

pps 7-14 from Quetzil E. Castañeda, "Spiritually Seeking the Maya"

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The "Maya" of the Maya and Mayan Spiritual Seeking

The book *Lost Discoveries: The Ancient Roots of Modern Science—from the Babylonians to the Maya* seeks to redress the Eurocentric disparagement of non-“Western” civilizations’ “scientific” achievements. The use of Maya and Mayan in this text should provoke the reader to do a double-take and ask: “Wait—who exactly are Maya and who are Mayans?” “Is there a difference between Maya astronomy and Mayan astronomy? “Is this just awful copyediting or what is going on here?”

Of those ninety-six achievements, only two were attributed to nonwhite, non-Western scientists: [T]he invention of zero in India in the early centuries of the common era and the astronomical observations of Maya and Hindus in A.D. 1000. Even these two accomplishments were muted by the editors of *Science*. The Mayan and Hindu “skywatchers” [...] made their observations, according to the journal, for “agricultural and religious purposes” only (Teresi, 2002: 12, underlining added for emphasis).

Maya astronomy reached a level comparable to that achieved by Babylonians and surpassing in some ways the Egyptians. Almost as remarkable as the precision and scope of Mayan astronomy was... (Teresi, 2002: 96, underlining added for emphasis).

What then is the correct use of Maya and Mayan? What perpetuates the incorrect, contradictory, and confusing naming of Maya peoples as “Mayans”? What is the significance of the erroneous and contradictory misuses of the word Mayan?

To be succinctly emphatic: Maya is the correct ethnonym of a culturally, historically, and linguistically diverse group of peoples who speak 32 languages, number approximately 6-8 million, and live in the same regions of their ancestral homelands. In its etymological origins Maya is an adjective before being an ethnonym and it continues to be used as such in Maya and Spanish. Anglophone speakers should therefore also use it as the correct adjective in phrases such as Maya

culture, Maya civilization, Maya astronomy—not *Mayan culture, *Mayan astronomy, *Mayan cities, *Mayan civilization, etc. (see Aissen, England & Zavala Maldonado, 2017; Beyyette & LeCount, 2016; Campbell & Kaufman, 1985; Fischer & McKenna-Brown, 1996; Law, 2013; Montejo, 2005; Restall, 2005; Restall & Gabbert, 2016).⁷

Mayan is never correctly used as an adjective except in reference to language. It is a term invented by linguists to function in the same manner as the word “Indo-European.” Mayan, or *mayense* in Spanish, was created to refer to a) their analytical construction of the Mayan language family, b) any one or more of the 32 Mayan languages of this family, c) the proto-Mayan source language, and d) to speakers of Mayan languages. Thus, Mayan should be used in the same manner as the word Indo-European, to indicate languages or a linguistic attribute, not as an ethnonym. The terms Mayan/*mayense* and Indo-European do not imply or denote any specific nationality, ethnicity, race, culture, religion, or historical time period but rather point to an extensive diversity of possible affiliations and sociological identities.

In fact, a Mayan could be any nationality in the world (although probably Guatemalan, Mexican, Belizean, US, or Canadian) or even not have a nationality if they lived in the period before the sociohistorical invention of nation-states.⁸ Maya civilization (from 2000 BCE to present) is internally diverse and heterogenous.⁹ The Maya have significantly different cultures, communities, histories, religions, forms of social organization, lifeways, beliefs, and languages—there is no uniformity or singular way of being Maya. In fact, with Spanish colonialism, Maya—as “culture-bearers” of Maya civilization—are also Westerners who fully participate in Western cultures and civilization to the same extent and degree that any other “Westerner” does.

The incorrect application of the term “Mayan” as an ethnonym reflects Eurocentric imagining and romanticist fetishization of Maya people. This erroneous use is a racialized neocolonial slur: It is a legacy not simply of Spanish colonialism that sought to eliminate the possibility of the indigenous peoples of that era to lay claim to their cultural and civilizational heritages. The pervasive erroneous use of this term and the confusion of its use with the correct ethnonym, Maya, derives from three factors: First, the term itself signals the scientific imperialism of US linguistics which created this scientific nomenclature in the first place in

the early 20th century. Second, the hegemony and privilege of anglophone grammatical rules (of deriving adjectives from ethnonyms and ethnonyms from toponyms) is everywhere evident and are misapplied: there does not and has never existed a place of origin with the toponym “Maya” from which *Mayans would “come from” (see Restall, 2005 on this point; cf. Restall & Gabbert, 2017; Restall & Solari, 2020). Third, the pervasive, entrenched, popular assumption, commonly shared throughout the world—due to a great extent to the racialized imaginary propagated by the educational films and publications created, for example, by the BBC, PBS, and National Geographic Society—is that the Maya are a “dead” civilization. The perverse logics in popular thinking might therefore be that the contemporary descendents are somehow impoverished, derivative of those Maya from two thousand years ago and thus by not being “fully” Maya should be called “*Mayans.” Maya peoples do not call themselves *Mayans—and we should not either, at least, to avoid and, thus, not propagate the underlying imperialism, neocolonialism, privilege, and racism signaled by the label Mayan as an indigenous identity.

The errors of using Mayan as an adjective and as an ethnonym pervades both scholarly works and popular media. In the above mentioned book, the author correctly used the word Maya as an adjective fourteen times and as the ethnonym 78 times. However, there are 54 instances of the incorrect use of the word Mayan as an adjective and eight instances of incorrect use as an ethnonym. Similar to the example above, there are correct uses of the words mixed with incorrect uses in the same paragraph and even in immediately sequential sentences. Two illustrative examples are from Teresi’s annotated bibliography. In both cases the cited references correctly use the word Maya as an adjective in the title of the book, but the immediately following annotation by Teresi incorrectly uses the word Mayan as an adjective, for example:

Freidel, David, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker. *Maya Cosmos. Three Thousand Years on the Shaman’s Path*. New York: William Morrow, 1993. (This book weaves **Mayan spiritual beliefs** with scientific and technological achievements. Authors are pioneers in **Mayan research**.) (Teresi, 2002: 427, bold emphasis added)

The existence of both the contradictory usage and lack of copyediting is not only shocking, but pervasive and significantly revealing of a deeper problem of ignorance and privilege. The erroneous usage in

academic publications is of course the model for popular discourses of tourism and spiritualities. Figure 1 shows the promotional page for a “Maya 2012” pilgrimage tour from the website *Power Place Tours*. The screenshot highlights two talks, both incorrectly using Mayan in the titles, “Mayan Mysteries” and “Unlocking the Mayan Code of Time.” The text asks: “What did the Maya [correct use] know in their time that was forgotten in ours?” In the right hand, column of the ad, the promotional text asks, “Why come to Maya 2012” [correct use] and answers in confusion:

We will be celebrating the end of a many-thousands-of-years cycles that the Maya foresaw [correct use], at one of the New Modern Seven Wonders Of the World. Now, you have the chance of a lifetime to be present in the very complex the Mayans [incorrect use] built to convey their great knowledge to future generations. (< https://powerplaces.com/Yucatan_2012.htm >, accessed October 24, 2012).

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Why Come to Maya 2012?

We will be celebrating the end of a many-thousands-of-years cycles that the Maya foresaw, at one of the New Modern Seven Wonders Of the World. Now, you have the chance of a lifetime to be present in the very complex the Mayans built to convey their great knowledge to future generations...and perhaps you will experience your own personal transformation in this sacred complex! **Be at the Right Place at the Right Time!**

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Figure 1. Source: Power Place Tours.

Texts such as these should provoke everyone to ask, not simply, who really are Maya and Mayans, but *what is the significance of this contradictory confusion* that pervades not only academic scholarship, but the social media, literature, and websites of New Age Maya spiritualism. For example, on the website of the spiritual publishing house, Inner Traditions, the books authored by Hunbatz Men are alternatively identified as Maya and “Mayan” “teachings.”¹⁰ Hunbatz Men is alternatively identified as a “Maya Daykeeper” and as a “Mayan Elder.” Is there a difference beyond marketing aesthetics/hype? The first is a translation of the K’iche’ word for the religious specialists who do calendar based divination; *ahk’ij* (daykeepers) are actually existing real sociocultural roles assumed by persons after extensive formalized training within K’iche’ communities of the highlands of Guatemala: The roughly parallel role of daykeeper among Maya of Yucatán ended in the 19th century. The second, “elder,” is neither the translation nor the name of a role: There does not exist an institutionalized or established cultural role or formal position, as opposed to informal status, of “elder” in relation to religion in Maya cultures. The terms are neither equivalents nor analogues. Instead, the latter is the elevation of an honorific term for an informal, relational status (in Maya cultures) to a spiritual-religious “role” (in New Age spiritualisms) based on Eurocentric fantasies and racial stereotyping of indigeneity: The assumption is that all Maya are the same and all Maya are “Indians” who are, as cultures and individual humans, “identical” and substitutable. Thus, if there is an indigenous group that has a formally institutionalized role of “elder” then this must be the case for all indigenous peoples including Maya. This however is not reality, only racism.

The idea of a stereotypical indigenous position of “elder” insinuates an established sociocultural community that is served by this supposed role and, reciprocally, that this “elder” status is formally recognized by the community. The labeling of elder is the invention of a term to connote “indigenous spirituality” and symbolize “authenticity” as if the Maya word for “elder” meant anything other than an honorific equivalent to “sir” or “mister.” The culturally established role and position in Maya culture of Yucatán is *hméen*: However, Hunbatz Men never self-identifies with this title, instead he alternates between “elder,” “teacher,” and “daykeeper.” Hunbatz’ has identified the word “men” in his name as derived from

day name, men, from the precolumbian Maya calendar. There are no daykeepers in Maya culture of Yucatán: it is a role belonging to Maya cultures of Guatemala. It should also be emphatically emphasized that despite popular and common attribution of the term shaman (*chamán* in Spanish) to Maya ritual specialists, it is my position that shamanism in any form does not currently exist at all in Maya culture of Yucatán and that the K'iche' Maya daykeepers are only in an analytical sense “shamanic” (Tedlock, 1991).¹¹ Just as Hunbatz Men has assumed being an “elder,” highland Guatemala Maya assume the “western” ascription of “shaman” in order to cater to spiritual seekers.¹² In other words, the use of “elder” as well as “shaman” or “daykeeper” in this manner is pure fiction that is rendered invisible by Eurocentric fantasies of cultural alterity and desire for “true” spiritualism.

Hunbatz Men is himself Yucatec—or, what anglophone copyeditors “correct” as “Yucatecan”: In other words, he has the ethnic-regional identity of being born and raised in the state of Yucatán, México; he has however a primarily non-indigenous background. To clarify: He is not K'iche' or from Guatemala. Although his indigeneity/“ethnicity” is quite debatable in terms of both anthropological criteria and common-sense understandings of the region about who is/is not Maya, he nonetheless seems to self-identify as “indigenous” to the extent that he alternates between Maya or “Mayan” as the “ethnic” etiquette.¹³ However, he never uses “indigenous” as his identity—more often “Mayan” and least often Maya. What could this mean and imply?

This explicit contradiction of terminology and pervasive confusion of uses indicates that something else is at stake: First, beyond the erroneous usage of words, bad copyediting, and lack of knowledge about which one writes, who is or is not Maya is precisely what is at stake in New Age Maya spiritualism. Second, this issue not only has political implications and meanings beyond individual spiritual seeking, but points to an underlying matrix of power and politics. We must engage and move past the 1990s critiques of “plastic” shamanism to create a more nuanced analysis of the essential “mixing” that underlies spiritual seeking. We need to rethink through all our inherited concepts of mixing to do so—including syncretism, innovation, invention, hybridization, revitalization, and transculturation—as well as create new tools.

Third, the terminology of labels of spiritual “leaders” and “roles” that is assumed by spiritual seekers of the Maya is completely open for ethnographic and textual investigation. In the cultic milieu of New Age Maya spiritualism, the self-identification of being “Mayan” has shifted grounds from that of an indigenous ethnonym based in social and ethnographic realities to become a label—the spiritualist’s native term—of spiritual-gnostic achievement. In other words, it is a common “teaching” of those writing new age Maya onto-theologies that those who attain the sought out “ultimate spiritual sublime” become “Mayans.” Thus, spiritual seekers of the Maya can become “Mayans.” The popularity of this idea can perhaps be attributed to Argüelles (1988) who “seeks” to become “Mayan,” that is, attain in perpetuity ultimate communion (or dialogue) with his Uncle Joe Zuvuya (the allegorical figure of his “dimensional double” and “higher self”).¹⁴ Thus, by allegory “Mayan” is an embodied state of being (intergalactically a-embodied as energy vibration) and by synecdoche “Mayan” is the proper name given to the “content” of the spiritual sublime that is achieved—that is, “attuning” oneself to the “energy frequency” of the cosmos; this could be glossed as “gnosis,” “nous,” or “wisdom” if one wanted to impose the terms of a different religiosity on the “Mayan” ontotheological system of Argüelles. Hunbatz Men, therefore, is not “ethnically” or “linguistically” a Maya and hardly identifies in this manner;¹⁵ rather, he claims to be and commercializes himself as a “Mayan” in ways that complicates unidimensional critiques of “white/plastic” shamanism (Aldred, 2000). Thus, in those instances that I refer to spiritual seekers of the Maya as “spiritual seeking Mayans” or “Mayan spiritual seeking” (in this double allegorical and synecdochic sense) to underscore that the target of what is being sought is a kind of illusion (as in the Hindu concept of *maya* indicated in this section title) created by and through new age appropriations and inventions of Maya cultures.

Fourth, the case of Hunbatz Men points to the capitalist logic of market and production. The spiritual seeking of “Westerners” is a consumer demand that generates and creates the production of endless new spiritual commodities for spiritual client-consumers. As well, it motivates Maya, whether or not they have actually attained community status as a healer-spiritual leader, to become “shamans,” “elders,” “teachers,” and so on for foreigners of all nationalities who visit them

in order to attain an authentic Maya spiritual “fix” (see Ayora-Díaz, 1998, 2000; Christenson, 2016; Deuss, 2013; González & Sitler, 2010; Molesky-Poz, 2008; Pitarch, 2007; Sitler & González, 2010). These spiritual commodities in turn—as is suggestive of the case of Hunbatz Men as so far discussed—are “manufactured” by processes of syncretism, hybridization, innovation, invention, and transculturation. Hunbatz Men is not a Maya ritual specialist (to use the anthropological umbrella term) but, in a manner related to “white shamans,” has invented himself as a new age “Mayan” spiritualist in order to feed the consumer desire for and fetishization of the Maya.

To conclude this section, I suggest that the confusion and illusion of terms Maya and Mayan discussed is itself—to use the “native’s terms”—an “occult” “clue” that these “Mayan” seekers “have left us”—that is, “us,” the sociologists and anthropologists who study new age religiosities. The “esoteric” knowledge to be discovered—that I am seeking to “reveal”—is that the politics and processes of cultural appropriation, invention, syncretism, and transcultural dynamics must be at the center of our investigations as much as the logic, meaning, and experience of individuated practices of spirituality, modernity, and capitalist logics of consumerism/production.

Between Practices and Beliefs: “Desperately Seeking Cults”

There are no criteria of how to self-identify as a Maya seeker, much less any type of corporate membership to which followers could belong or achieve. There is no sociological or ethnographic “there-there” in the sense of discrete communities, whether as institutionalized organization or as loosely bound associations or collectivity. There are no formulized prescriptions, dogmas, or mandates of discrete practices that followers should adhere to: no specific determination of bodily activities and techniques of spiritual realization that should or should not be enacted and performed on ritual or everyday occasions; no definitive determination of required accoutrement; no particular system of material objects necessary to perform, believe, and follow or through which to express identity as an adherent. There is no Maya shamanism that pre-existed spiritual seeking “Mayans” and that was not invented as a service commodity to sell consumer clients.

**“SPIRITUALLY SEEKING THE MAYA”:
TOWARD A DECOLONIAL APPROACH TO NEW AGE
MAYA SPIRITUALITIES**

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Abstract: This article is a theoretical essay that offers an approach to the study of new age spiritual seeking in general and to the study of New Age Maya spiritualism in particular. The theoretical framework of “spiritual seeking” and “cultic milieu” has been productive, especially regarding the relationship between emergent spiritual technologies of subjectivity, forms of modernity, and capitalist logics of consumerism. This article, however, identifies shortcomings to this research paradigm: It does not provide either the analytical focus or conceptual tools for understanding seeking spirituality through the alterity of other cultures and communities marked by racial-ethnic difference. This article explains the contradictory and confusing use of Maya and Mayan as a point of entry to illustrate the need to attend to transcultural processes and the politics of transculturation. By drawing from established work in the sociology of religion on cult typologies, I offer criteria by which to create an analytical ideal types framework that can both begin to address questions of politics, transcultural exchange, and seeking/community dynamics as well as allow for productive comparison and contrast of different emergent spiritualities and religiosities in the Americas and elsewhere. The first steps toward developing this ideal-types framework is presented by thinking through issues in establishing new age Maya spiritual seeking as objects of study.

Keywords: New Age; Maya cults; Theologies; Rituals; Experiences

Use this link to download the full text:
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