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The Maya Pilgrimage to the Black Christ

A Phenomenology of Journey, Sacrifice, and Renewal

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Abstract. – Esquipulas, Guatemala, is the most significant pilgrimage site in Central America. Maya traditionalists come here to materialize their pleas through the bodily enactments of journey, touch, and sacrifice that set in motion not only the lives of the pilgrims but also the world as such. In this article, the meaning of pilgrimage, usually trapped in culturalist or historicist explanations, is placed in a relationship between pilgrims' practices and their understandings of their lifeworld. This phenomenological perspective enables the anthropology of Latin American pilgrimage to take seriously both native cosmology and experience basis of everyday life on which it is based. *[Guatemala, Esquipulas, pilgrimage, Maya cosmology, religious experience, lifeworld]*

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"All classes and conditions of people, from the simplest Indian to the most sophisticated members of Guatemala's aristocracy, kneel inside and outside the church, each with lighted candles, each praying or singing while clouds of incense rise to lofty beams. Among them is represented surely every physical, mental and spiritual ill and enough faith to move mountains." This is what Kelsey and Osborne (1939: 48) wrote of Esquipulas. The town, located in the eastern part of the Guatemalan Highlands, at the border with Honduras, is the most important pilgrimage site in Central America.[1] Today, the temple attracts more than a million pilgrims every year, 60% of whom come from Guatemala, 20% from Honduras, 10% from El Salvador, and still smaller portions from Mexico and the USA (Thomas, Horst, and Hunter 2002: 33). The object of veneration is the image of a Black Christ (Cristo Negro, Señor de Esquipulas or Milagroso) that was, in 1595, placed inside a small chapel and, in 1759, in a majestic basilica, where it has remained to this day.[2] Despite its incontestable importance, the phenomenon has so far not been sufficiently investigated.[3] Ethnological research on pilgrimages to Esquipulas, chiefly linked to the Ch'orti' Maya population, has been sporadic and piecemeal.[4]

1 In the 1960s, Esquipulas was declared a town and the shrine a basilica minor under the custody of the Benedictine Order.

2 On the history of the sanctuary, see Paz Solórzano (1914), García Aceituno (1940), Castañeda (1955) and López Hernández (2010).

3 Borhegyi (1953, 1954) discussed Esquipulas as a pilgrimage site in relation to the sanctuary in Chimayo; more recently, researchers have paid attention to the geography of pilgrimage (Thomas, Horst, and Hunter 2002; Horst, Thomas, y Hunter 2010) and the related tradition of geophagy (Hunter and Kleine 1984; Hunter, Horst, and Thomas 1989), to popular poetry (Navarrete Cáceres 2007), and to political history (Pompejano 2009).

4 Surprisingly, Wisdom (1940) does not mention pilgrimages to Esquipulas in his fascinating work; Girard (1962: 29–31), however, describes the custom of "bringing in the winter" among the Ch'orti' and the Poqomam (1962: 163 f.). The pilgrimages of the Poqomam are also discussed by Gillin (1958 [1951]: 237 f. and Reina (1973 [1966]: 245 f.). Probably the most detailed account of the pilgrimages to Esquipulas among the Ch'orti' is provided by Fought (1972: 451–461), these pilgrimages are also briefly described by López García y Metz (2002: 205) and Metz (2006: 127 f.), and, in passing,

Beginning with the classic study by Eric Wolf (1958), who analysed the Marian cult in Guadalupe, the anthropology of Latin American pilgrimage has made headway and generated an edited volume (Crumrine and Morinis 1991) as well as extensive monographs (Sallnow 1987; Derks 2009).[5] The theoretical frameworks underlying the study of pilgrimage have gradually shifted from functional structuralism to political economy (cf. Schryer 1991). While some researchers have emphasised the continuity, even timelessness of native symbolism, others focused on its historical determination by the social structure of the rulers and the ruled. In the present study, it is not my intention to defend or dispute any of the above approaches, nor to attempt to provide a synthesis of them, but rather to offer a different perspective, one that is less analytical and more phenomenological (cf. Tedlock 1982). I argue that it is the experience of the natural and social world the Maya are part of that gives Maya pilgrimage its meaning and makes it efficacious. The cosmology of the Maya, in which beings of the world possess the idiosyncratic traits of analogicity, complementarity, and cyclicity, is a living and dynamic response to their everyday life experience. Within this context, pilgrimage is perceived as a sacrifice, which sets in motion not only the lives of the pilgrims but also the world as such.

Answering the call of the current anthropology of pilgrimage, which emphasises the actual movement, metaphoricity and phenomenology of the journey (Coleman and Eade 2004), this study discusses the Maya pilgrimage ritual as an expression of the course of the world. The movement of the pilgrim is an analogy to the movement of the world, the sacrifice made by the pilgrim an analogy to the mechanism of sacrifice of the universe. Human being acts within the coordinates of his world and is a part as well as a representation of it. Entangled in a network of relations, he becomes an element in the general circulation – of reciprocity, primarily represented by the food exchanged between humans and deities, or of the cycle of birth and death, perhaps most succinctly expressed by the agricultural year. Unlike colonial-historical, post-colonial or post-structuralist analyses, I take the view that Maya pilgrimage needs to be understood within the context of Maya lived cosmology, which is embedded in their specific experience of the world and embodied in the specific activities of the pilgrims, that is, in the experienced thought and practice. I pick up on the line of the ethnology of the Maya that studies culture within the lives of its agents, as it is constantly renewed and transformed in contact with observed phenomena and processes.[6] This study also follows the intentions of the anthropology of experience, defending the visual against the verbal and images against language (Turner and Bruner 1986), as well as of the anthropology of Christianity, criticising the focus of Western scholars on text and meaning (Engelke and Tomlinson 2006). The tendency to experiential examination and practice theory, however, does not implicate a discrimination of linguistic and semantic analysis (see Kray 2007). After all, it was already the Turners (1978: 97), who recognised "the *communitas* within the structure, the 'flow' within the 'frame'" in Latin American pilgrimage; that is its dimension of dynamics and experience.

The designation "Maya pilgrimage" is not used here to refer to some "primordial," "essential," or "ideal" Mayaness, but quite simply to discuss those pilgrims who speak any of the Maya languages and who, through ritual practice, express their view of the world, which derives from a rich cultural negotiation between their native heritage and European imports.[7] I do not think that precisely defining, analytically distinguishing, or in any way contrasting the "Maya" with "Christian" versions of the journey is of much use: the dichotomies native/non-native and Christian/non-Christian are rendered moot by the processes of syncretising or even hybridising (cf. Watanabe and Fischer 2004). All forms of identification, including different types of Catholicism, Maya cultural revival, or even Protestantism, which might be encountered in Esquipulas, are the result of unique and complex interconnections and interpenetrations of these varied religious elements. Nonetheless, this does not imply that there are no discrepancies between the official Catholic idea of

by Palma Ramos (2001: 141). A dedicated study on Esquipulas has been written by Kendall (1991); the long journeys from Almolonga are described by Goldín (1988: 302 f.). A well-known ethnological piece of evidence on the reverence enjoyed by the Lord of Esquipulas in Mexico comes from Zinacantán (Early 1966).

5 For México, see Garma Navarro y Shadow (1994). On the attempts to set up pilgrimage studies of the Maya cultural area see, for instance, Osborne (1948), Straub (1985), or Astor-Aguilera and Jarvenpa (2008).

6 Watanabe (1992); Cook (2000); Fischer (2001); Carlsen (2011 [1997]).

7 This is, in fact, a simplified description, which assumes away the differences between various forms of the traditional *costumbre* (syncretic or hybrid Maya-Catholic religiosity) and of cultural activism (antisyncretic or purified Maya spirituality) (see Deuss 2007; MacKenzie 2009, 2014). Despite the pluralism and fluidity of present-day Maya religion, different pilgrims do have some common premises and traditional themes, that is, the constantly reproduced elements of the Maya "cultural logic" (Fischer 2001).

Fig. 1: The Basilica of Esquipulas, Guatemala.

the pilgrimage, as represented by the Church administration of the sanctuary, on the one hand, and the Maya traditionalist perception, which draws on the bodies of knowledge within the specific local communities, on the other. Just as other great pilgrimage sites, Esquipulas provides an arena for a number of divergent, and sometimes even competing, pilgrimage discourses (cf. Eade and Sallnow 1991). The Maya traditionalist does not regard the Black Christ of Esquipulas as a reference to Christ, Son of God and Saviour in the orthodox Christian sense but, indeed, it is not a task of the anthropological study of Christianity to search for "the true Christianity," just as it is not the task of the ethnological study of the Maya to search for the "true Mayaness."

The aim of this study is twofold: first, to contribute to the ethnography of pilgrimage to Esquipulas, a subject which has been neglected to this day, despite its importance; second, to provide a contribution to the general anthropological study of Latin American pilgrimage, which has so far tended to reduce its subject of interest to cultural continuity, or to power relationships between humans. What is, thus, the meaning of the pilgrimage which is trapped in such culturalist and historicist explanations? Without denying the merits of these approaches, I suggest that pilgrimage should be located in a fundamental relationship between pilgrims' practices and their understandings of their lifeworld. In pilgrimage, both human beings and the cosmos are put into motion and (re)enacted. The study begins by discussing the image of the Black Christ, his perceived character and gender, his colour, and the origin attributed to him by the Maya, particularly in connection to his analogicity and complementarity with other beings of the world. It then provides a description of the pilgrimage itinerary, focusing on its two major points; the line to the Black Christ and the Way of the Cross, where despite a general shift toward motorisation, the journey remains the chief motif. The bodily enactments of journey, touch, and sacrifice are ritual expressions of the concept of promise, which in turn is a means of making the pilgrimage efficacious (its efficacy is demonstrated but by no means self-evident). It is argued that the sole meaning of the spiritual exchange may not necessarily consist in rational calculation and scheming selfishness, or in subordination and resistance; Maya pilgrimage is situated at the heart of the Maya lifeworld, in the intersubjective experience of journey, sacrifice, and renewal.[8]

8 This study draws on a total of six months of fieldwork conducted in Guatemala in 2009 and 2013. Data were collected using the participant observation of behaviour in the pilgrimage centre, especially in the line to the Black Christ and on the Way of the Cross, and short informal interviews. Applying qualitative methods, I pursued to experience pilgrims' worlds in their natural contexts – not only at the site but also in the course of motorised group pilgrimages; moreover, I made a journey on foot from Jocotán. I visited some of the pilgrims to Esquipulas at their homes, even in the distant Department of Huehuetenango, which allowed me to hold more in-depth conversations within their families and communities. Given the location of the pilgrimage site, I present literature drawing on the ethnography of the Ch'orti' Maya, who have only recently attracted wider interest from researchers (Metz, McNeil, and Hull 2009). However, examples from other Maya groups are used for comparison.

The Living Black Christ

Two features of the Black Christ's image are remarkable: it is a Christ and he is black. The Marian cult may dominate the majority of Latin American and, in particular, European pilgrimage centres, but it is the Christ cult that prevails in the Maya cultural area. Jesús Sepultado (San Felipe), Cristo del Gólgota (Chajul), Cristo Chi-Ixim (Tactic), Cristo de las Tres Caídas (Ayutla), or Niño Dios (Amatitlán) rank among the most important pilgrimage sites in Guatemala.[9] It is true that this situation could have, in part, resulted from the popularity of worshipping Christ in Spain during the 17th and 18th centuries (Christian 1981: 182) and from the European Catholic reformation at large (Nolan 1991: 31), but the religious sensitivity of the indigenous population seems to have played an important role as well. Even today, the Church relies upon the popularity of the Crucified with the Maya in the Christianisation of indigenous communities, as I have learned from conversations with Catholic priests.[10] The importance of Christ within the syncretic Maya religion is also reflected in the very first relevant ethnographic monographs (La Farge and Byers 1931; Wisdom 1940). In my view, though, the strongest motive for the veneration of Christ is his connection to the cross, which is a key symbol of Maya religiosity, tracing back to pre-Columbian times (cf., for instance, Vogt 1976).[11]

Many pilgrims believe the Black Christ comes from the nearby Las Minas Cave and visiting the cavern is a popular stop in the pilgrims' itinerary. During the feast, thick smoke from hundreds of candles rises from the cave, while fires of the sacrifice rituals of the Maya traditionalists, preparing well-laid tables (*mesas*) for the deities concerned, are burning outside. Some pilgrims attribute healing powers to the drops of water released from the rock walls.[12] The cave has the shape of a cross and forms the entrance to a massive mountain towering over the Chacalapa River. The accounts of pilgrims suggest that the symbolism of the cross is a significant factor contributing to their respect for the site. However, another key Maya symbol is at play in this context: namely that of the mountain linked to a powerful lord and owner of great wealth. This is where the justification for the story of finding the image in the cavern comes from. Linking the Black Christ of Esquipulas to caves and springs is also common at other places, as is linking him to various manifestations of the Lord of the Mountains or the Lord of the Earth (Josserand y Hopkins 2007: 91).[13]

Fig. 2: Maya fires of the sacrifice rituals outside the Las Minas Cave.

9 Chiantla, where the Virgen de Candelaria is revered, is the only large Marian pilgrimage site in Guatemala.

10 This is also the motive behind the journey of a copy of the Black Christ around the traditional Maya communities in the Department of Huehuetenango, organized by the Church in 2013.

11 Astor-Aguilera (2010) argues that the cross is a Maya core element representing a quadripartite sense of space. On the other hand, an important motive for the veneration of Christ may be his association with the maize deity (see Christenson 2001: 75–77).

12 Healing water and earth are, by long tradition, of significant importance in Esquipulas (Hunter and Kleine 1984: 159 f.; see also Brady and Veni 1992). There is, too, archaeological evidence of similar cave pilgrimages in pre-Columbian Maya culture (Brady and Rissolo 2006). In the case of pilgrimages to Cozumel Island, Patel (2009: 207) argues that the journeys should be associated with their experiential components and the concepts of birth, renewal, and ancestor veneration.

13 Fought (1972: 523) relates the pilgrimage to the Black Christ to sacrifices to the Spirit of the Earth; Vogt (1976: 17) reports of the image of the Christ of Esquipulas in Zinacantán, found in a cave; the feast of the Lord of Tila is also celebrated in church, but also in the nearby cave, which houses a stalagmite considered to be an image of the Black Christ, and a large cross (Josserand y Hopkins 2007: 108).

In this context, the issue of gender is also interesting. Although Christ is primarily connected to the male sex, his sexual ambiguity is implicated by the belief that Our Lady of Olopa is, in fact, the wife of the Black Christ of Esquipulas (Fought 1972: 451).[14] The anthropological study of Marian pilgrimage in Latin America sometimes emphasises the pilgrimage as expressing gender inequality (Derks 2009), but this problem does not seem to have substance in the Christological pilgrimage in Esquipulas. The Maya worldview does not discriminate against femininity in any radical way (see, for instance, Reina 1973: 308) and women in Esquipulas participate in all spheres of social and religious life (Kendall 1991: 152 f.). This freedom of expression also applies to rituals, be they religious rites at the basilica or shamanic ceremonies at Las Minas. Nevertheless, my own experience leads me to believe that there is a slight gender bias in what is emphasised during the rituals: while female prayers tend to focus on specific close individuals, the household and the like, male prayers tend to be directed to the community and the world at large.

Black depictions of Our Lady are known from Marian pilgrimages in both America and Europe. However, there are almost no parallels to the Black Christ in Europe, and Black Christs are very uncommon even in the context of Latin-America (Nolan 1991: 32; Richardson 1995). The Church attempted to interpret the unusual colour as a symbol of Christ's suffering and death (Paz Solórzano 1914: 19). Some scholars have linked the black colour of Christ to the skin of indigenous people (Kelsey and Osborne 1939: 47; Borhegyi 1953: 84) or to that of the ancient Maya deity of cacao and trade named Ek Chuah, who was of black colour (Lothrop 1927: 77–81; Borhegyi 1954: 390). Restoration in the 1990s revealed the image of Christ to be made of cedar wood and its present-day black colour to result, in fact, from the effects of time, touches, and candle, and incense smoke (González de Flores y Carías Ortega 1998: 11–14). Moreover, the black colour probably only acquired its religious and social meaning in the 19th century (Navarrete Cáceres 2007: 8).

The efforts to demonstrate the Maya origin of the pilgrimage site have turned to archaeology (cf. Toledo Palomo 1964: 49–59).[15] Although Esquipulas likely emerged next to a pre-Columbian settlement and is not located far from the important Maya cities of Copán and Quiriguá, clear evidence of continuity in pilgrimage tradition is lacking. Nevertheless, the adornment of the Great Bridge (*Puente Grande*) in King's street (*Calle Real*) from the 18th century, consisting of several sculptures of pre-Columbian provenience, which was already linked to the Black Christ as an expression of religious syncretism by Lothrop (1927), attracted some attention in this context. However, these sculptures, of which the one popularly called *El Muñeco* is the best known, do not come from the nearby archaeological site of Los Cerritos but from Copán and were placed on the bridge at the earliest in the middle of the 19th century (Cabrera Morales 1999: 42–46).

Whatever may be the historical origin of pilgrimages to Esquipulas, the Maya have included those in their ritual life. In present-day Maya imagery, the Black Christ is linked to the cross, the mountain, and the cave. As regards his black colour, I have not come across a Maya explanation: this is simply the way he is. The Black Christ is a specific being that actually lives in Esquipulas: he is embedded in a particular landscape and inhabits a particular place. His image in the basilica is actually he himself. As other Maya deities, he too is live, animated, and endowed with free will, intentionality, and the capacity to act autonomously (cf., for instance, Arias 1991 [1975]). As a result, his being and nature are, to some extent, similar and analogous to those of humans. The Black Christ is indigenous not due to his dark colour but due to what he is for and what he provides to Maya pilgrims.

The Itinerary of Pilgrims

Pilgrims arrive in Esquipulas throughout the year, though most often at Easter and on the Black Christ Feast on January 15, which is also the date marking the end of the novena that begins with the celebration of Epiphany on January 6. This January pilgrimage can be termed "truly Maya": the town is flooded with representatives of even the outlying indigenous communities, featuring a wide variety of languages, customs, and traditional costumes. Pilgrims mostly arrive in groups – with family members, friends, or fellow members of the community.

14 According to Wisdom (1940: 110), Maya deities are characterised by sexual duality, either in the form of an androgynous individual, or in the form of a sexually differentiated couple. Hull (2009) has shown that reality of gender duality, in which the whole includes both the male and the female aspects, is related to the Maya model of world at large.

15 On the attempts to ground present-day Mesoamerican pilgrimage on the pre-Columbian tradition, see also Martínez Marín (1972). Indeed, towns, ruins, mountains, cenotes, caves, wells, or trees were the locations of Maya rituals and pilgrimages (Brady and Veni 1992: 163; Hammond and Bobo 1994; Pugh 2009: 322).

Fig. 3: A group of devotees kneeling at the door of the shrine.

Large groups, organised by either the Catholic Church or Maya traditionalists have their leaders, who decide on the itinerary of the pilgrimage and are in charge of the solemnities. The largest groups of pilgrims come during the week preceding January 15, and usually stay in Esquipulas for two or three days.

On arrival, it is customary to go to church immediately and greet the Black Christ; accommodation and food and drink should be of secondary importance. Failing to act according to this norm may lead to bad luck, which is sometimes linked to what is perhaps the most popular local legend, the story of the Rock of the Godfathers (*Piedra de los Compadres*). This legend tells the story of a man and woman linked by the bond of god-fatherhood, who violated the rule of sexual abstinence on pilgrimage and were turned to stone for punishment (Dary 1986: 173 f., 431). The groups, led by their community leaders, kneel at the door of the basilica to pray; some pilgrims even undertake the final part of the journey on their knees. Accommodation is arranged following the visit to the church, with some people staying in hotels and other facilities and many in parks or at the nearby campsite, which fills with hundreds of tents and makeshift beds. Sometimes pilgrims bring food, tableware, and firewood to prepare their meals in the open.

The itineraries of pilgrims differ, but there are some places and activities that are frequently included. First and foremost, there is the standing in line to the glass display case of the Black Christ; also popular is walking the Way of the Cross up the hill of Morola and visiting the cave of Las Minas or the legendary rock formation of *Piedra de los Compadres*. Maya traditionalists burn candles and copal, and pray, and dance there. Many pilgrims take part in the mass, seek out blessings from the priest and make a pecuniary donation. Also common is paying a visit to the Church of St. James,[16] the church from which the image of the Black Christ was moved to the new basilica in 1759. It stands along King's Street, which is still a venue for processions during the feast days. While some pilgrims were eager to share their itineraries with me, others needed to be asked explicit questions and provided a list of the specific activities, responding with nods and "*sí pues*" (yes indeed) or "*todo*" (all). Although I knew that the meaning of their nodded agreements was chiefly formal, I realised that the word *todo* referred to something more substantial, namely to a practice that is of essential importance for Esquipulas: the effort to pay visit to as many sacred places, utter as many prayers, and conduct as many rituals as possible to make the pilgrimage efficacious. On the one hand, pilgrims attribute varying degrees of importance to different stops on their itineraries, while on the other, they firmly believe that the *costumbre* (custom) needs to be acted upon everywhere and sacrificial duties accumulated and fulfilled.

Yet, even in Esquipulas, there is time enough for shopping and entertainment. Some pilgrims look for holy water as well as earth in the form of clay tablets called *benditos* or *pan del Señor* (see Hunter, Horst, and Thomas 1989: 281). Most pilgrims buy rosaries or images at the basilica, but also venture

16 Esquipulas was founded in the 16th century as Santiago de Esquipulas: the celebration of the feast of its patron James takes place on 25th of July.

Fig. 4: Pilgrims standing in the endless line to the Black Christ.

into the large marketplace that offers more profane products. Evening marks the beginning of entertainment and funfair attractions. This all contributes to the strong impression that people take back home from the pilgrimage. During the feast days, Esquipulas becomes alive with Catholic processions and traditional dances, such as the "Dance of the Spaniards and the Moors" (*Baile do los Españoles y Moros*). The otherwise quiet town resounds with musical performances and fireworks. In the run-up to the holiday the *serenata*, a range of various music, dance, folklore, and other performances, takes place to honour the Black Christ. Pilgrim activity in Esquipulas reaches its climax in the night of January 14/15: the park is flooded with masses of people that seem to blend together in an endless line for the Black Christ. Pilgrims extend their sacrificial places beyond the designated areas and burn candles and copal around the basilica; the interior of the temple becomes filled with people, who sit or take a nap there, waiting for the midnight mass. This is when the elements of *communitas*, social homogeneity, and psychological concord become most apparent. The available accommodation facilities are full and there are no places left, not even for a Western anthropologist. I, as many others, spent the night with other pilgrims at the patio of the basilica, surrounded by candles and the murmur of endless Maya prayers.

Influenced by the work of Victor Turner, anthropologists of pilgrimage have discussed whether there is *communitas* in pilgrimages, or not. On the one hand, there are noticeable social boundaries between both the Ladinos and the Maya and particular Maya ethnic groups. On the other hand, these boundaries are very often blurred through sharing time and space, joint participation in rituals, mutual conversational exchanges and the common experience of unusual moments. Moreover, Esquipulas also connects people across regions. To paraphrase Wolf's (1958) classic text on Guadalupe as a symbol of Mexico, Esquipulas seems to be a symbol of Central America, connecting the political with the religious, the colonial with the independent and the indigenous with the Ladino. Respect for the Black Christ is an expression of an ethnic and religious compromise and, as Pompejano (2009: 128) puts it, "a cult which has transformed into a national and later Mesoamerican myth," at least at the political level.[17]

The Touch of Christ

It may look as though the experience of journey has been downgraded in or even excluded from present-day pilgrimages to Esquipulas. A road passable for vehicles and a tarred quality road were built to the town in the 1930s and 1960s, respectively, resulting in a radical motorisation of the pilgrimage. Pilgrims, who earlier travelled on foot for days, weeks, or even months, now arrive in buses and cars in merely hours or, at most, days.[18] My intention,

17 For an insightful discussion regarding the ethnicity of supernatural agents in Maya culture, see Knowlton (2012).

18 Even today, the pilgrimage is occasionally undertaken on foot and some of the respondents admit that *peregrinaje*, the real pilgrimage, should take place on foot. On the other existing forms of non-motorised pilgrimage to Esquipulas, see the study on pilgrimages on bikes in the middle of the 20th cen-

Fig. 5: A Maya woman flogging the man's body with fresh branches on the Way of the Cross.

in the following two sections, is to demonstrate that the concept of journey has not disappeared from the pilgrimage but is very much present in at least two key pilgrim activities: participating in the line to the Black Christ and walking the Way of the Cross.

The goal of the pilgrimage is to make personal contact with the Black Christ; during the feast, this involves spending many hours in the line (*cola*) that winds through the park before the basilica. The pilgrims stand in the line, praying, singing, and sometimes holding burning candles. All of them bring candles as presents,[19] with some of the pilgrims reserving a portion of these candles to consecrate and to return them to their communities.[20] Although it is no longer possible to touch the image itself but only the glass case surrounding it, the pilgrims look forward with great excitement to the moment when they climb the stairs behind the altar and found themselves face to face with the Miraculous, pay him due respect, touch him, kiss him, and show him their presents, while talking to him, praying, and making their pleas and expressing their thanks. They end their journey at the chapel outside, where they lay down their candles, as it is not permitted to lit them inside the basilica following its reconstruction (although this ban is violated by the traditionalists, especially on the night of the feast). Then they perform their rites outside at other sacred places, such as *Vía Sacra*, *Las Minas*, or *Piedra de los Compadres*, or back at their home altars, hills, and crosses.

The blessing of candles, rosaries, holy images, and other items is increasingly delegated to priests, who are attending the pilgrims before the basilica. At the same time, the custom of consecrating items through contact with this sacred place is still very much alive. Ethnography has confirmed that pilgrims bring images of family and community saints and place them at the side altars of the basilica, watching over them day and night, in order to renew their power (Kendall 1991: 144). Maya traditionalists come with images of Christ (*Cristo de visita*) to have them revived (Navarrete Cáceres 2007: 73). These items gain, through their presence at the holy place, a fraction of the sacred aura, power, and strength offered by the Black Christ and other deities, regardless of whether they have been acquired at the pilgrimage site or whether brought there. As noted by Hull (2009: 197), the concept of *bendición* (blessing) is reinterpreted by the Ch'orti' as "power" or "strength."

Candles and copal remain the main offerings to this day. Through them, the pilgrims ask for easier lives. A man in his thirties from Quetzaltenango provided this explanation to me: "The Black Christ

tury (Esquivel Vásquez 2007) and the study on the emergence of a tradition of pilgrimage on horseback since the 1980s until today (Esquivel Vásquez 2006).

19 Generally, a distinction is made between *velas* and *veladoras* (stand-alone candles and candles in glass jars, respectively) and between *ceras* and *parafinas* (candles made of wax and of paraffin, respectively); the symbolism and meaning (often different across regions) attached to them are linked to specific colours and sizes. Some pilgrims also use traditional candle cases, such as those made of the hollow stalks of maguey.

20 Fought (1972: 521) describes Jocotán pilgrims showing their candles to the Virgin Mary and to Christ in Esquipulas and then carrying them back to their home altars (see also López García y Metz 2002: 205). Girard (1962: 163 f.) mentions the custom of brining copal from Chiquimula to Esquipulas to consecrate it.

Fig. 6: Pilgrims lighting their candles to the Miraculous.

gives you whatever you wish or desire; people ask him for health, success in business, money, food; they beg our Holy Earth for forgiveness; that's why we give him candles." The Maya do not connect salvation with the transcendence and afterlife but with another life in this world; a world with less sorrow, anxiety, and pain.[21] The Black Christ has, as noted by Fought (1972: 456), the power to remove sin and give humans "more life." Happiness and unhappiness result from the motion in the fine fabric of relationships between humans, deities, and other beings of the world. What matters is communication and contact between these various agents, who all have their respective wishes, possibilities, and wills and who all strive for their respective places in the sun.

The Secret of Illness

Many of the pilgrims walk the Way of the Cross, beginning at the Church of St. James (*Parroquia Santiago*), popularly known as *El Calvario*, and then rising along the Franciscan Convent (*Santuario y Convento Belén*), built in the 1970s, up to the hill of Morola. Some spend a number of hours walking the Sacred Way (*Vía Sacra*). At each of the fourteen stations, pilgrims utter long prayers and flog, rather symbolically, the whole of their bodies with prepared fresh branches. They then either drop the branch before the respective station or straight into it. Small stones are used in a similar way, applying them to touch each other on different parts of their bodies to be subsequently thrown behind the bars of the individual stations. The Way ends with a chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes and a cross made of concrete, where candles are lit and copal burned. Maya traditionalists perform their own ceremonies around the nearby terrace, which offers a wonderful view of the Valley of Esquipulas and of the basilica.

Some pilgrims report reciting the rosary (*hacen rosario*), as the chapel is dedicated to Mary, others using their own traditional invocations. Church authorities are reserved about the popular rituals performed on the Way of the Cross, although they are prepared to accept them as prayers for the forgiveness of sins. The meaning attributed to the prayers by Maya pilgrims is similar, if less orthodox. A woman in her forties from Todos Santos Cuchumatán offered the following explanation to me: "You take about fourteen to fifteen branches or stones, touch your body with them and then throw them away in order for all evil to stay there and for you to come back clean, with a pure body." The specific designation of "all evil" (*todos los males*) as well as the emphasis on the carnal deserves attention. A man in his seventies from Santa Lucía Utatlán told me: "This is the secret. If someone has an illness, he will leave it here." According to this Maya traditionalist, there is a secret (*secreto*) and the meaning of that secret is the removal of illness (*enfermedad*). Cook (2000: 117), whose research concerned the K'iche', describes the *secreto* as an esoteric knowledge of how ancient rituals are to be formally performed.[22]

Ethnographic research documented similar practices in prior pilgrimages conducted on foot; the pres-

21 This is how a Catholic priest of Maya ethnic affiliation explained the issue to me in a municipality in the Cuchumatan Mountains. In a similar vein, Arias (1991: 53) is of the view that interaction between humans and the world in Maya cosmology is not a means to eternal life but an end in its own right.

22 Reina (1973: 260), too, defines the *secreto* as the knowledge that can be used for curing or restoring certain behaviours; the ritual transfer of headache onto a bean can be listed as an example. López García y Metz (2002: 211) link the *secreto* with the concept of *promesa*, which designates a prayer to the deities, asking them to restore health and order.

ent-day Way of the Cross can thus be interpreted as a transfer of some older patterns. The Maudslays (1899: 49 f.) describe indigenous pilgrims returning from Esquipulas, singing and making stops at crosses to adorn them with flowers, green branches, and pine straws – and flogging their feet with fresh branches to secure health. Fought (1972: 457), too, refers to the pilgrims placing small stones, plants, and branches that they whipped their ankles with just before, around crosses – to transfer their fatigue and exhaustion into the items they have left behind (523). A similar custom is mentioned by Goldín (1988: 302 f.) in her report on the journeys of merchants from Almolonga to Esquipulas in the 1940s. Moreover, she describes the hill of Cruz de los Milagros with piled *piedras de penitencia* (stones of penitence), carried uphill by the pilgrims, who would then to the tune of music and dancing and drinking pray for new strength and a safe journey.

As summarised by López García y Metz (2002: 212), the Maya moral order requires the existence of the good and desired as well as the bad and undesired. The goal of the pilgrimage rites in Esquipulas is to free oneself of guilt, damage, and evil and to get rid of whatever bad one has done or has been done to him. In Maya cosmology, illness is a token of this state of error, irregularity, and disharmony (see Fabrega and Silver 1973: 92; Tedlock 1982: 119) and requires a remedy in the form of asking for forgiveness (*pedir perdón*) and presenting an offering (*ofrecer*).[23] When Maya pilgrims at the basilica offer candles and copal to the Black Christ and touch him in order for his healing power to be transmitted onto them, they leave behind, on the Way of the Cross, the branches or pebbles onto which they have moved their diseases. To make this work, prayers and requests, materialised in the bodily enactments of journey, touch, and sacrifice, must be performed. This is a dialectical game of good and evil, health and disease, the aim of which is to attain harmony, which is constantly at risk.

The Promise and the Sacrifice

Esquipulas, just as other Catholic pilgrimage sites, is dominated by the discourse of promise. "People come here with a promise [*promesa*], with some sort of penitence [*penitencia*]," a female pilgrim said to me. "Then they make an effort to get back to the Black Christ, in a year or so. When you ask for a miracle, have a wish, ask for it and it is fulfilled, you come back to thank Him for what he's done." Making a promise is linked to a specific wish; it is a commitment. If the deity fulfils the wish of the human, the human must keep his or her promise to go back to the deity's place of abode and express his or her thanks. As a result, some people come to Esquipulas to make requests, others come here to give thanks and bring their ex-votos. Although this is a practice that is within common Catholic discourse, in this section I would like to call attention to the moments that are also of importance for the cosmology of the Maya.

The practice of promise is usually linked to individual wishes. A certain human asks for a specific thing, such as health, money, or employment, for himself or for somebody close to him. For many Maya traditionalists, however, the *promesa* or *penitencia* has a collective dimension. These pilgrims are representatives of their municipalities, they pray for their communities, for the harvest, and for all things good in the following year. Maya pilgrimage has already been linked to requests for rain and good crops by Osborne (1948: 135), while Fought (1972: 524) expressed the opinion that pilgrimages to Esquipulas had been part of the indigenous cyclical rituals connected to the New Year. Girard (1962: 29–32) describes the custom of "bringing in the winter" (*traída del invierno*) in the same vein: the representatives of Quetzaltepeque travelled to Esquipulas to make a pecuniary offering and ask for "virgin water" from a sacred well intended for the community altar. The pilgrimage was a plea (*ruego*) for rain, harvest, enough food, and health for the entire community, foreshadowing the beginning of a new year and the regeneration of the world.[24]

In this context, it is worth noting the linguistic fusion of the words *ruego/rogación* and *promesa*. Searching for traditional sacrificial rituals in Olopa, I was told that *rogaciones*, where they are still performed, are made under the name of *promesas* (cf. also Dary, Elías, y Reyna 1998: 261).[25] The promise is semantically linked to the plea and the offering, or rather to the collective's request for rain and good

23 Illness is a consequence of not showing respect to the important beings of the world: it is "the most feared punishment for deeds putting the established order at risk" (Arias 1991: 42). According to López García y Metz (2002: 219), illness is a consequence of violating the balance at both the corporeal and spiritual levels.

24 Gillin (1958: 216 f.) gives a similar account of a pilgrimage to the Black Christ that set off from San Luis Jilotepeque and involved the Brotherhood of "Winter" or of "March the 15th" performing rituals for the good course of the upcoming agricultural year and bringing back holy water, which it then poured over the fields before the sowing.

25 This is probably a linguistic shift similar to that concerning Maya serpent-like deities (*chicchanes*), who were renamed to Catholic angels (*ángeles*) (López García y Metz 2002: 206).

crops at the time of the advent of the New Year.[26] According to Josserand and Hopkins (2007: 107), the concept of promise referred to as *i wa'tyäl i kuxtyäl* in Ch'ol should be understood as a "contract on the mutual obligations between the promisor and the deity, created through a number of petitions and prayers, accompanied by offerings." In Maya cosmology, humans and deities feed each other (Tedlock 1982: 77–82), need each other and there is a reciprocal relationship between them (Metz 2006: 125). The wish, the promise, and the thanksgiving are just aspects of one and the same thing, in which the will of humans and that of the gods intersect.

In its consequences, the promise (*promesa*) is a plea (*rogación*) and an offering (*ofrenda*), thus it is a sacrifice. The practice of sacrifice is ubiquitous in Esquipulas, for instance, in the form of "stones of penitence" that are carried to the crosses, in the form of the knee walk towards the basilica, and pecuniary gifts to the Catholic priests. The substantial means and time reserved for the pilgrimage[27] are also a sacrifice, as is standing in the line to the Black Christ, walking the Way of the Cross, lighting candles, burning copal, and the preparation of banquets for the deities (*mesas*). According to one account, when the shrine was founded, sacrifice of poultry, candles and copal as well as live human beings was required to appease the serpent that ruled over the area (Fought 1972: 453–455). Esquipulas is a place of sacrifice and sacrifice comprises the fundamental elements of Maya cosmology, including the complementarity between humans and deities that require each other.[28] The beings of the world exist as long as they are renewed, just as trees and plants, just as days and years (Arias 1991: 35). The life cycles of humans, plants, and ages are connected through the universal regeneration of the world (see Carlsen 2011: 50–57; Cook 2000: 107–184). The analogicity and complementarity of these beings manifest themselves in the sacrifice, which "gives the world its power of movement, thus enabling it to evolve through its endless cycles of birth and death" (Carlsen 2011: 56).

Naturally, the practice of promise and sacrifice is justified by its efficacy. "If you set out on a journey without faith, I doubt you'll reach what you want. For us the pilgrimage is of help, because we have faith and believe in the Black Christ," said a nearly eighty-year-old woman to me. "Why would the wishes of a human without faith go unfulfilled?" I asked. "Because he doesn't have a good heart," she replied. The idea that it is faith in the Black Christ and his power that makes him miraculous is very widespread among pilgrims. However, they also give the splendour of Esquipulas, the endless crowds of people, and the number of reported miracles as reasons for their beliefs in the place being miraculous. Some pilgrim accounts suggest that they not only reflect on their faith but also subject it to tests. A woman told me about her visit to the Las Minas Cave, where a man described the miracles related to the oily liquid dripping from the holes in the rock: "I was able to confirm this myself, as I was having a headache when I came there, so listening to the words of that man, I took a little bit of the oil, put it on my head and the pain went away after a couple of minutes and that's because you do it with great faith and believe in the Black Christ."

It is this connection between faith and evidence that constitutes the power of pilgrimage. Maya pilgrims believe in the miraculousness of the Black Christ and are convincingly informed of it by their own experience as well as by the colourful stories of others, the sheer numbers of ex-votos, and the obvious glory and splendour of Esquipulas. God's help, however, is not a matter of course, nor can it be foreseen in any way. A thirty-year-old man waiting in line before the basilica told me: "I believe that the Black Christ will help me, but I don't know how. He can do anything and you never know in what form help will come." These expectations, fears, and hopes of the Maya looking forward to the advent of the New Year and good weather and crops are the same as those of pilgrims travelling to Esquipulas for their own specific goals. "Wishes, intentions, and aspirations are not sufficient to reach the desired goals; the will of God is above all that." – At least this is how López García y Metz (2002: 202) interpret the Ch'orti' saying "*primeramente Dios*."

Conclusion

Watanabe (1992: 5–11) distinguishes, based on their theoretical approaches, two groups in the ethnology of the Maya, the cultural essentialists and the colonial historicists, criticising the former for having a static view of the culture and the latter for trying to reduce culture to a derivative of colonial dominance. This distinction also applies to

26 The link between *rogaciones* and pilgrimages is also documented by Núñez Chinchila (1971), who describes a procession to the river at an indigenous settlement in Copán.

27 Metz (2006: 169 f.) mentions that many Maya report the danger and high cost involved as reasons for not undertaking a pilgrimage to Esquipulas.

28 One of the first ethnographic descriptions of Maya sacrifices is the account of the rite of *tcai* performed by Maya priests in Santa Eulalia flogging their back to blood around crosses and asking for rain to come (La Farge 1947: 121).

the ethnology of Maya pilgrimage. Straub (1991), for instance, has examined pilgrimages to the Lake of Amatitlán, searching for and finding some tenacious cultural symbols and forms from the pre-Columbian era, which, to this day, continue to endure. Adams (1991), on the other hand, has exposed the pilgrimage as an account of the economic and political structure of the region.

Despite its many forms, the colonial-historical approach has a strong presence in the anthropological study of Latin American pilgrimage today. Already in his classic study on the pilgrimage site of Lapa, Brazil, Daniel Gross (1971: 129) interpreted the religious relationship between the saint and the believer as a projection of the relationship between the patron and the client, arguing that "pilgrimage provides ideological support for the system by projecting earthly relationships into the sacred sphere in which people act out debt paying as ritual." In this view, the bond of debt dependence regarding spiritual exchange is a consequence of sacralising social exchange and, as such, provides legitimacy to the given social structure and inequality. Shadow y Rodríguez V. (1990), too, see pilgrimages to Chalma in Mexico as having political content and manifesting social inequality, but they differ from Gross in that they do not consider this to be an instance of passive reproduction of existing norms, but an active expression of social tension, a form of resistance. For them, the pilgrimage is then a "celebration of frustration and futility, in which the subordination to the formal institutions of the non-countryside sector is heralded with a strong voice and sad regularity" (1990: 71).

Although each study has a different attitude toward agency, both studies treat the institution of pilgrimage as a representation of power relations and a reaction to the exploitation of oppressed people. In their assumptions, they both brush up the classic description by Marx of religion as the opiate of the people; as a tool of oppression and alleviation for the oppressed. In the former case, the institution of pilgrimage is imposed by the oppressor in order to facilitate control and exploitation of those who are unconscious and passive; in the latter case the institution is the consequence of marginalisation and subordination as well as an expression of resistance by and a means of consolation to conscious and active agents. When post-structural anthropology illustrates how the weak appropriate the discourses of the powerful, it is not venturing too far away from this pattern. Derks (2009: 1) studied expressions of class, gender, and ethnic inequalities in pilgrimages on the example of Marian Quillacollo, Bolivia, and argued that "[p]ilgrimage is seen as an arena where the power structures in society are articulated and mediated." Controlled by neoliberal narratives, those at the pilgrimage site "are actively negotiating for power within the social inequalities they experience" (2009: 3) and cope with their suffering through faith.

The enormous contribution of colonial-historical and post-structural studies to our understanding of religious phenomena, especially with respect to the political-economic relationships and the mechanisms of power, is beyond dispute. However, their areas of focus and their strengths are also their limitations and weaknesses. These analytical approaches tend to overlook the native cosmological underpinnings of the phenomena and the experience dimension. In their extreme forms, they turn into ideology, adopting the Marxist assumption of the omnipresence of detrimental unequal power relations between people or the Foucaultian assumption of the omnipresence of similarly hapless power relations between words and things. To address this problem in Maya studies, Watanabe (1992: 12), as opposed to colonial historicists, has situated the community identity within the existential relationships emerging from the given environment, from the combination of "place, people, and premise" and "in the immediacies of local sustenance and sociality." Armstrong-Fumero (2011: 63), on the other hand, as opposed to the poststructuralists, has looked for the roots of ethnic politics in the everyday treatment of local material and linguistic elements and in the "experiences with words and things whose presence in their quotidian lifeworld long precedes the diffusion of anthropological discourse."

To search for the meaning of Maya pilgrimages merely in the sphere of power relations between people is of course possible, but it has its limitations, at least from the point of view of the cosmology of the Maya, which extends the relationships relevant for the pilgrimage to additional beings inhabiting the world. Entities such as ancestors, saints, hills, stones, celestial bodies, atmospheric phenomena, crosses, churches, trees, plants, animals, and even more abstract concepts, such as Sky, Earth, or God, are all endowed with consciousness and will, and, by extension, the capacity to act autonomously just like humans. The similarity of the nature of the beings inhabiting the world is complemented by interdependence among them: individual agents are involved in a mutual communication and require and need each other – just as deities "feed" humans, so do humans "feed" deities, the one unable to live without the other. Life is constant exchange, which is an expression of the course of the world. The course of the world itself, however, is not a matter

of course: it requires participation, that of sacrifice. The analogicity of social and natural processes and the complementarity of the agents involved in them as well as the place of humans in this complex network of relationships, derive their meanings from the cyclical model of the world. The cyclicity arising against the backdrop of the life periods of the universe, plants, animals, and humans amounts to a dialectics of birth and death, health and illness, happiness and unhappiness, guilt and plea for forgiveness, request, and offering. The imagination of the Maya draws on this universal platform of the course and renewal of the world to represent life as a cycle of sacrifices by individual and mutually interdependent agents.

Nevertheless, Maya cosmology does not remain frozen in the past; quite the contrary (Carlsen 2011: 64), it feeds on everyday lived experience (cf. Fischer and Hendrickson 2003). It does not blindly follow the teachings of the ancestors, or even the ancient Maya and it is not made up of petrified cultural patterns or systems of ideas floating in the sky. It is a shifting and dynamic knowledge rooted and constantly represented, tested, and changed in the practices of everyday life. The rootedness in the human as well as the natural and material world, in a certain landscape, in specific places and the activities linked to them takes on a temporal dimension in the reality of the agricultural year, particularly in the vegetation cycle of maize. The cyclic renewal, connected to the analogicity and complementarity of the beings of the world, is experienced reality. Maya cosmology feeds the mechanism of sacrifice, which in turn, through its realness and efficacy, feeds the cosmology. Humans think and act in the world as it reveals itself to them: in a non-disentanglable interaction and ever-shifting negotiation between perception of nature and its cultural representations. The problem of one of the few phenomenological interpretations of Maya pilgrimages undertaken by Konrad (1991) consists precisely in the fact that it became stuck in the timelessness of the repeated cosmic processes and imitated heavenly phenomena, drawing on Eliade's concept of eternal return rooted in the dualism of the sacred and the profane. What I wish to stress in this study, is not the timeless repetition of mythical beginnings but rather the emplacement in the temporal reality and the participation in everyday maintenance – reinforcement as well as transformation – of the course of the world.

To view the Maya spiritual exchange that takes place between humans and deities at pilgrimage sites as a passive or active manifestation of the social structure or an expression of the game of power within an imposed discourse would amount to social determinism, but also be a sign of ethnocentrism. Explanations of this type take pilgrimage out of its context; but for the people inhabiting it, this context is of crucial importance. Analysing the spiritual exchange as a rational choice exercise, as a conditional set of transactions with powerful deities, means falling for the same fallacy. Saying that pilgrims trade with their saints because they are governed by an "artificial" discourse of debt dependence is, in a sense, equivalent to claiming that they do it based on "natural" selfish calculation: what the connotations of "artificial" and "natural" have in common is that they seem to be Western, rather than Maya, constructs. Such a rationalisation of the ritual pushes its lived elements into the background, with the consequence of belittling or misinterpreting its power and efficacy. The Maya concept of exchange of sacrifices, which, among others, can be found in pilgrimage, is a part of the course of the world, perceived in a specific way, from which it cannot be separated. This is the continuous reciprocity that is deeply present and, on observation of the vegetation cycle of maize or the perception of the yearly cycles, constantly (re-)presented in the world. People see how the world works and feel its pulse. They walk through the world just as the world walks through and with them. The human is engulfed by the world: the human represents the world just as the world represents the human.

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