

Abstract

In *The Wisdom of Way Kot* I examine how commerce and the global economy are represented locally through the analysis of a popular Yucatecan tale. *Way Kot* depicts a veritable fantasy world in which human beings become winged beasts and animals betray their natural instincts; however, unlike many studies that explore the intersection of different modes of exchange, I do not view these images as projections of a mystified mind. On the contrary, building on Marx's discussion of money, and the aesthetic theory of the Frankfurt School, particularly Adorno's notion of "exact fantasy," I demonstrate the myth's rigorous logic by showing how it unravels the mysteries of the commodity form. In addition, I highlight the critical function of the tale (ca. 1935), as rhetorical counterpoint to the commodity aesthetics of the era. While agents of a rapidly modernizing state were eager to make commodities enchant, *Way Kot* presents commerce as a form of witchcraft, and consumption as a form of cannibalism, in which unsuspecting Maya consume their relatives. [*Mexico, Maya, Myth, Marxism, Capitalism, Cannibalism and Sex*]

I. Introduction: Narrative and Economy

As many anthropologists have discovered, strange and wondrous things occur at the margins of the world system where different economies collide. Airport runways suddenly appear in the rain forests of Papua New Guinea (Worsley 1968), stories of the devil are heard with increased regularity on coffee plantations in Colombia's Cauca Valley (Taussig 1980), real estate in "Manhattan" can be purchased at rock bottom prices (Graeber 2001), and tales of buried treasure break like news items in Michoacan, Mexico (Foster 1967). Little wonder, perhaps, that surrealists and ethnographers have time and again found inspiration in each other's work (Clifford 1988).

Two things, however, should be said about these stories. One is that little attention is generally given to the narrative itself. In most cases, readers are lucky to get a summary or a small snippet of the exemplary text since the latter is employed primarily to demonstrate a broader lesson about exchange, the nature of commodities or the difficulty of economic development. Nor, in many cases, does the ethnographer discuss the status of the narrative. Is it considered a factual account, a true story? Is it an allegory? Or does it, perhaps, belong to a genre that doesn't exist in the ethnographer's vernacular? These questions are, of course, asked and answered quite well in ethnographies of communication (Bauman and Scherzer 1974; Haviland 1977; Hanks 1990, Scherzer 1983), or in studies of oral literature (Boccaro 1997; Bricker 1981; Burns 1983; Gossen 1974; Ligorred Perramón 1990). The latter, however, clearly come from a different part of the anthropological animal and generally do not attempt to answer broad questions about economy or exchange.

The second point, not unrelated to the first, is that such narratives are generally intended to demonstrate the mystification or fetishism of people living at the periphery of the world system. Such bewilderment may be attributed to the limitations that social organization (Godelier 1977) or the mode of production (Taussig 1980) impose on consciousness,¹ or simply the distance that separates production from distribution or consumption. As Appadurai (1986: 48) explains in his oft-cited introduction to *The Social Life of Things*, "such stories acquire especially intense, new and striking qualities

when the spatial, cognitive or institutional distances between production, distribution and consumption are great ... the institutionalized divorce (in knowledge, interest and role) between persons involved in various aspects of the flow of commodities generates specialized mythologies". In either case the ability of indigenous groups to understand the world without the aid of the anthropologist is gravely in doubt. Economic dependency gives way to anthropological dependency.

In the present study I have tried to shift the normal division of anthropological labor by foregrounding the imaginary – a popular Yucatecan tale – without losing sight of the broader picture, the relationship of narrative to history and political economy, particularly the political economy of early 20th century Yucatán. While *Way Kot* reveals a veritable fantasy world populated by animate objects and inert, moribund human beings, I reject the idea that these images are simply manifestations of a bewildered, alienated subject. Building on the aesthetic theory of the Frankfurt School – particularly Adorno's "exact fantasy" and Benjamin's "mimetic transformation" – it is argued that the production of such incongruous figures can be seen as an attempt to reveal the contradictory essence of the commodity form, the first step of a critical hermeneutic.

If, as noted in the opening epigram, Adorno considered fetishism or reification an inherent aspect of human creativity (Martin Jay 1973: 181-2), it was not an Alcatraz of consciousness, a prison house of language from which no daring individual ever escaped. On the contrary, employing the messianic language Benjamin so admired, it would be better described as the first act of "revelation." Through "ciphers" or "riddle-figures," music, art and other forms of expression highlighted the contradictory nature of social life. Greater truths concerning the contingency or the historical construction of the "given" – what Adorno referred to as "second nature" – would then be revealed through critical exegesis, a precursor of sorts to deconstructionism. Moreover, if art or other forms of representation were intimately tied to the world – or imminent within the object – they were neither static, nor totally contained within the object. In fact, in articulating the concept of exact fantasy or mimetic transformation – deliberate non-sequiturs – Benjamin and Adorno ran the gauntlet between theories of art as a reflection of the real world, then popular among Marxists of the Third International, and bourgeois idealism which saw the artist as a free and unfettered creator of beautiful objects. While the artist was hemmed in by the particularities of bourgeois social life (e.g., the concrete particular), he was still free to rearrange the pieces – which Adorno likened to Leibniz's monads or Marx's fetish objects – in a manner which anticipates Lévi-Strauss's "bricoleur" and his science of the concrete (1969). As Susan Buck-Morss writes (1977: 86-7):

Exact fantasy was thus a dialectical concept which acknowledged the mutual mediation of subject and object without allowing either to get the upper hand. It was not imagination in the sense of subjective projection beyond the existing world either into the past or into the future; it remained imminent within the material phenomena, the factuality of which acted as a control to thought. Exact fantasy was scientific in its refusal to step outside the perimeters of the elements. Yet like art, it rearranged the elements of experience, the riddle figures of empirical existence, until they opened up to cognitive understanding. It was this interpretive rearrangement which brought to light what Adorno meant by the logic of matter. The subject yielded to the objects, yet it did not leave them unchanged.

What remains troublesome, at least to me, is the relationship *within* critical theory between the artist, or front-line interpreter, and the critic or second-line interpreter. Since there are always at least two interpreters of art, myth, music or drama, the question becomes: who does the heavy lifting? With the exception of Schonberg, whom Adorno considered a true revolutionary at least in a musical sense, it appears that the weight of interpretative activity fell mostly upon the philosopher-critic and *his* use of juxtaposition to explore or break apart the essence of concrete phenomena. In other words, while the artist/storyteller was quite capable of forming riddles, he wasn't, in Adorno's view, very good at solving them.

However in interpreting *Way Kot*, I argue that the myth does a pretty good job of solving its own riddles. While the verbal iconography of *Way Kot* can be compared to the radical juxtaposition of antithetical elements in surrealism, it does not simply replicate the phenomenal forms (appearances) of consumer society – a charge which Adorno leveled against surrealism – but provides a novel interpretation of its object through the deft arrangement of its “fetishes” in narrative structure. Indeed, through the subtle play of images, *Way Kot* not only reveals the mystery of the commodity form (e.g., the relationship of labor, commodities and money), but provides a critical perspective on consumption itself, a rhetorical counterstroke to the commodity aesthetics of the period. Whereas institutions of modern society (ca. 1935) attempted to make commodities enchant, *Way Kot* presents commerce as a form of witchcraft, and consumption as a form of cannibalism, in which unsuspecting Maya consumed their own relatives. In short, following David Graeber (2001: 248), I would suggest that the best place to look for “*unfetishized consciousness in non-Western societies ... is precisely around objects Westerners would be inclined to refer to as 'fetishes.'*”

II. The Oral Literature of Yucatán

Although critical analysis of Mayan folktales is a recent and still relatively rare pursuit, anthropologists and folklorists have been collecting stories, proverbs and riddles in Yucatán for well over one hundred years. An early sampling is contained in Daniel Brinton's 1883 *Folk-lore of Yucatan*, a publication of the London Folk-lore Society. While Brinton's study is by no means systematic, and contains no complete texts, the author identified several important characters and motifs that appear in later collections, and are discussed throughout the peninsula today. One such character is the *x-tabay*, a seductress who captures the attention of hunters by combing her beautiful hair in front of the *ceiba* tree she inhabits. When a hunter approaches, *x-tabay* runs away, but slowly enough, and with an occasional glance over her shoulder, that he knows to pursue her. The unsuspecting hunter easily catches *x-tabay* and embraces her, but not before the seductress is transformed into a cactus or thorny bush with huge talons. Heartbroken and bloody, the hunter returns home, develops a fever, and in most versions, becomes delirious or dies.

Because Maya villages were despoiled by large *henequén* (sisal) plantations that supplied the world market with fiber needed for cordage in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – and *henequén* is a type of cactus (*agave fourcroydes*) – it's possible that the popularity of this story relates to Yucatán's early insertion into the global economy. Brinton, however, was content to compare *x-tabay* with legendary women of the Old

World (e.g., the sirens of Greek mythology), and saw little need to contextualize or historicize the story. Indeed, while one would expect *henequén* to figure prominently in regional folklore because of its impact on village life, little or nothing has been written about this devilish plant. On the other hand, untold volumes have been written on maize deities and other Ur-Maya constructs.

A more systematic approach to Maya oral literature can be found in Margaret Park Redfield's *Folk literature of a Yucatecan Town* (1937), a study conducted in Dzitas, Yucatán in the 1930s. Here, M. Redfield follows the example of earlier mythographers such as Malinowski by dividing oral literature into three broad categories: the *cuento*, a fanciful tale, the *ejemplo*, a more or less true story with a moral, and, finally, the *historia*, a more or less true story without a moral. While the *cuento* – which includes animal stories as well as tales of European origin – was considered a stable, well-defined form, Redfield politely noted that the *historia* violated the taxonomies laid down by previous mythographers, veering off in the direction of fantasy or anecdote. Nevertheless, like ethnographers of her time, Redfield considered herself a functionalist, and viewed folk literature as a method of reinforcing community norms – *not* as a critique of the social order. *Ejemplos*, in particular, were considered tools for teaching children to avoid saying inappropriate things.

People said that I had twins because the children had two fathers. But God punished them for talking this way. It is not good to talk about other people, and so these same women had twins too (1937:26).

A more contemporary approach to oral literature can be found in the work of Allan Burns. In *An Epoch of Miracles* (1983) Burns not only broadens the scope of oral literature by including narratives concerning esoteric phenomenon and dreams, but relates his typology to indigenous speech categories rather than the categories employed by Malinowski and others. Burns also places considerable importance on the contextual and performative aspects of Maya storytelling. In addition to noting that Yucatec Maya like to tell riddles at wakes, he argues that storytelling is best understood as a dialogue or conversation (1983: 19-20). More importantly, at least for the present study, Burns argues that oral literature, especially “counsels of a historical nature” (e.g., *historias*), be understood as a form of *rhetoric* or argumentation rather than a recitation of tales frozen in time or space. Here, for example, Burns notes that one informant rejected his scientific explanation of rainfall and evaporation by performing a counsel (*historia*) that “included a reference to a time during the Caste War when the water from the sea joined the water from the sky to destroy many enemy troops” (71).

Another important contribution to Maya oral literature is Michel Boccara's *Encyclopédie de la mythologie Maya Yucatèque*, a 15 volume work published in French and Yucatec Maya (1997). In the introduction to the *Encyclopédie* (volume one), Boccara lays out a general theory of myth that sharply distinguishes the “myth” from the “account” (or myth text), and emphasizes the affective or unconscious nature of myth (1997: 16-17). In contrast to Lévi-Strauss and the structuralists, Boccara argues that myth is really a special kind of speech (*parole*), a primeval form of communication based on song or chant. This, according to Boccara, not only helps to explain the recurrent comparison between human beings and birds in mythology, but the fact that many myths

contain a prologue concerning the origin of language or a reference to mythic ancestors who laugh and sing, but do not speak (1997: 20).

Notwithstanding the importance of bird-lore in Yucatán, Boccara's general formulations are obviously remote from my way of thinking about myth. Nevertheless, the *Encyclopédie* is, in my view, an invaluable resource. Unlike many previous collections which sacrifice depth for breadth and offer little contextual information or analysis, Boccara's encyclopedia focuses on a limited number of motifs, including commerce and *Way Kot*, and provides multiple versions of each tale as well as commentaries, historical and ethnographic notes, and other supporting documents. Boccara, as I note further on, also does a good job of pointing out how myths evolve over time, incorporating new elements or characters as the historical context changes.

III. Meeting Way Kot

My first meeting with *way kot* occurred shortly after my arrival in Yucatán, although at the time I assumed I was simply dealing with the curiosity of a six year-old child. My wife, Helene, and I had just completed a quick tour of handicraft stores in the town of Ticul and were waiting in 100 degree heat at the local bus depot. As I scanned the area for *boli bolis*, the local version of a popsicle, a young girl approached, and, selecting the less threatening of the two gringos, directed a question to Helene. Still in the process of learning Spanish, Helene cast a confused glance in my direction and asked: "what's *agarran* mean?"

"Grab," I said, noticing a broad smile on the face of the woman standing next to her. Something was up. I moved closer and asked the girl to repeat the question. Reluctantly, but more annoyed than frightened, she turned and asked if it's true that gringos grab young children, take them up North and make ham out of them. Peels of laughter rippled from every corner of the dusty depot. Unsure about how to respond, or whom I was really responding to, I paused, turned back to Helene and translated the question. Finally, not wanting to appear too defensive, I smiled and said: "no, actually gringos prefer hamburgers, they make hamburger out of them." Undaunted, but recognizing that caution is the better part of valor, the girl stepped back and buried herself in the folds of her mother's *huipil*.

Back in Maxcanú (my primary field site) I repeated the story to friends and informants hoping to elicit similar stories about "los gringos." Few were forthcoming. Although I was privy to endless stories about the archaeological team from Madrid that was allegedly stealing gold artifacts from nearby Oxkintok (a preclassic Maya site) and shipping them back to Spain, people were hesitant to talk about "los gringos Americanos," at least to me. Eventually, however, my eldest informant, 80 year-old Don Román, admitted that the episode in Ticul reminded him of an *historia* – a tale which combines fantasy with historical fact (Sullivan 1989: 186) – he had heard as a young man, and told me to return the next day to hear the tale of *Way Pop* [*Way Kot*].

Version One²

... había un encargado que habitaba en una finca. Entonces a lado de la finca todos
... there was a foreman who lived on a small hacienda. Back then they imprisoned

los que no obedecían a el los encarcelaba, pero dice que cuando amanece ...

those who didn't obey him next to the hacienda, but they say the next morning ...

no esté allí. Y entonces le dice a sus compañeros: "señores, éste no está, se huyó,"
[the prisoner] wasn't there. Then he says to his friends: "gentlemen, he's not here, he escaped,"

y después está cerrado con llave. ¿Quién sabe como se fue? Bueno, cada vez así ...
and then [the prison] was locked. Who knows how he left? Well, each time it was like that.

Como hay uno de ellos también que sabía ese de convertirse en *way pop* desobedeció al encargado.
Since one of them also knew how to convert himself into *way pop* he disobeyed the foreman.

Entonces lo metieron al bote. Ah, entonces como a media noche oyó que se estaba abriendo
So they threw him in the prison. Ah, then around midnight he heard someone opening

la llave del carcel y lo sacaron. "Bueno, pues pasa a subirte aquí, que voy a llevar en Mérida."
the lock on the prison and they took him out. "Okay, climb up here, I'm taking you to Mérida."

...obedeció y se trepó entonces y vio que abre sus alas entonces y voló y va volando y ve que éste
...he obeyed, climbed up and saw [foreman] open his wings and fly, he was flying and saw the

tenga narices a con que así llevan los demas, pensó el. Pues ... en medio camino habia una
[creature] had a beak with which he carried the rest, he thought. Well ... about half way there was

mata de arbol, pero vio que era un desierto, pero ese mata estaba muy frondoso y muy alto.
a tree, but he saw that it was in a desert, but this tree was very florid and very high.

Allí descansó ... entonces vio que llegó en un pueblo. Y vio que se bajó
There he rested ... then he saw he had arrived in a town. He descended onto

sobre una azotea y que le decía: "bajate." Vio que no tenía alas, nada ...
a long flat roof and was told: "get down." He saw [*way pop*] had no wings, nothing ...

Y empujó la puerta y entró. Y agarró la mano del señor y vio que se le entregan a
[*Way Pop*] pushed the door and entered. He grabbed the hand of the man and delivered him to

otro señor. "Aquí traje ... otro. Está bueno ...ya tengo para mi mercancía,"
another man. "Here I brought another one. He's good ...now I have [enough] for my

que dice. "Ah, éste es tan poco mas gordo, hay para preparar para vender," que dice.
merchandise," he said. "Ah this one is a little fatter, there's enough to prepare for sale," he says.

Ah, creo que son los que se preparan de jamón para vender. Ah, entonces agarraron su mano
Ah, I think they are the ones they make ham from, for sale. Ah, then they grabbed his hand,

y llevaron y lo metieron ... en una una caseta así, y vio que allí están a sus amigos allí
they carried him away and put him in a little house like this, and he saw his friends were there

y le tienen cortado los pies ... Cerraron con llaves a todos. Entonces el como nada sacó la llave ...
and their feet had been cut off ... Everyone was locked in. Then he casually pulled out the key ...

Bueno, pues abre. Uno de sus, que es muy conocido de el ... "Pues, hoy te voy a llevar," que dice.
Well, it opened. To one of them, who is very close to him ... he says: "I'm taking you today."

Y lo sacó entonces al otro cuando lo sacó así entonces ahora así que abre sus alas también.
And he took him then to the one he took out, he [shows] him he has wings too [and says]:

“Subate allí en mi espalda, vamos”... Muy alto empezó a ir y vio hace rato que
“Climb up there on my back, let's go”... He began to fly very high and he saw after

está yendo hasta que asomó en el desierto, a éste a que pasamos y empezó
awhile he was going to the place they landed in the desert, the one we passed and he began

a ver donde está el arbol donde descansaron ... Entonces cuando llegó allá a la finca ...
to see the tree where they rested ... Then, when he arrived there at the hacienda ...

Abrió donde están cerrado los demas, vio que no había ni un preso allí.
He opened the place where the rest were and saw there wasn't even one prisoner.

Ya había amanecido entonces. Cuando si antojó al encargado fue a echarse allí en la carcel.
The sun was already up then. When he noticed the foreman he threw himself in the jail.

Y vio que allí estaban los dos personas, personales y achechó. Y vio que es el que llevó.
[The foreman] saw there were two people and stared. He saw it was one he already took.

Y entonces el señor lo vio y no habla ese. Ah, se le quitó allá... Es que se estaba huyendo....
The [foreman] saw him, but he didn't speak. Ah, he just got out of there... He was really escaping...

Después que salió el encargado salió también y fue a la comandancia. Entonces le dijo que
After the foreman left, he left as well and went to the police. He told the police to

agarran a ese encargado: "Ya descubrí donde acaban la gente que a veces," que dice,
grab the foreman: "Now I discovered where the people sometimes end up," he says,

“que lo meten en el calabozo y cuando amanece que no está allá pues el lo lleva. Los lleva a vender.
“they put them in prison and when morning comes they're not there since he takes them. He sells them.

Ah, porque yo ya fui. Yo ví allí están mis compañeros. Hay que ya comieron, hay que
Ah, because I just went. I saw my companions there. Some had already been eaten, some

todavía, ya le tienen cortado sus pies a todos...” Entonces ... la comandante fue ... a ver el calabozo
still hadn't, they all had their feet cut off...” Then ... the police chief went ... to see the prison

y vio que allí esté el señor. Entonces al agarrar entonces ese encargado, no lo agarraron. Se huyó
and saw the [foreman] was there. He then tried grabbing the foreman, but he couldn't. He escaped

... volvió en su casa ... lo agarraron y...metieron en el calabozo...entonces lo metieron en los separos allí.
... he returned to his house ... they grabbed him and...put him in jail... they put him in solitary confinement.

En los separos no dejan nada. Si tienes faja te lo quitan ... Solo te dejan tu pantalón y tu camisa ...
In solitary nothing is allowed. They even take your band-aids ...They only leave your pants and your shirt...

Nada le dieron para comer y cuando amaneció, cuando fueron a ver allí, estaba colgado.
They didn't give him any food and the next day, when they went to see him, he was hanging.

Se ahorcó...Ya se acabó el *Way Pop*... Entonces el otro citaron para que se presenta otra vez y se fue.
He hung himself ...*Way Pop* was finished... They set a date for the other [*Way Pop*] to appear and he left.

Y dijo como descubrió. "¿Pues ... cómo ese oficio lo sabe?" "También lo sé, pero yo no para hacer daño.
And he told what he learned. "Well ... how do you know this business?" "I know it too, but not to do harm.

No más lo aprendí y nunca he hecho ningún mal ... Solo así a veces voy a buscar mercancía....

I just learned it and I have never done anything evil.... Only on occasion do I go looking for merchandise....

Eso es lo que hago, pero ese señor que lo descubrí, tenía un comercio de pura lozanía.”[R: ¿De puro que?]
This is what I do, but this man I discovered, he sold pure luxury goods.” [R: Pure what?]

De pura lencería. Ah, entonces en ningún lado encuentran esas cosas que tiene el ... no se veo.
Pure linen and lingerie. Ah, back then you didn't find the things he had anywhere ... they weren't seen.

El va por extranjero, pero así lo trae cargado. Y nunca se vio que se estaciona un coche en la puerta de
He goes abroad, but brings them back like this. Nobody ever saw him park a vehicle in front of the

la lencería. Cuando se abre la casa está lleno de puras cosas así ... Le dieron su libertad ... No le
clothing store. When they opened the house it was full of things like this... They let him go ... They

hicieron nada. Porque el confesó que no era para hacer daño. Que el iba al extranjero a comprar mercancías.
didn't do anything. Because he claimed he didn't cause harm. He went abroad [simply] to buy merchandise.

IV. Discussion

A. Primitive Accumulation

In this version, and other versions of *Way Kot/Way Pop*, the myth begins by posing a solution to a specific problem; however, the problem it purports to solve is not identified until the very end when the narrator notes the mysterious character of the clothing store (*lencería*). Although no one ever sees a delivery being made, the store is always stocked with costly and unusual goods. Where does this merchandise come from? Moreover, how does a merchant who doesn't engage in productive labor, or directly exploit the labor of others, amass such great wealth? The problem, of course, is a familiar one. It is the same problem Peter Worsley identified in his study of cargo cults, and the basis for the imitative magic he described in *The Trumpet Shall Sound*. “As far as the natives are concerned,” writes Worsley, “the Whites received the goods by steamer from unknown parts; they did not manufacture them, and merely sent pieces of paper back ...Who made these goods, how and where were mysteries – it could hardly be the idle White man” (1986: 97).

The Mayan solution, however, is a bit more “sociological” than the New Guinea one. In the tale of *Way Kot* the merchant, in the guise of a large bird, emanates directly from the foreman, an individual well-known for his ability to appropriate the labor power of others. Known in Yucatán as the *mayokol*,³ the foreman was an anathema in the eyes of the Maya labor force. Although a native Maya speaker, he served the hacienda owner, a demonic figure, by enforcing production quotas and meting out corporal punishment to Maya workers (xxxx). In other versions of the tale (see page 32), the foreman is replaced by a priest, another well-known usurper,⁴ but the outcome is the same.

The tale of *Way Kot* also resembles the treasure tales told by the peasants of Tzintzuntzan, tales which were used to explain a resident's sudden rise to prominence. Indeed, most of Foster's treasure tales (1967: 146-47), though purportedly examples of a general world view (e.g., the idea of limited good), deal specifically with the genesis of mercantile capital:

1. Salvador Enríquez was a potter, so poor he lacked animals to carry clays. Like other poor potters, he packed his raw materials on his back, and his tumpline had worn all the hair off his head, he was that poor before he began to live well. His daughter, after cutting

her bare foot several times on a stone in the yard, lifted the slab out with a hoe and to her astonishment found a pot containing pure silver. Salvador bought the village's first sewing machine, *opened a store*, built a fine house and began to live on a scale previously unknown in Tzintzuntzan [emphasis added].

2. Several boys were playing in the *aljibe*, a vault beneath the cloister adjacent to the church. One of them, Jaime Enríquez, struck an old chest and saw something gleaming behind the rotten wood. He ran to tell his father, Gaudencio, the sacristan, who ejected the boys and locked the room. That night Gaudencio sent his eldest son, Angel, who took his friend Eleno Miranda, and the two removed the treasure which in part consisted of golden sandals left there by Tarascan kings. Shortly thereafter, Eleno opened a *fine store on the plaza with clothing and everything*. *Angel entered commerce* [emphasis added], bought a truck . . . and became Tzintzuntzan's richest man.

The difference is that while the treasure tales of Tzintzuntzan attribute the genesis of mercantile capital to fortuitous circumstances, or in some cases simple theft, the tale of *Way Kot* proposes a more sober economic solution by linking commerce to production and highlighting the dependence of the city on the countryside. Once again, however, the fragmentary character of Foster's published narratives makes a more detailed comparison impossible.

B. Eagle Excrement and Gold Shit

Having resolved the problem of "primitive accumulation," *Way Kot* moves on to other matters. At this point, however, the serious reader confronts an interpretive stumbling block. Although in all versions of the tale the role of the kidnapper/usurper is of central importance, his identity remains somewhat in doubt. While in versions one and two he is referred to simply as *way pop*, which might be translated as "the witch of the mats" (*Diccionario Maya Cordemex* 666), in version four he is referred to as *way kot* "the eagle witch" (DMC 338). Moreover, in version five, a literary rendition composed by Luis Rosado Vega, *way kot* acts in concert with a third evil-doer, *way pach'*, a long, slender creature who can "slip through the smallest fissures" (1957: 168-175).⁵

Prima facie evidence, of course, supports the choice of *way kot* since the usurper in each case is a large, winged creature. Moreover, the collaboration between *way kot* and the serpentine *way pach'* allows for a rather intriguing comparison between the usurping villain and the Mexican peso (e.g., money), since based on mythic imagery of an earlier era, the Aztec origin myth, the back of a peso features a ferocious eagle perched atop a cactus (nopal) with a serpent dangling from its beak. Following this scenario the florid desert tree where *way kot* rests in version one can be interpreted as the nopal upon which the Aztec eagle sits. In fact, the nopal, a cactus found throughout Mexico, is well-known for its flower.

Moreover, thanks to a popular jingle preserved by José López Bolio (1983: 42), we know that the eagle and his droppings have served as metonyms of token money since the time of the Mexican Revolution, if not earlier. Referring to the worthless *carrancudos* that General Carranza used to pay his soldiers, one anonymous poet wrote:

El águila nacional
es un animal muy cruel
se traga el oro metal
y caga puro papel.

The national eagle
is a very cruel animal
it swallows gold metal
and shits pure paper.

| | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| ¿Qué nos diga el General? | What do you say to us General? |
| ¿Con que dinero nos paga? | With what money will you pay us? |
| Si con el oro metal | With gold metal |
| o con lo que el águila caga. | or with eagle shit. |

Maya speakers are, apparently, no less prone to sarcasm since as Norman McQuown points out (personal communication 1994), the Yucatec Maya term for money, *tak'in*, is best understood as a compound noun containing the morphemes for “excrement” (*ta'*) and “gold” (*k'in*).⁶ In any case, if *Way Kot* is really a tale about commerce, it only makes sense that the protagonist doubles as money.

But who, then, is *way pop*? Michel Boccara, who likewise notes the tendency of storytellers to use both names, suggests that the term *pop* – a type of reed or mat (DMC 666) – designates the material from which a more technologically astute witch constructs his wings. From Bocarra's perspective the myth of *Way Pop/Way Kot* is undergoing a transformation parallel to the evolution of technology in Yucatán, and the term *pop* represents the extension of the *way* (witch) from a malevolent being in animal form to a malevolent technician or to technology itself. However, the only evidence provided in support of this interpretation comes from a brief description of *way pop* manufacturing his wings from a soft wood. No attempt is made to demonstrate that this wood is actually the reed known in Yucatec Maya as *pop*. Furthermore, Redfield, who also noted the tendency to substitute one name for another, claims that it was actually older people, not young ones who used the term *way pop* (1990 [1934]: 179).

A more plausible explanation, in my view, is that the name *way pop* derives from an analogy between this myth and folktales about genies on flying mats that were brought to Yucatán by Lebanese immigrants in the early 1900s. Mayan myths, as Allan Burns has noted (1983: 31), have been profoundly influenced by European tales, and Domingo Dzul Poot, a well-known translator, has specifically noted the imprint of Arab tales on local forms of storytelling (personal communication, June, 1989).

As both oral and written sources attest (Ramírez Carrillo 1994), Lebanese immigrants began arriving in Yucatán in the late 19th century and got their start as itinerant merchants. Indeed, stories abound of Arab merchants traveling the back roads of Yucatán with unusual consumer goods. Although few were able to speak more than a few words of Spanish or Maya, they were persistent salesmen and would gesture or draw diagrams in the dirt in order to sell an article. In addition to developing a reputation for being stubborn (*terco*), they were known for their frugality. In fact, older residents still affectionately refer to Lebanese merchants by the Maya-Spanish hybrid *haant cebolla* (onion eater) since this was, reportedly, the only thing they needed to sustain themselves.

By the mid 1920s several Lebanese families had established clothing shops (*lencerías*) or dry goods stores around the central plaza in Maxcanú. Judging by the number of marriages between children of wealthy Lebanese merchants and established Yucatecan families, it appears that the more prosperous families were easily assimilated into the town's upper class; however, they were also sometimes suspected of being *wayes* (witches). Not only is the merchant in some versions an Arab, but when Don Román began discussing who in Maxcanú were actually *wayes*, one of the two names which came up was that of Don Pepe, a Lebanese merchant who owned a lucrative business in the center of town. In short, then, one might say that the name *way pop* (e.g., mat witch)

shows a certain deference to the knowledge of the Lebanese merchant-villain himself. But, then, as the young girl who quizzed me in Ticul recognized, who would know better than one who has flown the coop?⁷

Does this mean that the tale of *Way Pop/Way Kot* first came to life in the 1920s or the early 1930s? Maybe, maybe not. One can certainly find earlier references to *Way Kot*. For example, Daniel Brinton's *Folk-lore of the Yucatán*, published in 1883, contains a reference to this character; however, the *way kot* found there is a mischievous bird that hid in the exterior walls of a house and threw rocks at pedestrians. It is not clear if the ill-mannered bird was actually an eagle. In fact, it's not clear whether the Maya term *kot* refers to this devilish creature at all, since *kot* also means "wall or stone fence" (DCM 338). Could *way kot* have been the "witch of the wall" originally?⁸ If so, is this really the same *way kot*? Could the intensification of commerce in the 1930s have led to a slippage in the referent (e.g., from wall to eagle)?

Similarly, one can consider Michel Bocarra's claim that the tale goes back to 1829 if not early, because Don Claudio, a merchant named in version four, was known to have lived in Yaxcaba at the time. But what if the merchant's name was inserted *ex post facto*? In addition to examining how different versions of *way kot* mythologize history, it's important to consider the ways in which different narrators historicize myth. It is, after all, an *historia*. In my view, determining the origin of this tale is a little like trying to figure out when English writers began to lament the decline of rural life (Williams 1973). Infinite regress is clearly possible, especially if we allow for slippage between referents. Not only have witch tales served as an idiom for discussing social life for many years, *both* (e.g., stories and social life) have, undoubtedly, undergone numerous transformations in the last century.

Therefore, instead of pursuing an elusive starting point,⁹ I prefer to focus on what's being said. In other words, if Don Román heard the tale as a young man (ca. 1935) as he claims, what was happening at *that* time which contributes to our understanding of the story? What's the nature of the relationship between narrative and social life, or narrative and history? And, finally, what animates the continual retelling of this story?

C. Commodity Aesthetics, Sex and History: Chan Kom and Beyond.

As it turns out the Lebanese weren't the only ones trying to make money. Between 1931 and 1948, the period covered in Redfield's restudy of Chan Kom (*c.f. A Village that Chose Progress*), commerce expanded significantly, individual rights in property became far more commonplace, money gained greater currency, and work became increasingly specialized. In 1931 house lots were considered a type of usufruct that would revert to the village, the eminent domain, if the resident moved away; however, by 1948 individual ownership of house lots was common and properties were routinely bought and sold. Agricultural land and all the things that went with it (e.g., fruit trees, wells) were also being privatized. In fact, notwithstanding dissension on the part of some residents (Goldkind 1964), even sections of the *ejido* (community land) were effectively privatized. Most importantly, perhaps, the ethos of Chan Kom had changed. Not only was Don Eus, Redfield's chief informant, furtively scribbling comments about the "importancia de dinero" (1950: 158) in the margins of his books but monetary transactions had become part of everyday life. "In these seventeen years," writes Redfield, "the people have received many visitors and have come to take it as a matter of

course that serving a meal will bring money and that house rent be paid by one who is given lodging” (1950: 65). In any case, by 1948 Chan Kom had four well-stocked general stores whereas in 1931 it only had one, and, as Redfield himself notes, the “uayes were ... real” (1950: 125).

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the state and its various dependencies were behind many of these activities. As Ben Fallow notes, Yucatán’s socialist governor, Bartolomé García Correa (1930-33), was intent on modernizing the Maya by spreading “western models of labor, consumption and recreation” (1997: 558). In addition to promoting baseball, good hygiene and consumer items that went along with it (e.g., shoes, new clothing), the García Correa administration held female beauty pageants and male strong man contests “to reward the most ‘hardworking’ and ‘progressive’ males; winners were crowned ‘India bonita’ and ‘Indio robusto’” (1997:558). A similar proposal was put forth by Humberto Peniche Vallado, a prominent Yucatecan educator, on the eve of the Cárdenas agrarian reform in 1935. For Peniche Vallado the problem was not simply that the Maya had grown averse to physical and mental labor but that they lacked the sentiments and “bodily needs” that linked other subjects to the world of *comodidades* (understood both as comforts and commodities). For agrarian reform to succeed the Maya villager would first have to be transformed into a subject of irrepressible desires (In Cetina Sierra et. al., 1987: 95).

The problem – to my understanding – does not lie precisely in learning how to read or acquiring a certain level of knowledge. The problem lies in elevating [the Indian’s] standard of living, in making sure that he enjoys the well-being that civilization has brought, and in creating bodily needs (*necesidades*) for him [Translated from original by author].

To release the elemental passion of the Indian, emotions repressed by centuries of exploitation, Peniche Vallado proposed a curriculum which emphasized competitive sports, theatre and excursions throughout the state. Although in his opinion baseball and tennis might prove too intellectually demanding, other competitive activities such as track, weightlifting and wrestling would elevate the Indian’s spirit and enable him to overcome his “inferiority complex” (In Cetina Sierra et. al. 1987: 104).

More importantly, though, it was the responsibility of the rural educator to make modernity enchant by embedding the consumption of new commodities in community events where emotions ran high. In particular, Peniche Vallado recommended that teachers induce villagers to construct a hygienic, cinder block house with all the latest amenities: running water, a cement floor, etc., and in an opportune moment invested with all the pomp and gaiety of the annual fiesta, to raffle off the exemplary construction. Similarly, patriotic holidays and the emerging courtship ritual provided excellent opportunities to help students form an affection for good clothes. While Peniche Vallado was against imposing western dress on young students, the demands of courtship combined with the “capricious” nature of women would, in his view, make the introduction of modern apparel much easier. In short, through rituals old and new – what Sydney Mintz (1985: 122) refers to as “rituals of intensification” – the elementary school teacher would gradually develop the student’s aesthetic sensitivity and self-discipline, qualities which would not only induce the Maya to covet personal property but were considered the building blocks of civilization itself.

Therefore, if the ability to purchase new consumer items provided an opportunity to shed signs of servility, and was eagerly embraced in some places (See Ownby 1999; Cohen 1990; Miller 1994),¹⁰ Yucatán was not one of them. New forms of consumption required new forms of seduction, and, in some cases, new forms of coercion. In fact, as Redfield notes in his famous restudy of Chan Kom, girls adopted western dress only because their teacher demanded it, and abandoned the new fashion as soon as they left school (1950: 41).

In my view, then, *Way Kot* is best understood as part of a more general reluctance to embrace the market and its charms. By equating commerce with witchcraft, and the consumption of processed meats with cannibalism, *Way Kot* provides a rhetorical counterpoint to Peniche Vallado and other educators (including Villa Rojas) who were lavishing the Maya with icons of modernity. While one can reasonably argue that *Way Kot* is more about profiting off the blood and sweat of Maya workers (e.g., coercion) than about the dangers of seduction, the clothing store *way kot* operated was, according to Don Román, “*un comercio de pura lozania*” (a luxury goods business) where one could purchase items which were impossible to find anywhere else.

This does not suggest that the simple *lencería* was filled with expensive jewelry and silk scarves; lingerie and certain dry goods would have been considered luxuries in their own right. It does, however, emphasize the seductive nature of such an enterprise. And here we should remember that it was seductive or illicit sexual acts that often raised suspicion of witchcraft in the first place. In an unusually candid account of Maya verbal “intercourse,” Paul Sullivan notes that sexual escapades are not only “favorite conversational topics among Maya men in their gatherings” (1989: 110) but highlight the connection between witchcraft and illicit sexual performances in local gossip. Describing how the wife of San (a master shaman) died, Sullivan writes: “Some say San’s late wife was a *way*, a transforming witch, killed while in the form of a black dog, the guise she habitually assumed for nightly sexual assaults against a certain young man in the neighboring village. The man would wake up night after night to find himself completely naked, his penis swollen and raw, so one night, the story goes, he lay in wait and shot the witch-dog as she approached” (1989:201). Similarly, Redfield notes “[t]he *uay xib* (male witch) is described as using its tongue as its instrument of lubricity” (1990 [1934]: 179).¹¹

Interpreting *Way Kot* as a rhetorical counterpoint to a new ethos of consumption (ca 1935) is also strengthened by the behavior and rhetoric of other social classes. In fact, when Don Eus, Chan Kom’s wealthiest and most progressive citizen, was not informing Redfield about the need for technological improvement, he was complaining about the buying habits of young people the way some parents now speak about the dangers of marijuana or other “gateway” recreational drugs. “Shoes and dresses mean being advanced, the young people say. But I say, then beds follow, and different foods ... If you go *catrin* [become a dandy] you can’t carry a load on you back and you aren’t content with chayote or squash. And I say it costs too much money” (Redfield 1950: 41).¹²

Similarly, I would argue that even members of the peninsular elite had serious reservations about the growth of consumer culture, a view they expressed through their ridicule of upwardly mobile residents (*los catrines*). Although many anthropologists have treated the term *catrin* as a neutral ethnic category (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1990 [1934]; Redfield 1964; Thompson 1968; Goldkind 1964; Press 1975), or a term of

unknown origin (Hansen and Bastarrachea 1984: 158), it is actually an insult, equivalent to “dandy” or “fop,” and is directed against anyone who dares to dress beyond his supposed station in life. In fact the term, just coming into popular use in the 1920s¹³, comes from a 19th century novel, *Don Catrin de la Fachenda* (The Pretentious Don Catrin), by the Mexican satirist José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi.

Because Fernández de Lizardi’s protagonist, Don Catrin, comes from a family of very modest means, the father assumes that his son will be groomed for a practical trade such as carpentry or tailoring; however, the mother, who claims to have the “blood of Ponces, Tagles, Pintas and Velascos” (Spell 1931: 74) in her veins, insists that her son be sent to a preparatory school. Don Catrin attempts to follow the course set by his mother, but only succeeds in acquiring a distain for honest labor. However, despite his many failings, Don Catrin always manages to wear the latest fashion; and because in his view clothes make the man, he is surprised when, on the verge of poverty, his old friends abandon him (Fernández de Lizardi 1944: 45).

I was caught floating in the air, without training in military arts, business, farming or anything else worthwhile, but was a clean person without frills when my old friends, the officials, turned their backs on me. None of them showed even the slightest appreciation; they even refused to greet me. Perhaps, it was because I was broke since in these days I was pretty well dressed. With what I made by selling my uniform, I bought ... a top hat, a pair of remounted boots, a watch worth twenty reales, the latest fashion chain for six pesos, a little cane and a handkerchief. [Translated from original by author]

In short, threatened by the decline of sumptuary regulation *de vestido* (of the dress), and other, more traditional methods of demonstrating status, the cream of Yucatecan society fashioned their own critique of consumer culture and those who sought to advance through it. And like the Maya, they made ample use of allegory if of a different sort.

D. The Riddle of Money

Let me now go out on a limb. Having penetrated the ‘veil of *way kot*,’ and discovered the commodity form (e.g., money), it now becomes possible to see the second problem: the enigmatic relationship between commodities, labor and money, a puzzle the myth attempts to solve as it follows the trail of disappearing Mayas. In the first chapter of *Capital*, Marx painstakingly demonstrates the equivalence or commensurability of labor power, commodities and money as distinct types of value. Whereas the former creates value, and is sometimes referred to as “value-substance,” the latter are considered to be different expressions of “value-form.” In turn, commodities and money are distinguished by the fact that in the former “value-form” is inseparable from a particular use value or material satisfaction, while in the latter it is not. It is independent and can go where it chooses.

At the same time, however, Marx points out that the relationship between these synchronically ordered elements of value are gradually obscured by the development of money. In the case of direct barter the social character of value is relatively transparent. But with the emergence of a general equivalent, that is a commodity such as gold which

becomes the measure of other commodities, value appears to be inherent in the commodity itself (Marx 1939: 65).

What appears to happen is not that gold becomes money in consequence of all other commodities expressing their values in it, but on the contrary, that all other commodities universally express their values in gold because it is money. The intermediate steps of the process vanish in the result and leave no trace behind . . . We have seen the progressive development of a society of commodity producers stamps one privileged commodity with the character of money. *Hence the riddle presented by money is but the riddle presented by commodities; only it now strikes us in its most glaring form* [Emphasis added]

The value-relation is obscured even further by the eventual substitution of paper money or tokens for commodity-money, an event that accompanies an increase in the circulation of commodities. As gold, money still contains value, the magnitude of which is rendered directly in terms of its weight. However, as commodity exchange becomes increasingly commonplace, the nominal weight (or price) of money not only deviates from its actual weight (or value) as a result of wear and tear, but begins to take its place, a process which highlights the increasing importance of money as a *medium of exchange* as opposed to a simple measure of value. With the substitution of paper for precious metal this function becomes preeminent. "Its functional existence," as Marx writes, "absorbs, so to say, its material existence" (1939: 105). In this way value is replaced by its symbol, a move which not only severs the link between labor as a source of value and its expression (e.g., value-form), but leads to the most imaginative fantasies (e.g., commodity fetishism). In short, then, the world from which *Way Kot* draws its imagery, the world of incipient commodity exchange, is a world of fragmentary, inchoate forms, a world in which things are endowed with inalienable powers, and the social relations among producers are obscured by the products of their own labor.

In order to resolve the conundrums of commodity exchange and explain the power of money, *Way Kot* must first render sensuous experience concretely; that is, it must reduce its object, the contradictory nature of 'things' to a few palpable images, or in the words of Adorno, an "exact fantasy." While on the one hand token money, the valueless value-form, is brought to life on the wings of *way kot* (an image which, perhaps, represents the "independence" of the value-form), humanity is reduced to a passive, inert form, first as a helpless, footless prisoner, then as a commodity, ham.

Having depicted the appearance world in terms of its more notable attributes, *Way Kot* then illustrates the transformation of value into its various constituent forms as it follows Maya labor through the diaspora. In the opening episode *way kot* confronts his prisoner, or in the plaintive language of political economy, labor comes face to face with its value-form. It is a coercive encounter in which value triumphs and labor is forced to go abroad; however, *way kot* does not transgress the limits of his function as a *medium of exchange*. In a drama in which the equivalence between different items is rendered "metamorphically," either through consumption or through transformation (e.g., the foreman becomes a large eagle), *way kot* and his prisoner remain distinct. *Way kot* does not consume the prisoner as one might expect, but simply *mediates* the transformation of living labor-power into the commodity form. In other words, by ignoring *way kot's*

natural identity as a bird of prey, the myth foregrounds *way kot's* other identity as money, thus pushing the economic logic of the narrative to the surface.

Indeed, the laborers *way kot* steals are not consumed until after they enter the realm of production, that is until after the second transaction in which *way kot* sells his prisoner to the factory owner. Thus, the myth not only expresses the rural villager's antipathy towards industrial wage labor and, perhaps, a latent xenophobia (Sullivan 1989), but reveals the essence of the commodity as *congealed laborers*, an image which would surely be the envy of Dali or Miró. Nevertheless, *Way Kot* is not unlike many passages of *Capital* which are so littered with imaginary subjects like Mr. Moneybags that Marx feels compelled to warn his readers that "the characters who appear on the economic stage are but the *personifications* [emphasis added] of the economic relations which exist between them" (1939: 57).

The circuit is then completed when *way kot* returns from abroad with canned goods, sewing machines and other foreign products (see especially texts 6 and 30 in Boccara 1997: 55 and 124).¹⁴

The encounter between *way kot* and his Maya victims can also be seen as a condensed history of productive relations in Yucatán, or what Walter Benjamin sometimes referred to as a "configuration" or "monad" (see opening epigram), an arresting moment in which the narrator grasps the connection "which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one" (1977: 263). If, as Michel Boccara suggests, the tale of *Way Kot* goes back to the early 19th century, the central drama can be viewed as a highly cathected image of the notorious sale of Maya slaves to Cuba in the 1840s, the expropriation of Maya villagers by *henequén* producers in the late 1800s, the intensification of commerce in the 1930s, the migration of *braceros* (farm workers, literally "arms") to the US in the 1940s as well as the ongoing necessity of workers to go abroad. In fact, one thing Boccara demonstrates quite effectively through his dialogue with Don Mario, an elder informant, is that *Way Kot* continues to evolve, incorporating newer, more ingenious methods of capturing labor as well as more talented evil-doers (e.g., engineers, intellectuals).

Indeed, in a story reminiscent of the question posed by the inquisitive six-year-old I met in Ticul, Mario remarks (1997: 157):

Everyone who has completed advanced studies has researched ways ... to exploit the people. If they weren't able to exploit the women, they have sought to exploit the strength of the peasant. But there are people who ... are nearly the same as *Way Kot*. There are many cases like this. They steal the infant and they carry him away. There are times where they find the person responsible, but sometimes the child is lost. One time, I don't know who discovered it, but there was a little child who had been taken to another country. And when he was grown up, well ... they injected ampoules into his arms so that he would become clumsy (one armed), so that he could get handouts, so he could ask for charity. Each day, the child went out, and when he returned to where the chief who had taken him lived, he gave him the money, and thus he [the chief] lived on the back of the little child.... Well, I also think that the *Way Kot* are like this, lazy people who don't want to work and that make money with studies, with their ideas. [Translated from the original by author.]

E. Commerce and Witchcraft

Another vexing issue emerges when we attempt to analyze the relationship between the kidnapper-merchant and his chief antagonist. At first the relationship appears to be nothing other than a classic confrontation between good and evil. While the kidnapper-merchant profits by stealing hacienda workers and selling them for merchandise, his counterpart uses his magical powers to aid in their rescue, all for no apparent reward. While one is surreptitious and operates in the dead of night, the other is law abiding and conducts his activities in broad daylight.

Upon closer examination, however, the structural polarities of the myth give way to affinity and likeness. For example, the so called “hero” of version one turns out to be a merchant himself, a nameless character identified simply as “another one who knows how to convert himself into *way pop*.” In fact, when I asked Don Román the name of the second *way pop* following his recitation, he treated the question as an historical inquiry, and responded: “I think his name was Juan Martín.”¹⁵

Similarly, in version three of the myth merchants themselves become the victims of *way kot*:

. . . thus every night he took a drunk to Columbia and left him there in a shoe factory. The priest chose the most expensive shoes and returned to Yucatán. The following night he took another person to another factory in another country, left him there and grabbed the best, most expensive liquor which he sold in his store for less than the factory. Well then, the people paid attention and began to spy. One day he fell into the trap. All the merchants rebelled against the priest because nobody was buying their merchandise. [Translated from the original by author.]

What should we make of all this? Does this mean that *Way Kot* is not the critical commentary it appeared to be at the outset? Is the criticism of commerce misplaced?¹⁶ I think not, although it might be safer to say that criticism is being directed against *certain* business practices or *certain* businessmen, rather than commerce *per se*. To put things in perspective it’s helpful to think once more about the merchant’s peculiar co-referent, the witch or spiritist, and the public discourse that envelops such individuals. While residents of Maxcanú recognize that it is sometimes necessary to consult a spiritist in order to discover the origin of an illness or to counteract its negative effects, the spiritist’s knowledge and power make him/her an object of enduring suspicion, a necessary evil.¹⁷ Therefore, if merchants are truly analogous to witches as *Way Kot* suggests, it’s not surprising that they are thought of as good, or at least necessary, in one instant, and evil or dangerous in the next. Indeed, the idea that *way kot* can be *either* good or bad (or was originally good but turned bad) is presented in a brief summary of the tale in Boccara’s encyclopedia (1997, volume 6: 89). Appropriately titled *Le fils du Way Pop ou le bon et le mauvais Way Pop* (The child of *Way Pop* or the good and evil *Way Pop*), the story presents *way pop* as an honorable merchant who helps the poor. His son, however, is evil incarnate. The latter not only demands huge sums of money from his father, bringing the elder merchant near ruin, but abuses his adoptive sister.

Such ambiguity is hardly surprising. As myths from ancient Greece to Hollywood (e.g., *Star Wars*) reveal, evil and good often originate from the same source. Still acknowledging this draws attention to the fact that *way kot* himself is a self-contained contradiction, or to borrow once more from Adorno, one of those images which becomes more paradoxical the “more insistently it is observed” (see opening epigram).

V. Conclusion

Like Lévi-Strauss (1963: 230), I believe that myths, at least some myths, contain their own incisive logic. These stories offer a creative way of exploring conundrums that are seldom obvious to outsiders. At the same time, however, I think it would be wrong to reduce myth to a methodology for solving arcane puzzles. Speaking of commerce in the idiom of witchcraft suggests that there is more at stake than cracking unsolved mysteries, or explaining the opaque nature of capitalist exchange. It suggests that a judgment is being cast upon the morality of the marketplace and those who participate in it. Whereas institutions of bourgeois society attempt to make commodities enchant, the story of *Way Kot* presents commodity consumption as a form of cannibalism in which the rich eat the poor, or worse, in which unsuspecting Mayas eat their brethren. As the narrator in version one comments, the goods brought back by *way kot* are "*pura lozas*" (luxury goods), a devilish seduction that leads Maya villagers to participate in their own destruction. Indeed, by characterizing the tale as an *historia* the narrator indicates his awareness of the rhetorical/didactic function of the tale, not the veracity of every image or trope. *Historias*, as Sullivan notes, are "colorful and exciting, but they may contain truth, as well – lessons for present or future generations of ... common people" (1989: 186).

The interpretation of *Way Kot* as a form of rhetoric – a counterpoint to the commodity aesthetics of the era – is strengthened by the concerns that other classes, including the peninsular elite, expressed about the growth of commerce. Protests from this quarter might appear ironic since the Yucatecan elite apparently had much to gain from the new economy; however, as Appadurai notes (1986: 33), "whereas merchants tend to be social representatives of unfettered equivalence, new commodities and strange tastes, political elites tend to be the custodians of restricted exchange, fixed commodity systems, established tastes and sumptuary customs".

Finally, I would argue that the reason Marx's writing provides an effective vehicle for analyzing *Way Kot* is not because Mayas are in some sense proto-Marxists, or that peasant thought is governed by dialectical reason, but because Marxism itself is part of a rhetorical tradition – stretching from Aristotle to St. Thomas Aquinas and somewhat beyond – that not only emphasized the importance of labor, but questioned the value of the merchant and the money lender alike. As Block and Parry note (1989: 3), it "was essentially this idea of material production ... which prompted Tawney to remark that the 'true descendant of the doctrines of Aquinas is the labour theory of value. The last of the Schoolmen was Karl Marx'" (1972: 48). Here at last discussion of value as a moral precept catches up with value as an economic concept.

Notes

¹ For example, Michael Taussig (1980) explains the significance of the devil pact in Colombia's Cauca Valley in terms of the alienation peasants experience upon becoming wage laborers for the first time. Unlike their fully proletarianized co-workers, who have become accustomed to the logic or illogic of the market, the newly proletarianized plantation workers are caught between two opposed productive systems and, therefore, experience first hand the disappearance of a more satisfying life, one in which "work, organically connects soul with hand" (1980:11). In an attempt to illustrate the nature of

peasant consciousness Taussig presents a tale (presumably one of many) in which money acquires supernatural power through an illicit baptism ritual. By concealing a peso in his hand, an unscrupulous godparent is able to capture the blessing intended for his godchild. Endowed with heavenly grace the baptized peso returns to its owner each time it is spent and enriches him at the expense of his godchild who loses any chance of eternal salvation. However the status of this literary fragment is never directly discussed. While the story might reasonably be considered an allegory, Taussig views it as a *précis* on peasant thought in general, an example of an inflexible mode of reasoning which simultaneously "reflects" and "distorts" the reality of pre-capitalist exchange. In other words, the "peasantariat" cannot decipher the mysteries of commodity production because it does not decipher at all, it simply "thrust[s] into prominence the salient contrasts of the structures that enclose them ..." (1980: 103-4). For a sample of the large and growing number of writers who question the value of sharply contrasting gift and commodity exchange, or pre-capitalist and capitalist modes of production, see Bayly 1986, Bloch 1988, Comaroff 1985, Hart 1986 and Kopytoff 1986.

² **A note on sources.** My interpretation of *Way Kot* is based on five versions of the myth. The first version, which appears in the body of the paper, was recorded and transcribed in Maxcanú in the summer of 1989. The narrator, Don Román, was an eighty-year-old *rezador* (prayer leader), who said that he first heard the tale as a young man. Don Román lived in a small, thatched-roof hut on the edge of town and was considered a master storyteller as well as an authority on local history. He had been an agricultural worker most of his life. The complete version can be found in chapter six of my dissertation, *Ambiguity and Order: A Study of Power and Identity at the Mexican Periphery* (1995). The other four versions, along with English translations, can be found in appendix B of my dissertation. Version two is from Francisco de Asís Ligorred Perramón's *Consideraciones sobre la literatura oral de los Mayas modernos* (1990), a bilingual (Maya/Spanish) study of Maya oral literature. Version three was hand written in Spanish by Manuel Dzib Palominos, a young resident of Maxcanú who helped me with several projects. Manuel sometimes referred to himself as *way kot* because of several trips he took to the U.S. while I was living in Yucatán. Version four, or the Yaxcaba version, refers to a summary of the tale published by Michel Boccara in Spanish in *La Revista de la Universidad de Yucatán* in 1985. See *El Way Kot (Brujo Águila)*. Since then Boccara has published the complete version of the tale in Yucatec Maya and French in volume six of his fifteen volume encyclopedia of Maya mythology, so I have been able to consult the full form as well as other versions that are published in this collection. The fifth version is a literary rendition published by Luís Rosado Vega in *El Alma Misteriosa del Mayab* (1957: 168-175). Although the latter is entitled *El Uay Pach*, it discusses the collaboration between *way pach'* and *way kot*. A brief description and a picture of *way kot* can also be found in Redfield and Villa Rojas's *Chan Kom: A Maya Village* (1990 [1934]: 178-80), and in Daniel Brinton's *Folk-lore of the Yucatán* (1883).

³ An interesting folk etymology of the term *mayokol* reveals the popular attitude toward this enigmatic mestizo. *Mayokol* is likely a Yucatecan neologism formed from the Spanish term *mayor* meaning "elder," "principal" or "main," and the Maya word *kol* which translates as "field." It is, therefore, clearly a regional variant of the Spanish *mayoral* (foreman) or *mayordomo* (majordomo) heard in other parts of Mexico. However

Yucatecans familiar with the *mayokol's* role in protecting plantation property suggest that the term really derives from two Maya morphemes; *ma'*, a negative particle which precedes the verb stem (DMC 469), and *okol*, a verb meaning "to steal" (DMC 597).

⁴ In *Of Wonders and Wise Men*, Terry Rugeley points out that the priest and the hacienda owner were often one and the same, living fat off the labor of Maya workers. He also includes some rather colorful complaints about priestly excess, including one alleging that Raymundo Pérez, the priest of Mascuspana, forced his parishioners to hunt alligators that were so ferocious "they will eat a Christian" (2001: 44). While Rugeley views this complaint as an example of rhetoric rather than historical fact, it points to a tradition of discussing priests in unflattering ways. For another account of abusive priests in the peninsula see Irwin Press's study of Pustunich, Yucatán (1977). Mayan folk literature also contains a healthy share of dumb priest stories. See, for example, "A Story about a Trickster and a Priest" in *An Epoch of Miracles* (Burns 1983: 152-7).

⁵ The terms *pach* and *pach'* open up a variety of interpretive possibilities. According to the *Diccionario Maya Cordemex*, the term *pach'* not only refers to an object striking the ground, but to an object or animal which hangs limply like a piece of wet rope. Since several versions of the tale conclude with the evil *way* hanging himself in his prison cell, this referent is particularly apt. Indeed, death by hanging is considered an act of redemption in Maya mythology. The term *pach* also leads in an interesting, if somewhat different, direction. In its nominal form it describes a measure of cloth, the spine of an animal or the plumage of a bird (DMC 615). In its verbal form it means: 1. to appropriate or take possession, or 2. to augment or multiply. Either of the latter, of course, make sense if *way kot* is an anthropomorphic image of gold or token money (DMC 615-616).

⁶ The equation between feces and money has, of course, been noted in other contexts. Not only does the Thompson motif index have a place for donkeys that defecate ducats (B103.1.1), but as Alan Dundes notes (2002: 101) this association is "well attested in contemporary folkspeech: filthy lucre, to be filthy or stinking rich, to be rolling in it, to have money up the ass, and so forth ... Still other illustrative slang terms are 'paydirt' and 'shitload.'" However, contra Dundes, I see no reason to view money or accumulation as a sublimated form of infantile pleasures (e.g., the desire to play with one's feces) or as evidence of anal-erotic tendencies. I prefer a more direct approach; monetary accumulation is filthy because it is inherently anti-social and undermines established forms of reciprocity. In any case, readers who are interested in further examples of money as feces should refer to Park Redfield's tale of Don Juan Conejo, a trickster who sells the same corn to several different animals, and then buries the money in the ground. Later he decides to dig it up and divide it among his friends, but it has turned to shit so he plays with it, "throwing it up as if they were balls" (1937: 35).

⁷ A recent article by John Tofik Karam in the *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* (Fall 2004) allows for an interesting comparison between Lebanese immigrants in Yucatán and the Sirio-Lebanese population of Brazil. Like their counterparts in Yucatán, Brazilians of Lebanese ancestry got their start as peddlers, selling cheap goods in a cash poor economy. Like the former, they were also depicted as parasites "who traded goods but failed to 'produce' real wealth" (2004: 321). As Karam points out, Middle Eastern merchants were even disparaged by leading statesmen like Roquette-Pinto (2004:330): "... *turcos* peddle in all parts. They entrench themselves, seeking clients in all corners.

From the thousands of them that Brazil annually receives, there is not even a hundred [agricultural] producers...”. [Bracketed material in the original.]

⁸ Redfield (1990 [1934]: 179) interprets *Way Kot* as the “stone-wall-witch.”

⁹ Those interested in discovering the origin of Meso-American tales should heed the warning Robert Laughlin provides in *Tales of the Bat* (1988: 16-17): “What’s Man Like?” – a tale with undoubted European influence – had one scene that was absent from any of the collections I had reviewed. ... [a] woman’s “pestiferous wound” seemed so typical of Zinacantec imagination that I concluded it must be a local innovation. But this product of Zinacantec genius, I learned entirely by chance, had been forecast almost literally by none other than Francois Rabelais in his *Second Book of Pantagruel*.

¹⁰ Ted Ownby (1999: 127) argues that African-Americans generally, and blues musicians in particular, viewed consumption as an avenue to inclusion in America. “The men and women of the blues appreciated the hope of abundance, saw choice as a substantial freedom unavailable to farm workers, and believed goods could be part of a new dignity available to mobile, urbanized people. Above all, by connecting goods to new women, new men and new excitement, the blues upheld the romantic possibilities of consumer culture.” Similarly, Lizabeth Cohen argues that “with strict limitations on where blacks could live and work in Chicago, consumption became a major avenue through which they could assert their independence” (In Ownby 1999: 124). See also Daniel Miller’s “Style and Ontology” (1994), and Ovar Löfgren’s “Consuming Interests” (1994).

¹¹ Although generally hidden in footnotes or appendices, the association between witchcraft and sexual promiscuity is well-attested to in the work of Redfield and Villa Rojas. Summarizing a tale told by Tiburcio Coyi in *Chan Kom*, Redfield and Villa Rojas (1934: 334) write: “A certain man, having become suspicious of his wife, made up his mind to spy on her. One night, when they were sleeping together, he saw her get up, perform certain mysterious acts, and turn into a cow. In the street some bulls were waiting for her, and as soon as she appeared they surrounded her and had intercourse with her ... At daybreak he saw that what he had taken for a church was only a sascabera [i.e., a cave], and that in the bush there remained not a trace of what he had seen the night before ... When he reached his home, he found his wife grinding corn, apparently quite ignorant of what had happened.” Thanks to Robey Callahan who directed me to this passage and several similar ones.

¹² Don Eus, as it turns out, was right. Although based on a multiplicity of factors, social status in Yucatán (ca. 1930), was clearly encoded in variants of a domestically produced folk costume. While poor mestizos or Indians wore white garments made of *manta cruda* (unrefined cotton), and simple sandals or no footwear at all, the *mestizo fino* wore a more elegant version of the folk costume and leather *alpargatas*, sandals with a thick leather soles. Therefore, the adoption of western clothes, which imitated in form if not in quality the fashion of the urban upper class, not only transcended the opposition between poor and fine mestizos resulting in a new social designation, *el catrin*, but linked the wearer to the market, a fact which insured that all social gains would be short lived. Unlike the *mestizo fino*, whose status was rooted in the more stable terrain of family surname and reputation, the *catrin* functions as a floating signifier in a constantly shifting field of commodity signifieds. If tennis shoes were at one time sufficient to claim this identity, one now needs Nikes, sunglasses and a nylon gym bag with a team logo.

¹³ In the *Folk Culture of Yucatan* (1941) Redfield notes that this unusual moniker was just beginning to grace the lips of Dzitas residents during his stay in the peninsula. The term *catrin*, in fact, can not be found in the *Academica Real Española* or other 19th century dictionaries. Only in dictionaries printed after 1929 does it appear.

¹⁴ In *L'origine des machines a coudre Singer*, a grateful *way kot* leaves a late model Singer sewing machine for a hunter who spares his life (Boccarra 1997 (volume 6):55).

¹⁵ For the record, a 1925 census of Maxcanú does include a merchant named Juan Martín.

¹⁶ For a different perspective on commerce and indigenous life in México (ca. 1940) see *Malinowski in México: The Economics of a Mexican Market System*. In what turned out to be his last field study, Malinowski coined the phrase “commercial libido” to describe the Zapotec zeal for commerce (1982: 62). Although the eminent ethnographer was working in central México, he notes that “people in our region are not the only good merchants in the republic” (1982: 62).

¹⁷ Here we should note that spiritists like merchants are constantly engaged in *economic* as well as supernatural competition. Criticism of spiritists emanates not only from the church and the medical profession, but from other spiritists. Indeed Asael Hansen’s observation (1984 [ca. 1935]) that spiritists begin each consultation by criticizing other spiritists the visitor may have seen remains true seventy years later (xxxx).

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