specific practices, as well as techniques to help organize, decipher, and negotiate with destiny and the future. Descola (2013:212) further highlights the importance of astrologers and diviners who communicate with these elements (typically via dreams). They are the ones that pay special attention to destiny, and who “anchor” or “fix” the ends and dispositions of the universe of entities.

Astor-Aguilera (2020) emphasizes Maya ritual acts of controlling the environment and the entities dwelling within it. C. James MacKenzie (2016:2258), who studied in San Andres Xecul, agrees that attention should be devoted to the “establishment of order” within the “costumbrista mythology,” where “order is not inherent to the cosmos, but something that emerges through conflict and experiment, and must be perpetually renewed.” And in the hierarchy ruling these efforts of renewal, not all beings are equal. Following Viveiros de Castro (1998), MacKenzie (2016, 2019) describes his observations from Xecul in the context of renewed attention to animism (rather than analogism). These analyses from Xecul are based on the existence of “co-essential” elements or “companions” (i.e., *naval*), whose “humanity” is shared with non-human beings (MacKenzie 2016). For the present study, it is interesting how MacKenzie (2016:2333) describes the “enthusiastic Christianity” and his pointing out the importance of managing and manipulating of *suerte* (“luck-destiny”) and, therefore, the inter-connected divination practices involving distinct interpretations. Destiny is thus a delicate issue requiring protection through offerings and ceremonies performed in sacred places (MacKenzie 2016:2333).

Returning to Chajul and analogism, if a profecía’s inquiry requires consultation with an earth-being, it is part of negotiation with the order of the world to do so, and not necessarily her negotiation of religious affiliations or identities. Moreover, the practices of the profecías may represent some of those ethnographic concepts connected to place that indicate “excesses to the theoretical and empirical” that we are used to (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018:5). In this sense, these practices have the potential to teach us about the “world of many worlds,” inspired by Zapatista declarations and defined as “pluriverse” by Blaser and de la Cadena (2015). Practices that involve earth-beings performed from within heterogenous worlds matter especially when performed by women. This is crucial when we talk about pluriverse in the context of the role of patriarchy in the systematic
destruction of nature (Escobar 2018), especially if the reemergence of divination practices in Ixil communities happens through women and is prompted by migration, natural disasters caused by climate change, and extractivism.

Discussion and Conclusion

I suggest that, in Chajul, Ixil profecías are currently playing one of the most effective roles to handle the delicate issues of destiny. Their practices negotiate among various elements and combine distinct components associated with Catholicism, Evangelicalism, and costumbre, but do not necessarily imply a formal shift between religious affiliations. Rather, these heterogeneous elements belong to a non-dualist and non-naturalist ontology that could be described as analogism, but above all, they belong to the Ixil ontology; one of the worlds within the pluriverse (see Blaser and Cadena 2018). Co-inhabiting this relational world with interconnected elements and beings, whether they are humans, mountains, ancestral or new saints, or the Holy Spirit, requires special attention to time and destiny, and the consequent tracking, observation, and other tools of skillful specialists.

While Descola’s proposition has been debated (see Bruno Latour’s 2009 commentary on the debate between Descola and Viveiros de Castro), the concern with ontology is returning to social sciences (Escobar 2018:174). This “ontological turn” includes a critique of some of the fundamental dualisms, especially the divides between nature and culture, the secular and the sacred, individual and collective, etc. This brings a necessary reflection on modernity and neocolonial developments that clearly impact communities like those of the Ixil, and result in the devastation of social and physical landscapes, force increased migrations (Batz 2021, 2022), and shift relationships with non-humans. In places like Chajul, this creates a need for new ways of dealing with unstable elements, especially if stability and control over things like destiny were always considered delicate matters requiring considerable attention. Understanding the work of the (primarily female) Ixil profecías as a way of dealing with these inconsistencies within Ixil ontology, rather than within the non-rational realm of religious affiliations, helps reframe these indigenous narratives. Finally, considering the critique of dualism, ethnographic compositions attuned to the concept of the pluriverse can tell stories about where ontologies manifest themselves – including when referring to myths and ritual – and facilitate a better comprehension of distinct beings and their relations (see Blaser 2013; Blaser and Cadena 2018; Escobar 2018).

Acknowledgements

Research and preparation of this article was possible thanks to the grant provided by the National Science Center of the Republic of Poland (grant number UMO-2017/25/N/HS1/00633). I would like to extend my gratitude to Lucas Asicona, Manuela Asicona, and Felipe Rivera for providing important comments about this subject. I thank Giovanni Batz for reading the first version of this text. I am also grateful to the editors of this issue, Maxime Lamoureux-St-Hilaire and Victor Castillo, as well as to C. Mathews Samson for their comments, edits, and reviews of this article.


The Mayanist vol. 5 no. 2

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