

## **Boozing and Burping for God: The Material Transformation of Maya Religious Food Practices from the Spanish Conquest to the Present**

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**John Cabot University**

Department of History

Bachelor of Arts in History  
Minor in Communications

**Boozing and Burping for God: The Material Transformation of Maya Religious  
Food Practices from the Spanish Conquest to the Present**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis will analyze the transformation of material expression in Maya religious rites influenced by Spanish and American intervention. It will do so by comparing religious rites involving the usage of beverage from the pre-Columbian era up to the present. Through an evaluation of anthropological definitions of ritual complexions by Edmund Leach and Marcel Mauss, religion by Emile Durkheim and cultural imperialism by John Tomlinson, this thesis will attempt to understand the material interpretation of immaterial beliefs in light of cultural imperialism and cultural hybridity. Based on these theoretical precedents, this thesis will argue that the transformation of the usage of beverage in Maya religious rites is a case of cultural hybridity. This conclusion is founded on the durability of the ancient Maya belief system that is visible in either material or immaterial testament in each case-study. Food usage in Maya rites are therefore flexible in their material adaptation to their current circumstances. They change according to new systems of cultural exchange, consumption and production, set in motion by changes in political or economic power.

## **Dedication**

To the relentless Mayans

## **Acknowledgements**

I am thankful for John Cabot University for giving me the opportunity to write this research under the valuable supervision of professor Gene Ogle. His profound knowledge and constructive feedback have enriched my research to a great extent. I would also like to thank professor Kwame Phillips and professor Tom Bailey for their guidance and academic insight, the supportive and helpful staff of the John Cabot University Library and the critical professors from the John Cabot University Writing Center.

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# 1. Introduction

“When Zinacantecos light white wax candles at their mountain shrines, they say they are offering “tortillas” to their ancestral Gods who live inside the mountains. They provide “cigarettes” in the form of smoke from burning copal incense. Cane liquor, poured on the ground, completes the meal.”<sup>1</sup>

One of the world’s oldest remaining civilizations is of the Mayans. Its origins date back to 2000 BC, and approximately 6 million Mayans are still alive today in the areas of modern-day Southern Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Belize.<sup>2</sup> During the Maya Classic Period (250 – 900 AD), the Mayans developed a number of significant scientific and cultural advancements, reflecting their profound understanding of the world.<sup>3</sup> Innovations such as the Maya calendar, astrology and the hieroglyphic alphabet were developed during this time and continue to play a role in science and culture today. The ancient Mayans were highly religious people with a sophisticated polytheistic religion. Religious sacrifice and offerings played an important role in the daily life of the ancient Mayans, as they believed that the Gods had the upper hand in all circumstances in life.

Maya society experienced significant political, economic, social and cultural transformation with the arrival of the Spanish Conquistadors in the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>4</sup> From their early encounters with the indigenous population in 1511 to later conquests in 1695, the

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<sup>1</sup> Evon Z. Vogt, *Tortillas for the Gods: A Symbolic Analysis of Zinacanteco Rituals* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Michael D. Coe, *The Maya* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 202. This data was collected in 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Michael D. Coe, *The Maya*, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Arnold J. Bauer, *Goods, Power, History: Latin America’s Material Culture*, (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 44-45.

Spaniards managed to conquer the majority of the Maya indigenous communities which became subject to labor in newly organized systems of feudalism.<sup>5</sup> Within a couple of decades, the Spaniards conquered the majority of the indigenous Maya communities which became subject to labor in newly organized systems of feudalism. With the arrival of the Spaniards began a transformation to Western culture, where forms of Western architecture, dress, food, textiles, tools, urban planning were implemented through political enforcement in a large number of newly established urban environments. The Conquest was successful due to the enforced process of evangelization. Franciscan, Dominican and Augustinian friars were sent to Latin-America with the mission to convert the native community to Catholicism.<sup>6</sup>

Maya communities experienced a second radical cultural transformation in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The global climate of economic liberalism had large consequences for Maya religion as consumer products significantly replaced means and methods of traditional production of commodities. Despite the foreign influence, ancient Maya culture continues to exist and distinctively expresses itself in the execution of religious rites which are a consolidation of elements of ancient Maya civilization, Roman Catholicism and 20<sup>th</sup> Century consumerism. The foreign influences can be traced back in analyzing the linear transformation of the usage of beverages in Maya religious rites.

The modern spiritual consumption of drinks and foods by the Mayans recognizes a long tradition that dates back to the era of ancient civilization. However, the execution, interpretation and dedication to these rites have changed over time according to its current socio-political climate. The following thesis will investigate the transformations of beverage used in Maya religious rites in different time-periods to reach a better understanding of how Spanish and American cultures have influenced this transformation. In order to understand

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<sup>5</sup> J. Eric S. Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), Introduction.

<sup>6</sup> Brian R. Hamnett, *A Concise History of Mexico*. (Cambridge [England] ; Cambridge University Press, 2006), 69.



the meaning and transformation of rites, this thesis will present various evaluations of anthropological frameworks that will be relevant to this research. The literature review of this thesis will present the theoretical groundwork of the approach to the case-studies. The primary theories that will be evaluated are the definition of religion and the notion of *belief* by Emile Durkheim, the “Quadripartite Formulation of Prestation” by Marcel Mauss, the “Ritualization in Man in Relation to Conceptual and Social Development” by E.R. Leach and the definition of cultural imperialism by John Tomlinson. These frameworks will be divided in three sections of the literature review (Obligation to Ritual, Decoding Ritual, and Composition of Ritual).

It is important to analyze the historical antecedent prior to external influence in order to understand how Maya religions has transformed over time. Hence, the first chapter of this thesis will present a historical account of pre-Columbian society, focusing on culture, religion and rituals. This chapter will be followed by the two case-studies of this thesis. Each case will focus on a religious rite that has significantly been influenced by foreign culture. The first case-study will look at the effects of alcohol distillation on religious rite during the early stages of the Spanish Conquest. The second case-study will look at the appropriation of American soft drinks in religious rite during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Finally, the conclusion of this thesis will present the two main arguments that will support the thesis statement. First, it will argue how the presented case-studies are representative models of cultural hybridity in terms of the Spanish and American conquests. Second, it will argue that the notion of animism is the principal force that has led to cultural hybridity in the Maya peninsula from the Spanish Conquest up to the present.

## 2. Literature Review

### Religious Obligation to Ritual

Religion can be defined in a multitude of ways and approached by various theoretical frameworks. Important 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists have presented theories explaining the ‘meaning’ of religion and its contextualization in the real world. Within the various definitions, theories can be divided in a two-fold of theoretical frameworks. First, religion is studied from an anthropological frame of reference, studying religion’s role in its social setting. Second, religion is considered part of larger frameworks of scholarly debates of evolutionism, pragmatism or functionalism.<sup>7</sup> This thesis will attest to the definition of religion by anthropologist Emile Durkheim. Durkheim contextualized religion as “a unified set of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.”<sup>8</sup> This definition emphasizes the cohesive component of religious practice and studies the meaning of religious practices and beliefs within the framework of human collectivity. According to Durkheim, the ‘meaning’ of religion is a practical tool for understanding society. Therefore, Durkheim formulates religion as a way to understand non-religious life. This case-study will analyze religion as a means to understand both spiritual and secular life.

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<sup>7</sup> James S. Bielo, *Anthropology of Religion: The Basics*, (London ; Routledge, 2015), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Émile Durkheim, Karen E. Fields, and Rogers D. Spotswood Collection, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1995), Chapter One: Definition of Religion Phenomena and of Religion. Durkheim’s definition of religion is part of a larger scholarly debate of functionalism of religion and therefore the only definition of religion used in this thesis.

The execution of rituals is a fundamental component of religious life. Depending on the belief-system, the enactment of rites are a form of mediation to express a person's religious identity, his or her wishes, history and social status.<sup>9</sup> The majority of religious ceremonial practice (prayer, food offering, sacrifice) are means of communication between humans and their deities. Based on a continuous tradition, rituals are often performed according to a prescribed order and can be understood as an important factor in maintaining a society's tradition.<sup>10</sup> To understand the role of ritual execution in society, it is important to recognize the execution of religious rite as a form of human behavior. The symbolic understanding of religious rites can be analyzed through different anthropological abstractions. This thesis will use two different theories by anthropologists Marcel Mauss and E. R. Leach to categorize religious rites as different forms of behavior.

Marcel Mauss' 'Quadripartite Formulation of Prestation' is a theoretical framework which divides obligative behavior of human communication in four categories.<sup>11</sup> Along with human's *obligation to give*, *obligation to receive* and *obligation to reciprocate*, Mauss has schematized the fourth obligation as the obligation of *giving to the Gods*. Even though the first three categories of the 'Quatripartite Formulation of Obligation' are used as one of the primary schematics for historians and anthropologists to understand human communicative behavior, Mauss' inclusion of the *fourth obligation* (giving to the Gods) affirms the compelling significance of religious rites as a human expression of communication.<sup>12</sup> However, it must be taken into account that Mauss' schematization of obligation can only be applied as a method of understanding communication in highly religious societies. Many

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<sup>9</sup> Bielo, *Anthropology of Religion*, 58.

<sup>10</sup> *Oxford Dictionary*, s.v. "ritual," accessed November 9, 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/ritual>.

<sup>11</sup> Marcel Mauss and W. D. Halls, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 14-17.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher T Morehart and Noah Butler, "Ritual Exchange and the Fourth Obligation: Ancient Maya Food Offering and the Flexible Materiality of Ritual," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16, no. 3 (2010): 588.

secular societies do not include the fourth obligation as an ‘obligational’ part of daily life. Therefore, Mauss’ theory cannot be interpreted as a de facto premise that can be applied to any human individual.

Similarly, the performance of rite can be categorized as human behavior that is not compelled to the limitations of Mauss’ obligation theory. In his article “Ritualization in Man in Relation to Conceptual and Social Development”, anthropologist E.R. Leach develops a schema which differentiates three types of non-genetically determined behavior. This division is based on the human objective to why specific behavior is being performed:

1. Behavior that is directed towards specific ends and produces observable results in a mechanic way. Leach calls this “*rational technical behavior*”.
2. Behavior that uses culturally defined communication codes and is used for communicating. Leach calls this “*communicative behavior*”.
3. Behavior that is directed towards the evoking of occult powers, but does not produce observable results directly in themselves. Leach calls this “*magical behavior*”.<sup>13</sup>

Based on Leach’s observations, rituals can be categorized either as communicative or magical behavior, as they attempt to evoke indirect results through means of communication between humans or communicating to Gods. The categorizations of ritual by Mauss and Leach are similar but can be used in different ways. Whereas Mauss interprets execution of religious rites as a human condition of communication, Leach’s schema of behavior is less constrained as his schema can be applied to both religious and secular people or communities. For this reason, both theories must be approached in different circumstances depending on the historical and cultural context of the case-study.

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<sup>13</sup> E. R. Leach, “Ritualization in Man in Relation to Conceptual and Social Development,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological Sciences* 251, no. 772 (1966): 403–8.

The execution of religious practice reflects a conceptual and physical relationship between a society's belief system and its material reality. Though Leach distinguishes three types of behavior – *rational-technical*, *communicative*, *magical* –, Durkheim believes that they occur together and that *religious behavior* is a reflection of socio-political attitudes. In this thesis, each ritual will be understood as an expression of the *fourth obligation* in Mauss' as the Mayans are devoted religious practitioners. Therefore, the term is appropriate in its context. These rites will then be categorized in Leach's framework of human behavior in the attempt to reach a better understanding of the socio-political climate of each case-study.

## **Decoding Ritual**

In many religions, the interpretation and explanation of the ritual is described in a religion's *exegesis*. A religious order's *exegesis* provides the reader with a critical analysis and interpretation of sacred texts.<sup>14</sup> However, the majority of the rites that are executed in indigenous communities do not have such a written account. Religious expression in indigenous communities is often authorized by small-scale local religious leaders rather than a centralized jurisdiction. Therefore, rites are often passed down through a tradition of execution rather than the commandment of a sacred doctrine. Additionally, many ancient written sources have been lost due to the destructive force of colonialism.<sup>15</sup>

One of the prime interest amongst anthropologists who study religious rituals is the material interpretation of immaterial beliefs. In this case, 'material' are the resources used for religious rite, such as objects, music, words. The material used in rite is distinctly different from its function when the object is put out of its religious context: it is the socio-economic

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<sup>14</sup> *Oxford Dictionary*, s.v. "exegesis," accessed November 9, 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/exegesis>. It must be noted that this an encompassing conception and many religions do not refer to their critical explanation of sacred scripture by this term.

<sup>15</sup> Hamnett, *A Concise History of Mexico*, 67.

position of the practitioner and the rite's tradition, goal and intention that give religious meaning to the object.<sup>16</sup> The notion of 'immaterial beliefs' is harder to define, as it encompasses a multitude of interpretations. The clear qualitative distinction between the profane and the transcendental raises the question of how the two relate to one another. As Durkheim states; "... there exists no other example of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated or so radically opposed to one another".<sup>17</sup> Durkheim explains the distinction between an object's profane function and its sacred function through the notion of *belief*. The sacred meaning of an object is distinguished from the profane through the "greater intensity of the powers attributed to these objects."<sup>18</sup> The meaning of these objects can be understood in the context or tradition of the ritual. Rituals are a medium that combine the transcendental and the profane world together, but provide us with more information about the intention and belief-system of the practitioner. For each case-study, this thesis will analyze both the socio-political climate and the notion of *belief* of the rite under consideration.

A method of understanding *belief* is to directly ask informants what the meaning of their actions are. However, anthropologists studying indigenous culture claim that this often seems to create complication rather than clarification. The most general answer to this question is that the rite is performed out of custom.<sup>19</sup> One way to understand *belief* is by analyzing the objects that are used for religious rites.

Anthropologists Morehart and Butler argue that the physicality of religious rites is human's conceptualization of the sacred. Objects imply a symbolical meaning and are therefore distinctly different from materials used in daily life.<sup>20</sup> This distinction is based on the intention of the object: majority of the objects are used to achieve a direct practical

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<sup>16</sup> Morehart and Butler, "Ritual Exchange and the Fourth Obligation", 593.

<sup>17</sup> Durkheim, Fields, and Rogers D., *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 53-4.

<sup>18</sup> Durkheim, Fields, and Rogers D., *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 34.

<sup>19</sup> Vogt, *Tortillas for the Gods*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Morehart and Butler, "Ritual Exchange and the Fourth Obligation.", 4.

purpose, whereas objects of rite are used as a metaphor for a spiritual message.<sup>21</sup> This theoretical approach is similar to the Leach' distinction of *rational-technical behavior* and *magical behavior*, but instead of behavior, Morehart and Butler explain the practitioner's spiritual intention that is given to objects. This does not mean that the use of objects in religion have no relation to their original purpose. In fact, we see a clear connection between mundane and spiritual meaning of an object. The reflection of human's appraisal in materiality is an explanation as to why food is one of the most commonly used objects of rituals. Food is undeniably one of the most important aspects of human life since its access is a determined factor to our lives. In agricultural societies where access to food is dependent on climate conditions, people often perform food rites to ask celestial assistance for prosperity. Therefore, rites may change according to economic and climatic change. These factors must be taking into consideration when looking at the transformation of rituals. Both the metaphorical and common meaning of a religious object must be analyzed to understand how the two relate to one another.

### **Composition of ritual**

As rituals are a reflection of the socio-economic situation of the practitioner's environment, it is necessary that they change over time. Anthropologist James S. Bielo calls religious mediation 'a process', and claims that rituals are "made, remade, taught, adapted, negotiated and contested."<sup>22</sup> Rituals are not a mere reflection of a belief-system: both material and immaterial customs are influenced by social, economic, political and cultural change. The alteration or modification of objects used for rites are stimulated by social phenomena of

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<sup>21</sup> Durkheim, Fields, and Rogers D., *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 53-4.

<sup>22</sup> Bielo, *Anthropology of Religion*, 55.

production, consumption and exchange in ways that are both physical and conceptual.<sup>23</sup> Inter-cultural transactions are the force behind the exchange of products and belief-systems. Cultural change motivated by foreign power is often described as cultural hybridity or cultural imperialism. The two terms are different based on the influence of power between two or more cultures. Cultural imperialism implies that culture is highly influenced or modified by an imbalance in political or economic power. From this discourse, cultural change is often a by-product or a method of imperialism, but the primary concern is to maintain political or economic power.<sup>24</sup> Cultural hybridity is a term used when the formation of culture is a result of inter-cultural exchange which recognizes a degree of balance in the division of influence. Hybridity can therefore be interpreted as a result of cultural progress and cultural logic of globalization.<sup>25</sup>

*Culture, hybridity and imperialism* are each terms that do not have one clear definition, and must therefore be used with caution. Educationalist John Tomlinson claims that imperialism is commonly divided in a two-folded interpretation of either political imperialism or economic imperialism. This division primarily signifies imperialist colonial rule or economy-driven capitalism. The term cultural imperialism originated in 1960 as a post-Marxist critique on the Cold War, explaining why cultural imperialism is primarily used as a term implying the colonist power as economy-driven.<sup>26</sup> However, cultural imperialism can also be understood in light of colonialism. Both cultural imperialism and cultural hybridity do not entail a standard signifier distinguishing the level of cultural impact. For this reason, the exact definition and difference between the terms are ambiguous as the definitions can be used interchangeably. This thesis will distinguish cultural hybridity and cultural imperialism based on the degree of influence of local authority and the implication of

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<sup>23</sup> Morehart and Butler, "Ritual Exchange and the Fourth Obligation.", 600.

<sup>24</sup> John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction*, (London ; Continuum, 2002), 3.

<sup>25</sup> "The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics," "Cultural Hybridity", *Choice Reviews Online* 50, no. 12 (2013).

<sup>26</sup> Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction*, 14.



colonial demand of cultural transformation to determine the level of imbalance in power divisions.

### **Maya Religious Rite in Time**

It is important for this research to clearly define the term ‘Maya’ as it may cause ambiguity. The encompassing term ‘Maya’ is used to describe a language spoken in modern-day Mexico, the people inhabiting certain areas of Southern Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Belize and Honduras and as an adjective referring to attributes or nouns in relation to the Maya.<sup>27</sup> The Mayans are connected by means of a shared history and culture, with a foundation that can be traced back to an indigenous civilization who were inhabiting these areas in pre-Columbian time. The pre-Columbian Maya have never been united in a confederate political system. The overarching elements of Maya culture are therefore hard to define, since the geographical separation of people has caused for culture to develop in different ways. This has been one of the reasons why contemporary Maya communities speak different languages, worship different deities of their complex pantheon and perform religious rites in different ways. It is therefore impossible for the following case-studies to be a source of representative anthropological research of Maya religious rites as a whole. Instead, this thesis hopes to provide a more nuanced insight of such cases through the use of a frame of reference that is recognized throughout the Mayan-inhabited peninsula. By doing so, it will draw the parallel between the different geographical areas of the case-studies by means of shared history. Along with the geographical division, it is also important to look at the effect on culture of different population densities. One can distinguish a conceivable

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<sup>27</sup> In this thesis, ‘Mayans’ will be used in reference to the Maya people, and the term ‘Maya’ will be used as an adjective.

difference in the performance of religious rites in well-populated city-states from the Maya classical period and significantly smaller agricultural townships.<sup>28</sup> Smaller municipalities often remain small since they are less easily accessible (they are often located in the jungle). This research will be limited to folk religion in smaller municipalities, as these communities are less effected by the transformative forces of the globalized world and make a stronger case for hybridization.

First, this thesis will study the importance of maize in pre-Columbian Maya society. This chapter is a precedent to the case-studies. It is important to look at the foundation of Maya religion to reach a better understanding of how ancient culture has developed after the Spanish Conquest. Scholars recognize a long-lasting religious tradition in contemporary Maya culture that can be traced back to the ancient Maya belief-system. By looking at archeological findings and the Maya sacred scripture the *Popol Vuh*, we know that the worship of maize was by far the most important elements of the ancient Maya belief-system.<sup>29</sup> The praise of maize is a clear reflection of the society's value system, but it also plays an important role in the formation of culture.

The first case-study will analyze the effects on religion of the Spanish Conquest of Meso- and Latin America. The Spanish invasion launched a sweeping transformation of all aspects of Native American life. However, the evangelization has undoubtedly been the most encompassing and influential alteration from ancient Maya civilization. This chapter will look at the effects of the different methods of evangelization were implied by Franciscan and Dominican friars in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, and analyze how the newly introduced method of alcohol distillation played a significant role in the new religious interpretation.

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<sup>28</sup> Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, 73.

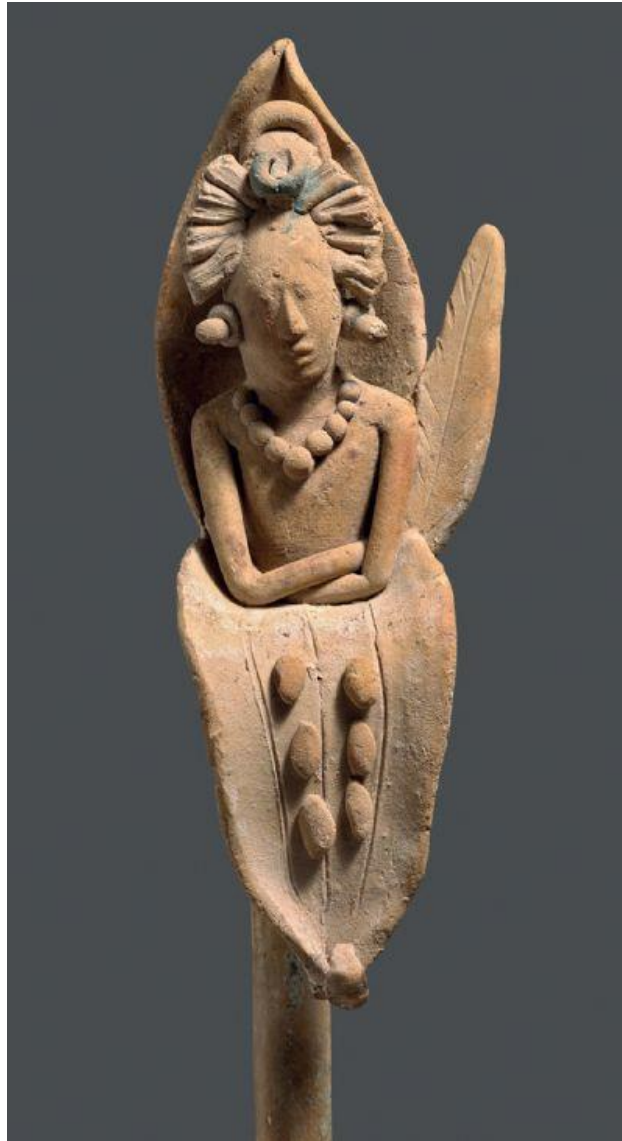
<sup>29</sup> Delia. Goetz, Sylvanus Griswold Morley, and Adrián Recinos, *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Ancient Quiché Maya*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950).

The second case-study will look at the transformation of religious execution of rites in the sphere of liberal economy of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The transformation was founded on the newly introduced American products of consumerism, namely soft drinks. This chapter will give a historical account of the rise of American enterprises in the highlands of Chiapas and analyze how this phenomenon constituted the use of soft drinks in religious rituals in the township of San Juan Chamula.

To understand the construct of hybrid culture, it is important to look at the degree of influence from both foreign and local authorities. Each case-study will therefore attempt give an account of primary sources which come from both spectra of the cultural consolidation. Due to the limited access and few remains of historical Maya scriptures, this thesis will attempt to illustrate the position of the Maya through contemporary anthropological observations when a primary source by the Maya cannot be given.

Based upon the redeterminations of the theoretic precedent from the Literary Review and the analyses of the case-studies, this thesis will argue that the material transformation of immaterial beliefs in Maya religious rites from the pre-Columbian period is a case of cultural hybridity. This conclusion is founded upon the observation of durability of the ancient Mayan belief system that is visible both in material and immaterial testament in each case-study. Food usage in Mayan rites are therefore flexible in their material adaptation to their current circumstances. They change according to new systems of cultural exchange, consumption and production, set in motion by change in political or economic power. However, each case study presents a continuation of ancient tradition by maintaining an animistic approach to newly introduced materiality.

### 3. Human Flesh and Corn Dough: An Insight into Pre-Columbian Religious Rites



*"Young Corn God", 8<sup>th</sup> Century AD.<sup>30</sup>*

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<sup>30</sup> "Young Corn God | Work of Art | Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History | The Metropolitan Museum of Art," The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, accessed December 11, 2017, <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1979.206.728/>.

Despite the disruptions caused by the Spanish Conquistadors, ancient Maya religion still lives on in Maya culture today. This chapter will analyze the importance of maize in pre-Columbian culture. It will do so by analyzing the 1703 redaction of Dominican friar Francisco Ximénez of the ancient sacred scripture of the Maya known as the *Popol Vuh*. In addition, this chapter will examine the observances of Maya religious rites by Spanish friar Diego de Landa contested in his *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán*.<sup>31</sup> Based upon these analyses, this chapter will illustrate the importance of food and beverage in ancient animistic Maya religion.

Studies have revealed that the origins of Maya civilization date back to 2000 BC in the areas of modern-day Belize, Guatemala and Southern Mexico.<sup>32</sup> By 250 AD, Maya culture established impressive scientific and cultural achievements such as the Maya calendar, the hieroglyphic alphabet, urban agglomeration and the development of an intricate pantheon. These developments reached their zenith during the Maya Classical Period (250 AD – 900 AD) and have largely contributed to the legacy of Maya culture today.<sup>33</sup>

The surviving evidence by which we can study pre-Columbian Maya culture is limited to archeological findings (buildings, murals, household objects) a number of hieroglyphic scriptures and observations of the Mayans and their customs made by the Spanish Conquistadors in post-conquest Mesoamerica.<sup>34</sup> The Spanish Conquistadors destroyed the majority of Maya scripture in the name of evangelical enlightenment.<sup>35</sup> This makes literary study of pre-Columbian Maya culture extremely limited. The most important remains of ancient sacred scripture are the translation of the *Popol Vuh* and the collection of

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<sup>31</sup> The English translation is *Yucatan Before and After the Conquest*.

<sup>32</sup> “The First Maya Civilization: Ritual and Power before the Classic Period,” *Choice Reviews Online* 49, no. 01 (2011): 49-0460, 28. There is a different cultural development within the highlands and lowlands of this geographical area, but this chapter will analyze the overarching elements of Mayan religion.

<sup>33</sup> Coe, *The Maya*, 22.

<sup>34</sup> Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, Introduction.

<sup>35</sup> Hamnett, *A Concise History of Mexico*, 66-7.

scriptures *Chilam Bilam*, both literary collections created in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>36</sup> These texts are considered to be ancient as their original version was written in pre-Columbian time, but the original scriptures have gone lost. Therefore, the origins and credibility of these texts are not fully reliable as they were produced for Spanish controlling purposes.

Another way of understanding ancient religion is through the observation of longstanding traditions of ancient culture in contemporary Maya rites and ritual. As Maya historian J. Eric S. Thompson notes in regards of the Maya cultural legacy, “Maya culture . . . is still very much alive; one sees the present in the past and the past in the present”.<sup>37</sup> It is important to be careful in trying to understand ancient history by looking at post-Columbian rituals, as we have established that contemporary Maya culture is highly dominated by Spanish and American cultural influence. It is therefore important to analyze the historical antecedent of a specific religious ritual to establish whether the origins are derived from ancient culture or by foreign culture.

### **The Maize God in the Ancient Maya Pantheon**

Religion played a pivotal role in almost every part of the life of the Mayans: religious rites such as human sacrifice were performed frequently as a form of celestial worship.<sup>38</sup> The religious dedication can be explained by the fact that there was no clear distinction between science and religion: many of the natural phenomena were considered to be the result of decisions made by the Gods. Religious dedication was therefore a way for people to secure their wellbeing. The source of wellbeing was different for each community, but the most

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<sup>36</sup> *Chilam Balam: (Chumayel)*, (ages), (Barcelona: Linkgua Ediciones, 2008), 186-7.

<sup>37</sup> Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, xv.

<sup>38</sup> Coe, *The Maya*, 184.

important deities show that agricultural prosperity is an important factor of daily life in the majority of the communities in the entire Mayan peninsula.<sup>39</sup>

Thanks to archeological remains, we are able to illustrate who the deities of the Maya pantheon were.<sup>40</sup> The ancient Maya pantheon is an incredibly complex religion with approximately over 166 deities, each appointed to a different element of human or celestial life. The large variety of Gods is due to each God's many counter figures of every natural cardinal direction and/or sex.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, there is a clear hierarchy in the worship of the deities. In many archeological artifacts, the God of Maize is depicted significantly more than the other primary deities of worship.<sup>42</sup> This can be explained by the economic importance of the grain. Maize is the only grain that grows as a natural grass on Mesoamerican soil and had been a fundamental nutritional value in ancient Mesoamerican civilizations. It was in fact the only natural food group that provided a surplus. Thus, much of ancient Maya economy evolved around maize's cultivation and trade. The political-economic importance of the grain was reflected in spiritual worship.<sup>43</sup>

The only pre-Columbian written account of maize worship is from the *Popol Vuh*.<sup>44</sup> The extensive collection of scriptures were found and translated by the Spanish Dominican priest Francisco Ximénez in 1703. The *Popol Vuh* tells myths of the world's creation from the native K'iche Maya (inhabitants of the Chiapas peninsula and Guatemala).<sup>45</sup> Even though it is not clear when the text was written, most scholars who have written about the *Popol Vuh* have made comparative literary analyses and believe that the original date is from pre-Columbian times. Consequently, the myth is a fundamental source for historians to

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<sup>39</sup> Coe, *The Maya*, 173.

<sup>40</sup> Coe, *The Maya*, 184.

<sup>41</sup> Coe, *The Maya*, 176.

<sup>42</sup> Other significant deities were the God of the Sun, Moon and Rain. The God of Maize has different names, including *Ah Mun*, *Zac Uac Nal* and *Hun-Hunahpu*. The different names can be explained by the many different languages that are spoken in the Maya peninsula.

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, 298

<sup>44</sup> Goetz, Morley, and Recinos, *Popol Vuh*.

<sup>45</sup> Goetz, Morley, and Recinos. *Popol Vuh*, Introduction.

understand the relation between the Mayans and their deities in the pre-Columbian Era. The collection contains a number of chapters, each telling stories about Maya mythological ancestry, cosmology and creation, and has served as a general introduction to Maya values and the most important Gods of the Maya pantheon. The myths present a clear linkage to men and elements considered to be most important for Maya society, as can be seen in the following passage:

. . . of yellow corn and of white corn they made their flesh; of corn meal dough they made the arms and the legs of man. Only dough of corn meal went into the flesh of our first fathers, the four men, who were created.<sup>46</sup>

This excerpt from the Maya creation myth implies that the flesh of the world's first humans was created and shaped out of corn dough. The suggested biological connection between maize and humans illustrates the intrinsic relationship the Mayans have with the cereal grain. The association of human flesh with maize can be explained considering that maize was the primarily nutritional aliment for the Mayans. Human flesh is therefore 'nurtured' by the dough. The claim that the elastic dough could make something as great as humans gives us an understanding of the multifunctional value that Mayans gave to maize.

To gain greater insight of the God of Maize, it is important to consider religious rite that involved the worship of the grain. The observations of the Maya by early 16<sup>th</sup> Century friar Diego de Landa are considered to be one of the most important sources for understanding pre-Columbian Maya civilization. In fact, it is believed that 90% of what we know of ancient Maya civilization is thanks to the writings of De Landa.<sup>47</sup> In his 1566 book *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán*, De Landa catalogued the main cultural, social, economic and political aspects of Maya life.<sup>48</sup> In using the writings of De Landa to reach a better

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<sup>46</sup> Goetz, Morley, and Recinos, *Popol Vuh*, 167.

<sup>47</sup> Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, Introduction.

<sup>48</sup> Diego de Landa, *Yucatan before and after the Conquest* (New York: Dover Publications, 1978).



understanding of Maya culture, one must take into consideration that his observations were made for political purposes commissioned by Spanish authorities. The Spaniards believed that it would be easier to overthrow native populations by understanding their culture.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, De Landa's writings are recognized as a primarily objective source as he writes in an objective and observatory style. For example, in observing the Maya and their use of maize, De Landa notes the following:

[The Mayans] also toast the maize and then grind and mix it with water into a very refreshing drink, putting into it a little Indian pepper or cacao. Out of maize and ground cacao they make a sort of froth that is very delicious, and with which they celebrate their festivals.<sup>50</sup>

The observation by De Landa is a description of the preparation and consumption of a drink known as *posh*, which is still consumed by many Mayans today.<sup>51</sup> *Posh* often contained a low percentage of alcohol due to the process of natural fermentation. De Landa's observation is limited in explaining what role the drink played in Maya society, but through historical analyses we know that *posh* was used both as a medicinal remedy and for the execution of religious rites. The consumption of the beverage was both a token of offering and worship to the Maize God.<sup>52</sup>

The examples from the creation myth in the *Popol Vuh* and the observation by Diego De Landa are an explicit expression of animistic religion. According to anthropologist Philippe Descola, animism is defined as "the belief that natural beings possess their own spiritual principles and that it is therefore possible for humans to establish with these entities

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<sup>49</sup> Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 132.

<sup>50</sup> de Landa, *Yucatan before and after the Conquest*, 34.

<sup>51</sup> Keith H. Steinkraus, ed., *Handbook of Indigenous Fermented Foods*, 2nd ed., and expanded, (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1995), 252, 259. Also often referred to as *pox* or *pozul*. There are many variations on the preparation of *posh*, with ingredients such as honey and the maguey cactus. Depending on the region, traditional *posh* may also be referred to as *chicha*. Now the word *posh* is primarily used in referring to sugarcane liquor.

<sup>52</sup> Luisa Maffi, "Liquor and Medicine: A Mayan Case Study in Diachronic Semantics," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 6, no. 1 (1996): 27.

personal relations of a certain kind – relations of protection, seduction, hostility, alliance, or exchange of services.”<sup>53</sup> Maize is in fact interpreted as a deity, root of human existence and source of material worship through its consumption. The value, understanding and use of maize go beyond the means of consumption as can be understood through the scriptures. The worship of the Maize God is a method for practitioners to hope for celestial security both in nutrition and welfare. The Mayans were able to create a system of trade between different Mayan and Mesoamerican communities as a result of the surplus of the plant. Thus, the significance of maize in Maya economy is a probable explanation as to why the Maize God was praised to such a large extent. However, when studying the *Popol Vuh*, it is important to take into consideration that we are analyzing myth. We are by no means able to understand if the Mayans from this time period believed the stories of the scripture, or if they were solely used as a symbolic understanding of the deities and the origins of the world. Nonetheless, the stories still present a clear reflection of the value-system of the Mayans.

By looking at the worship of maize through the schema of Leach’ division of behavior, maize worship is a clear case of *magical behavior* which also reflects the ancient Mayans *rational-technical behavior* and *communicative behavior*. As the cultivation of the grain was the central arrangement of Maya civilization, the worship of the grain naturally is a projection of systems of economy and social structures. However, there is no clear distinction between the symbolical meaning and the direct intention of the object: the use of maize in rituals is not a metaphorical implementation of a spiritual message, but the grain in itself is worshipped both as a product of consumption and as a celestial power. Therefore, it can be concluded that maize is worshipped because of its pivotal role in ancient Maya society. It is not only the foundation of ancient Maya economy, but also of nutrition and

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<sup>53</sup> Philippe Descola, ed., *Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives*, European Association of Social Anthropologists (London: Routledge, 1999), 114.

food-stock. There religious interpretation of maize is therefore closely related to the human body as described in the excerpt from the *Popol Vuh*.

#### **4. Firewater for Religious Enlightenment: The Effects of Alcohol Distillation and Evangelization in Maya Religious Rites**

The “hurricane of culture” is a fitting expression by historian Fernando Ortiz to describe the dynamic European reorganization of native civilizations after their arrival in Latin-America.<sup>54</sup> Each aspect of Mayan life was transformed by the introduction to Western means and methods of production.<sup>55</sup> Western principles of class, ethnicity and politics reconstructed Mesoamerican society and culture in every aspect. The majority of the native Maya communities converted to Catholicism through coercive control: Spanish evangelization was the most significant alteration of Latin-American native culture.

The Spiritual Conquest had a profound impact on the religious practice and interpretation of newly introduced foods and materials. The transformation of religion manifested itself in the diversification of traditional religious practices. Both religious conversion and material development determined new interpretations of traditional rites. The conversion to Catholicism and the introduction of alcohol distillation have made a significant impact on social, economic and cultural life of the natives since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. This transformation is reflected in the execution of religious rites in the Mexican state of Chiapas.

It is important to understand that the Spanish annexation was executed differently depending on the period of conquest in different geographical areas. Additionally, the transformation of religion and its execution largely depended on the method of evangelization used by the different Catholic orders. The following chapter will look at the Franciscan and Dominican approach towards evangelization in the Maya peninsula. It will then analyze how

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<sup>54</sup> Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint, Tobacco and Sugar* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 99-100.

<sup>55</sup> Bauer, *Goods, Power, History*, 44.

the effects of distilled alcohol production effected the execution of Maya rite under the subjugation of missionary control. It will do so by looking at the writings of Spanish friar Bartolomé de las Casas and the observations by 20<sup>th</sup> Century anthropologist June Nash. First, the different approaches to the Spiritual Conquest by the two dominant religious Catholic orders shall be explained through a brief historical account of the spread of Catholicism in Yucatán and Chiapas.

### **The Spiritual Conquest of Yucatán**

The Spaniards first set foot in Mexico in 1519 during an expedition led by Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés.<sup>56</sup> Their motive for exploration was clear; the Spanish came to conquer the native people and to find valuable material, primarily gold and silver.<sup>57</sup> The Spanish population increased at a rapid pace which had highly destructive consequences for the natives: disease and abuse caused one of world history's largest holocausts.<sup>58</sup> The violent aggression of the Spaniards was primarily carried out against the Aztec Empire, which was the largest political entity in Mesoamerica during the period of early Conquest. Maya communities were dispersed throughout the Northeastern Mesoamerican peninsula and did not have a strong centralized government like the Aztecs did. This explains why the influence of the Spanish Conquest is significantly different in the North and South of the Maya peninsula. Since the Spaniards primarily focused on the larger settlements that were established in the early stages of the conquest, many communities did not experience colonial domination for decades after Cortés first set foot in Mexico. As modern-day Chiapas and Western-Guatemala are highly forested tropical areas, it was more difficult for the Spaniards

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<sup>56</sup> G. M. Joseph and Timothy J. Henderson, *The Mexico Reader*, 95.

<sup>57</sup> Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, 24.

<sup>58</sup> Joseph and Henderson, *The Mexico Reader*, 95.

to station themselves in this region.<sup>59</sup> The quest for political dominance was therefore much less aggressive than experienced in West-Mexico. It was not until the arrival of the Dominican, Augustinian and Franciscan friars and the consequent large-scale program of evangelization in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century that the majority of communities from the Maya peninsula were subjected to Spanish rule.<sup>60</sup>

Cortés motivated the execution of evangelization in the New World by naming himself ‘God’s chosen agent’.<sup>61</sup> The first Franciscan friars set foot in Mexico as early as May 1524, and immediately initiated the process of evangelization.<sup>62</sup> Franciscans dominated the evangelization in the area of Yucatan through their successful implementation of the so-called method of “word and example”.<sup>63</sup> This approach implied that native communities were to convert to Catholicism by simply imitating the traditional rites of the Catholic order. Through the constrained execution of baptisms, memorization of prayer and training of traditional posture of Spanish piety such as kneeling and bowing the head, the native population of Yucatan adapted to the tradition of Catholicism. However, this approach did not make the native population truly understand the spiritual meaning of the religion itself. The native community memorized Spanish words of prayer without understanding the language or the meaning of those very words.<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, the institutionalization of Western standard of living implemented by the Conquistadors enforced the Franciscan evangelization. The approach to external teaching went hand in hand with the Conquistadors’ notion of *policía*. This concept was central to the cultural conformation of the natives and

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<sup>59</sup> Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, 50.

<sup>60</sup> Hamnett, *A Concise History of Mexico*, 69.

<sup>61</sup> Joseph and Henderson *The Mexico Reader*, 114.

<sup>62</sup> Mark A. Burkholder and Lyman L. Johnson, *Colonial Latin America*, 8th ed (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 97.

<sup>63</sup> Inga Clendinnen, “Disciplining the Indians: Franciscan Ideology and Missionary Violence in Sixteenth-Century Yucatan,” *Past and Present* 94, no. 1 (1982): 28.

<sup>64</sup> Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, 47.

was executed through the reconstruction of every aspect of the native people's lives and culture.<sup>65</sup>

Mayans in Latin-America were forced to adapt to Western standards of civilization emphasizing the importance of urban living and Western values.<sup>66</sup> The establishment of *haciendas* are the prime example of how extreme forces of institutionalized configuration resulted in cultural and religious transformation. *Haciendas* were feudal estates where the local community was forced to live and work in production of agriculture, alcohol or underground mining.<sup>67</sup> By 1854 there were over 6000 *haciendas* established in the state of Yucatan, transforming it into the center of institutionalized authority by Spanish rule.<sup>68</sup> The inhabitants of these estates were controlled through systems of political authority and religious institutionalization under one roof. Religious conversion in *haciendas* was initially executed through the training of Christian rituals; Indians were forced to memorize Catholic prayers through repetition and memorize Spanish words through sounds that sounded similar in their native language.<sup>69</sup>

In analyzing the extermination of the indigenous Maya religion, it is important to study the Franciscan approach to conversion and systems of feudalism. The decentralization of native society and enforced execution of Catholic rites left no freedom for the native population to pursue their native traditions.<sup>70</sup> In fact, the method of Franciscan religious conversion annihilated the native animistic religion and its traditions. Due to the enclosed

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<sup>65</sup> The following quotation by historian Alan Durston is a clear definition of the concept: "To live in *policía* required the attainment of the European idea of civility including clothing, food hygiene, etc. but above all, to live an urban life." (Alan Durston, "Un Regimen Urbanístico En La América Hispana Colonial : El Trazado En Dameró Durante Los Siglos XVI y XVII." (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 1994), 88.)

<sup>66</sup> Bauer, *Goods, Power, History*, 46.

<sup>67</sup> Mining, agriculture and alcohol distillation were the most important businesses of *haciendas*, but the establishments were also used for other means of production.

<sup>68</sup> Joseph and Henderson, *The Mexico Reader*, 243.

<sup>69</sup> Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, 48.

<sup>70</sup> Joseph and Henderson, *The Mexico Reader*, 243.

environment of *haciendas*, Mayans were violently separated from their fundamental elements of culture such as clothing, food, language, religion and education.

The material interpretation of Catholicism in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century through Franciscan teaching cannot be understood as a hybrid consolidation of native Maya culture and Spanish culture. As the Mayans were not able to execute religious rites based on their environment or religious history, ancient food offerings lost their cultural significance. Therefore, we can state that the Franciscan evangelization in the Spanish settlements of Yucatan is a case of cultural imperialism, enforced through the support of colonial authorities and institutionalization of cultural exclusivity, such as *haciendas*.

### **The Dominican Evangelization in Chiapas**

The Catholic order consolidated significantly later in the area of Chiapas compared to the north of the Maya highlands. This was largely due to the difficulty in accessing the area and to the lack of a centralized government of the geographical area of Chiapas.<sup>71</sup> The Spanish Conquest of Chiapas was initiated by Conquistador Diego Mazariegos in 1528, but did not see the arrival of religious missionaries until the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. The Spiritual Conquest in Chiapas was largely led by the Dominican order.<sup>72</sup> The Dominican approach towards the native community was significantly different from the Franciscans. The Dominicans criticized the Spanish exploitation of slave-labor and violence, and in fact many Dominicans friars encouraged the maintenance of native culture to preserve a sense of community.<sup>73</sup> The Dominicans believed that the collective expression of religious beliefs was

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<sup>71</sup> Coe, *The Maya*, 55.

<sup>72</sup> Sidney David Markman, *Architecture and Urbanization in Colonial Chiapas, Mexico*, (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1984), 204.

<sup>73</sup> Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, 54.



a necessary approach in the evangelization towards Christianity.<sup>74</sup> This approach manifests itself in the rule by Dominican bishop Bartolomé de Las Casas. De Las Casas was appointed bishop of the now called township of San Cristóbal de las Casas in 1542, and made a significant change through his humanitarian approach towards the natives.<sup>75</sup> He emphasized the teachings of Catholicism instead of the rigorous repetition of Catholic customs that dominated the approach of the friars during the evangelization. The following passage illustrates de Las Casas' interpretation of the Mayan stance towards Christianity and his personal stance towards the Mayans:

We . . . consider that the Indians are truly men and that they are not only capable of understanding the Catholic faith but, according to our information, they desire exceedingly to receive it. Desiring to provide ample remedy for these evils, we declare . . . that, notwithstanding whatever may have been or may be said to the contrary, the said Indians and all other people who may later be discovered by Christians are by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, even though they be outside the faith of Jesus Christ; and that they may and should, freely and legitimately, enjoy their liberty and the possession of their property; nor should they be in any way enslaved; should the contrary happen it shall be null and of no effect.

De Las Casas expresses a sense of compassion towards the indigenous population that was unimaginable for any Spaniard that set foot in the Americas at that time. The approach of De Las Casas explains much of how the Dominicans executed their evangelization. The Dominicans claimed that the native population must not be violated but instead respected for their culture and their capabilities. The tolerance and recognition of native traditions allowed for a hybrid interpretation of newly introduced Catholicism. Mayans were able to execute their traditional religious rites in the context of Catholicism. As the Dominican order perceived native Maya religion as pagan but not as a threat to Christianity as Judaism and

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<sup>74</sup> It must be noted that this approach is not representative for all Dominican friars in Chiapas, but was dominated by the religious rule of the Dominicans in the early Spiritual Conquest of Chiapas.

<sup>75</sup> Jeanette Rodriguez and Ted Fortier, *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith & Identity*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 89.  
San Cristóbal de las Casas was named after Bartolomé de Las Casas after his rule in the township.

Islam were in the Spanish Empire, the process of religious conversion was not implemented as a full-scale destruction of the native religion and its customs.<sup>76</sup>

According to historian Brian Hamnett, the Dominican encouragement of collective religious expression was in the climate of the new set of rules implemented by the ecumenical Council of Trent (1546-1563).<sup>77</sup> The Council was a result of the Counter-Reformation, a theological reaction to the growing protestant reformation in Europe and gave shape to the new church in Spain. The redefinition of Catholic Christianity required disciples to restrict the religion exclusively to the Catholic belief. The Council emphasized the aspect of collectivism in Catholic practice. Whereas it remained the only sanctioned religion in the conquered areas, the collective expression of Catholicism paradoxically allowed indigenous communities to incorporate the ancient beliefs of the Maya pantheon in the execution of Catholic rites.<sup>78</sup> The expression of native practice in Catholicism was sanctioned through the imposition of local *confradias*. These were local religious confraternities primarily from indigenous descent and functioned as the mediators between the Spanish missionaries and the local community, often ruling in significantly small municipalities where there were no Spanish missionaries.<sup>79</sup> Through the joint effort of local and colonial rule, the Catholic interpretation in Chiapas developed into a hybrid form of cultural religious intersection. This approach had a large impact in the execution of religious rites in the later stages of the conquest. One of the primary effects of transformed religious ritual was the increase of alcoholism in the state of Chiapas due to the growing significance of the distillery industry.

Spaniards implemented distillation-methods at an early stage of the Conquest.

Factories were settled as early as the late 16<sup>th</sup> Century in *haciendas* throughout the Yucatan

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<sup>76</sup> Hamnett, *A Concise History of Mexico*, 65.

<sup>77</sup> Hamnett, *A Concise History of Mexico*, 67.

<sup>78</sup> Hamnett, *A Concise History of Mexico*, 67.

<sup>79</sup> François Chevalier, Alvin Eustis, and Lesley Byrd Simpson, *Land and Society in Colonial Mexico: The Great Hacienda*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 230.

peninsula, and continued to grow throughout the Maya highlands during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>80</sup> The production of alcohol was originally an arrangement to produce a supply for the early Spanish settlers, but soon turned into one of the largest economic industries in Meso- and Latin America. The producers of *firewater* adapted to their environment and created liquor by using local ingredients such as maize and agave.<sup>81</sup> This was the beginning of popular modern drinks such as mezcal and tequila. With the increase of mezcal and tequila production, liquor became more accessible for the native community.<sup>82</sup>

The distillation of alcohol had large social consequences for indigenous communities in Chiapas. As a result of the Dominican promotion of collective expression of ancient rites, local communities continued to carry out rituals of celestial worship through the consumption of alcohol, despite the conversion to Catholicism. The ancient tradition of *posh* consumption was traditionally a method of expressing devotion to the God of Maize.<sup>83</sup> It was through the consumption of *posh* that the Mayans believed to reach an altered state of consciousness, bringing them closer to their deity.<sup>84</sup> The ritual pertained to exist, but *posh* was replaced by the new commodities of stronger liquor due to its large and low-cost accessibility. The alcohol percentage of distilled liquor is significantly higher than *posh*, causing a large-scale problem of alcoholism. Religious devotees celebrated ancient religious festivities to the point of extreme intoxication. Community drunkenness became a common phenomenon in Maya communities, and is significantly problematic up to this day.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Joseph and Henderson, *The Mexico Reader*, 243.

<sup>81</sup> *Firewater* is a term used for high-proof alcohol.

<sup>82</sup> Bauer, *Goods, Power, History*, 99.

<sup>83</sup> William B. Taylor, *Drinking, Homicide & Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages*, (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1979), 39.

<sup>84</sup> Elizabeth M. Dowling, W. George. Scarlett, and Sage Publications, *Encyclopedia of Religious and Spiritual Development*, (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 2006), 408.

<sup>85</sup> David. Carey and William B. Taylor, *Distilling the Influence of Alcohol: Aguardiente in Guatemalan History*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 70.

The justification of alcohol consumption in Catholic context can be understood through the observations by anthropologist June Nash during her investigation of the population of the Mexican village of Amatengo. Nash notes:

When I was living in Amatengo during the 1960s, drinking was institutionalized in every celebration within the home as well as in the church and town hall. Liquor was considered to be the gift of our Lord Jesus Christ, derived from the bath water of the crucified Christ when he was taken down from the Cross.<sup>86</sup>

These observations must be interpreted with caution as they are not representative for the general theological explanation of *firewater* consumption. Nonetheless, the passage illustrates how the Dominican allowance of traditional religious practice remarkably merged with Catholic biblical teachings. The act of worship through alcohol is disassociated with the devotion of the God of Maize and replaced with the devotion to Jesus Christ.

Even though the Dominican missionaries successfully converted the majority of subjected populations to Catholicism, the ancient worship of the deities of the Maya pantheon indirectly persisted through the collective force of sustaining traditional rites. Alcohol consumption in religious context is often understood in light of animistic tradition of the Maya. The Mayans believed that anything that moved or caused move possessed a soul.<sup>87</sup> The physical reaction to alcohol consumption is a clear indicator for the lively force of liquor, it being another motivation for alcohol consumption.<sup>88</sup>

The presumption that the continued consumption of alcohol was imposed to preserve the belief of reaching a state of spiritual enlightenment must be approached with caution. As distilled alcohol increasingly became a commercialized product of commodity, the

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<sup>86</sup> June Nash, "Consuming Interests: Water, Rum, and Coca-Cola from Ritual Propitiation to Corporate Expropriation in Highland Chiapas," *Cultural Anthropology* 22, no. 4 (2007) <https://doi.org/10.2307/4497787>, 627.

<sup>87</sup> Stephen D. Houston, *The Life Within: Classic Maya and the Matter of Permanence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), Introduction.

<sup>88</sup> Henry J. Bruman, *Alcohol in Ancient Mexico* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000), 48.

consumption of liquor also became a source of recreational enjoyment. This causes a concern in understanding whether the consumption of alcohol can still be understood as *magical behavior* in the framework of human behavior by E.R. Leach, or instead as an expression of *rational-technical behavior* with the aim to reach a state of drunkenness. However, based on the observations by June Nash and dominating enactment of the ritual during religious festivities, the assumption can be made that alcohol consumption is still primarily understood within the recognition of animism.

In Amatengo and other Chiapas municipalities under the religious decree of the Dominican order, the imbalanced division of power makes a clear case of cultural imperialism. Mayans were subjected to the evangelization through the force of colonialization. However, the syncretic expression of religion can be interpreted as a case of cultural hybridity. In comparison to the detrimental extinction of native Maya religion in the areas subjected to Franciscan evangelization, communities subdued by the Dominican order have been able to pursue a degree of native tradition of which its heritage is evident up to this day. On the contrary, the introduction to distilled alcohol has caused for an indirect destruction of social and cultural order. It can therefore be argued that the Dominican Spiritual Conquest caused larger social problems as a result of the humanitarian approach of cultural preservation.

## 5. Consumerism and Religion: The Chiapas Coca-Colonization



*Local Chamula community performing a religious ritual in the church of San Juan Bautista.<sup>89</sup>*

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<sup>89</sup> “Interior Del Empleo de San Juan Chamula | Vive San Cristobal de Las Casas,” accessed November 26, 2017, [https://www.vivesancristobal.com/excursion-a-san-juan-chamula/san\\_juan\\_chamula\\_templo\\_03/](https://www.vivesancristobal.com/excursion-a-san-juan-chamula/san_juan_chamula_templo_03/).

20<sup>th</sup> Century liberal capitalism influenced the Maya religious rites differently from one region to another. This influence is generally stronger in larger cities (such as Merida or Cancún), and weaker in smaller municipalities that are located in the inland of Mexico.<sup>90</sup> This chapter focusses on one instance of this influence, namely the insertion of Coca-Cola and Pepsi into the religious execution of rites. Though this phenomenon occurs in other places, this chapter will look solely at the instance in the township of San Juan Chamula. By doing so, the chapter will analyze the religious interpretation of consumer products by the Maya in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and onwards. First, a brief historical account shall be given of how Coca-Cola was introduced into Maya culture and religion.<sup>91</sup>

### **The Rise of Coca-Cola in Mexico**

The Independence of Mexico in 1821 did not have beneficial consequences for the Mayans. The majority of colonial potentates who monopolized the economy in the Colonial Era remained in place after Independence. For this reason, the majority of the Maya peasantry continued to work for the same commanders in the industries of alcohol distillation, underground mining and agriculture.<sup>92</sup> The economy of the Maya highlands was predominantly regulated through the system of Mexico's colonial past, which was founded on racial division and feudalism.<sup>93</sup> To some extent, Mayans were able to overcome racial divisions that refrained them from landownership during the uprisings of the Cuzat Rebellion in 1868-1870 and the Mexican Revolution in 1910. Indigenous people rebelled and fought

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<sup>90</sup> Coe, *The Maya*, 55.

<sup>91</sup> Coca-Cola was not the only soft drink brand that grew extensively in Mexico in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Similar brands such as Pepsi Cola implemented similar approaches to increasing its economy. The historical account of Coca-Cola is a representative model for the growth of soft drink consumption at large.

<sup>92</sup> Ricardo Pozas, *Chamula: un pueblo indio de los Altos de Chiapas*, 2012, 77-110. This is called *Limpieza de sangre* (translation: cleanliness of blood), a term used to describe those who remain in power due to their colonial ancestry.

<sup>93</sup> Gary H. Gossen, *Chamulas in the World of the Sun: Time and Space in a Maya Oral Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 2.

against the government and the continuation of racial division from the period of colonization. After the Mexican Revolution, communal land was distributed amongst the native community and the Mayans gained more independence and control over their native land.<sup>94</sup>

The global conformity to liberal economic policy starting from the 1980's caused serious damage for indigenous economy and culture. Though local municipalities retained political control over their land, much was bought up by large international corporations.<sup>95</sup> A clear example is the rapid growth of the soft drink brand Coca-Cola. The company had opened its first plants in Mexico as early as 1926, but rapidly increased its distribution in the post-war era.<sup>96</sup> During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the company had established one of Mexico's largest plants in the highlands of Chiapas, occupying a large part of the peninsula that was previously owned by Maya communities.<sup>97</sup> Coca-Cola originally built plants in Latin-America to tower production costs and soon after sit out to sell to local markets. Local marketing strategies were implemented to make the soft drink largely available and affordable. Large enterprises collaborated with local institutions such as schools, churches, vendors and even politicians. An example is the collaboration between Coca-Cola and the municipality of San Juan Tolimán, where the names of the current mayor and his administration are written on the township's City Hall in red and white letters (as are the letters of Coca-Cola), along with paintings of bottles of Coca-Cola.<sup>98</sup>

However, the increasing popularity of soft drinks was not solely an implementation of the company itself: local religious leaders endorsed Coca-Cola and other popular soft drinks as a tool to solve problems of alcoholism that they were dealing with in their own

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<sup>94</sup> Gossen, *Chamulas in the World of the Sun*, 3.

<sup>95</sup> Bauer, *Goods, Power, History*, 201.

<sup>96</sup> Bauer, *Goods, Power, History*, 210-211.

<sup>97</sup> Nash, "Consuming Interests.", 632.

<sup>98</sup> Nagata JM et al., "Coca-Colonization and Hybridization of Diets among the Tz'utujil Maya.," *Ecology of Food and Nutrition* 50, no. 4 (2011): 308.



community. Large-scale alcoholism in Chiapas was the aftermath of the promotion of alcohol consumption in the Colonial Era.<sup>99</sup> The problem of alcoholism in San Juan Chamula was first recognized by local authorities in 1980. The replacement of *posh*, rum, mezcal and tequila was supported by the claim that the effects of drinking soft drinks instead of alcohol were no different in light of spiritual enlightenment.<sup>100</sup> Local *cargo* established concessions with Coca-Cola and PepsiCo, making the drinking of pop soda a religiously authorized practice.<sup>101</sup>

### **Soft Drinks in Chiapas Ritual**

In the 21<sup>th</sup> Century, *posh* and distilled liquor are still the primary beverages used for spiritual enlightenment in the majority of Mayan communities.<sup>102</sup> However, the increasing augmentation of consumerism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century has contributed to a transformation in Maya religion and its execution. This transformation is very clear in the township of San Juan Chamula in the sovereign state of Chiapas.<sup>103</sup> San Juan Chamula is a relatively small town with approximately 3,329 inhabitants.<sup>104</sup> The Chamulas are known for their politically resistance throughout a history of oppression: they were the last Maya community to be submitted to Spanish Conquistadors Luis Marin and Francisco de Medina in 1624. Through local forces, the Chamulas have been able to retain many aspects of pre-Hispanic culture.: the majority of the Chamulas speak the native Tzotzil language and dress in native clothes.<sup>105</sup> The Spanish converted the population of San Juan to Catholicism in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, and

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<sup>99</sup> Nash, "Consuming Interests", 628.

<sup>100</sup> Nash, "Consuming Interests", 629.

<sup>101</sup> *Cargo* is the Spanish term used to define local religious authorities.

<sup>102</sup> Steinkraus, *Handbook of Indigenous Fermented Foods*, 252-259.

<sup>103</sup> San Juan Chamula is both the name of the municipality and the capital town of the municipality. In this case I am talking about the township.

<sup>104</sup> "'Chamula' Catálogo de Localidades," *Secretaría de Desarrollo Social (SEDESOL)*, accessed November 26, 2017, <http://www.microrregiones.gob.mx/catloc/LocdeMun.aspx?tipo=clave&campo=loc&ent=07&mun=023>. This data is from 2010.

<sup>105</sup> Manuel B Trens, *Historia de Chiapas: desde los tiempos más remotos hasta la caída del Segundo Imperio*, (Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas: Consejo Estatal para la Cultura y las Artes en Chiapas, 1999), 112.

built the church of San Juan Bautista which is still the central church of the municipality of San Juan Chamula to this day. Apart from the traditional exterior and the depiction of Jesus Christ, nothing else in the visual representation of the church seems to indicate Catholic tradition. Major traditionally Christian elements are missing in the interior: the church has no pews, no central figure of Christ and no other traditional Catholic decorations. Instead, the floor is filled with pine-needles and candles, practitioners perform executions of chickens on the floor and a mystic smell of burning copal lingers in the air. As the practitioners pray on the ground, they consume copious amounts of either Coca-Cola or Pepsi.<sup>106</sup> They believe that eructation caused by the carbonation is a method to let evil spirits come out of one's body.<sup>107</sup>

The Chamulas incorporation of Coca-Cola into Catholic ritual is pointedly not an instance of *Cargo Cult*, a mystified fetishization of a foreign product that is a common phenomenon in secluded indigenous communities.<sup>108</sup> This becomes clear when analyzing the general attitude of the inhabitants of the village towards American culture through legal and social aversion towards tourism and modernization. One example of this aversion is the prohibition of photographing in the village: Chamulas believe that the 'spirit' of an object is taken away when it is captured by a photo camera. A formalizing of the aversion is made clear by the local law that any non-Chamula needs permission from municipal authorities to stay in the town overnight.<sup>109</sup> It is therefore important to understand how the worship of Coca-Cola fits within the framework of acceptance of foreign culture.

The conventional consumption of soft drinks would be categorized as *rational-technical behavior* within the anthropological framework of E. R. Leach. Coca-Cola and

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<sup>106</sup> Gossen, *Chamulas in the World of the Sun*, 191. The observations by Trens and Nagata JM et. al. is supported by my personal observations in 2014.

<sup>107</sup> Nagata JM et al., "Coca-Colonization and Hybridization of Diets among the Tz'utujil Maya.", 300. Anthropological research on this specific case is limited. It is unclear if this interpretation was given by practitioners themselves or by religious authorities.

<sup>108</sup> Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (Oxford, UK ; New York, NY, USA: Blackwell, 1969), 48.

<sup>109</sup> Gossen, *Chamulas in the World of the Sun*, 5.

Pepsi are not marketed as a product for spiritual detoxification but as a beverage for consumption. Given that according to the Chamula community pop soda has a sacred purpose, the way the drink is consumed in the church of San Juan Chamula is clearly not to quench thirst. Even though soft drinks in San Juan Chamula are also used for normal consumption, the use of soft drinks by the Chamulas in religious context can be categorized as *magical behavior*. Leach defines *magical behavior* as “behavior that is directed towards the evoking of occult powers, but does not produce observable results directly in themselves.”<sup>110</sup> The Chamulas relinquish an active role to the soft drinks: they believe that the carbonation of the beverage activates a process that can be interpreted as spiritual detoxification.<sup>111</sup> To understand how and why the Chamula interpretation of such a common beverage fits within a religious framework, it is important to understand if the rite is derived from Christian or Maya tradition as these two religions have been the foundational frameworks of spirituality in the Chiapas peninsula.

Neither Catholic nor Maya religious tradition recognizes the use of soft drinks in rite as carbonated beverages were only developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. However, it is not unlikely that the use of Coca-Cola was inspired by the consumption of other foods or drinks from traditional Christian or Maya religious practice. The most important Catholic practice involving food or beverage is the Eucharist.<sup>112</sup> The traditionally Catholic practice recalls one of the last deeds by Jesus, when Christ hands his apostles bread and wine as representative objects for his body and blood.<sup>113</sup> In the case of the Eucharist, food is interpreted as a metaphorical manifestation of a celestial power. The ritual is not to worship the food itself

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<sup>110</sup> Leach, “Ritualization in Man in Relation to Conceptual and Social Development.”, 403-8.

<sup>111</sup> Nagata JM et al., “Coca-Colonization and Hybridization of Diets among the Tz’utujil Maya”, 300.

<sup>112</sup> The Eucharist is executed not only by Catholic Christians, but also by Orthodox and Protestants.

<sup>113</sup> “Eucharist | Christianity,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed November 29, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Eucharist>.

but what it represents. Bread and wine are a substance of translation for higher celestial power.

The use of pop soda for religious purposes can also be understood within the traditional Maya religious framework of animism. The religious use of soft drinks goes beyond the conception of the purpose of its creation nor is it a metaphorical representative for a celestial power. Instead, the object in itself is perceived as 'alive'. It is dubious to state that carbonated drinks are objects derived from nature. However, similar to the religious use of alcohol, it is the effect of consumption that makes it appear for the beverage to be 'alive'. The body's natural reaction of belching is interpreted by the Mayans as a celestial force from within. Similar to the ancient worship of maize, soft drinks are glorified for their 'natural' capacities benefitting the Chamula society.

It is unlikely that the consumption of Coca-Cola by the Chamulas derived from the material interpretation of food in the Catholic ritual of the Eucharist. Both rituals are similar in the sense of putting the authentic purpose of the food or drink out of their practical context. The consumption of soft drinks and wine/bread are not to satisfy hunger or thirst, but for spiritual enlightenment. However, the consumption of soft drinks in the church of San Juan Bautista does not indicate any relation to the worship of Jesus Christ nor is it representative for the worship of any other deity. Instead, it is the effect of the object that is worshipped. It can therefore be concluded that the celestial interpretation of soft drinks by the Chamulas is a continuation of animistic religious tradition with ancestral origins from pre-Columbian Maya tradition.

The Chamula ritual is a product of the global expansion of large multinational companies in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The soft drink became accessible on a large scale for local communities thanks to strategic local marketing by soft drink producers. The low cost and

accessibility of the beverage significantly increased the soft drink consumption.<sup>114</sup> The expansion of global businesses in local Maya municipalities projects the emblematic features of cultural imperialism. Within the theoretical context of cultural imperialism as a neo-Marxist concept, material implementation of consumer products is interpreted as the imperializing force of capitalism.<sup>115</sup>

External penetration from large multinational companies is undoubtedly the most important factor contributing to the significant growth in pop soda consumption. However, it is not the economically ‘colonizing’ force alone that caused pop soda consumption to be used for religious purposes. Rather, it is an instance of sophisticated community leader understanding perfectly well how a foreign commodity can be realistically used to solve a seemingly entrenched social problem of alcoholism. This institutionalization was jointly installed through a collaborative force between local authorities and multinational companies, but it can still be claimed that religious soft drink consumption was authorized through local initiative. The Chamula ritual is therefore a strong claim for cultural hybridity, as the foreign implementation of soda is a result of local and foreign collaboration. Additionally, the spiritual interpretation of soft drink consumption is through the lens of ancient traditions of animism.

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<sup>114</sup> In some areas, a bottle of Coca-Cola is cheaper than a bottle of water. (Nagata JM et al., “Coca-Colonization and Hybridization of Diets among the Tz’utujil Maya.”, 312.)

<sup>115</sup> Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism*, 26.

## 6. Conclusion

This thesis has analyzed the transformation of Maya religious rites based on the foreign influences of Spanish and American culture from the pre-Columbian era up to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It has done so by applying the definitions of religion by Emile Durkheim, ritual by Marcel Mauss and E.R. Leach and cultural imperialism by John Tomlinson on the use of beverages to the case-studies of this thesis. Based on these observations, this thesis claims for a cultural transformation in Maya religion founded in the conceptualization of cultural hybridity. In each case-study, the durability of the ancient Maya belief system is expressed in either material or immaterial testament of religion.

The 16<sup>th</sup> Century evangelization can be divided into two primary approaches by the Spanish missionaries, characterized by the method of conversion by the Franciscan and Dominican orders. The first case-study finds that Maya religious rites survived in Chiapas as Dominican friars allowed the Mayans to retain some of their religious practices within the Catholic framework. We can compare this with the Mayans of the north, where Franciscans did not allow Mayans to practice ancient rituals, resulting in a significant declination of Maya traditions. Cultural hybridity manifests itself in the expression of Catholic devotion through the Maya abstraction of alcohol consumption.

The American cultural influence in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Maya communities manifests itself in the occupation of American commodities in religious expression of the Mayans. As a result of an alliance between local and American authorities, adaptation of local marketing methods and tradition of ancient religion, soft drinks have been re-interpreted in religious Catholic context as objects of spiritual detoxification. Cultural hybridity manifests itself in the expression of pre-Hispanic tradition of animism in the appropriation of a contemporary consumerist commodity.

The case-studies demonstrate that the materials used for religious rites in the the post-Columbian Maya peninsula changed according to dominating political and economic dynamics. Both Spanish and American cultural influence in the Maya peninsula are a clear example of how cultural hybridity is a result of interpretation and appropriation of the subjected culture. Both American and Spanish colonial powers subject the native community to an extremely violent approach of cultural and religious transformation, either through the implementation of *haciendas* or the Coca-Cola's intent to collaborate with local authorities. This attitude has resulted in the destruction of many native customs. However, the altruistic approach of the Dominicans or the resistant effort of culture by the native population in San Juan Chamula illustrates how the force of imperialism can be dismantled through a counter-movement of native preservation.

The religious interpretation of newly introduced commodities make a strong case for the flexible adaptation of Maya culture to their current circumstances. The introduction of foreign products as a result of systems of cultural exchange are appropriated according to existing religious traditions. The substantial components of these commodities are interpreted according to the beliefs of the ancient pantheon or the approach of animism. In fact, both case-studies show how the local community searches for a common ground in spiritual interpretation of commodities which can be understood as the continuity of Durkheim's notion of *belief*. It is therefore that the material interpretation of religion can be studied to understand two indicative elements of a society. Not only are we able to understand the social circumstances that have put the material element in to religious context, but we are also able to understand the religious origins through the interpretation of the material itself. Distilled alcohol and Coca-Cola in religious practice give us an understanding of the socio-political climate of the Mayans, but also indicate a deeper understanding of spiritual approach towards objects based on the profound heritage of Maya religion.

The conclusion of this thesis must be interpreted with caution because of the limitations of the case-studies. First, this research restricts itself to the study of small municipalities in the Maya peninsula. This choice is made because of the stronger manifestation of native religious expression in these communities, which present a clear case of hybrid complexion supporting the arguments of this thesis. However, the influence of foreign culture in religious expression is significantly smaller than in large urbanized municipalities of the Maya peninsula. This is due to the considerably larger exposition to Spanish culture in the age of Conquest and to contemporary American culture in larger settlements. Additionally, it cannot be assumed that Maya religion is a single aggregation of religious expression due to the different pre-Columbian expressions and interpretations of the Maya pantheon depending on geographical separation. It must therefore be noted that the theoretical assessment of this thesis is not a representative model for Maya hybrid culture as a whole. Second, the study has limited itself to the evolvement of beverages in Maya religious context to present a historical linear transformation. The results rule out other fundamental material indicators for religion such as clothing, language, music, visual art and other food groups. These cultural indicators are important signifiers for the material representation of both a society's socio-political and religious climate. Additionally, it must be noted that the material influence of consumerism is an ongoing transformation that requires updated contemporary evidence. Therefore, in order to validate the theoretical assessment presented in this thesis, many more case-studies must be done to reach a better understanding of the material transformation of religion in Maya culture.



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