

Sacred Power in Colonial Mexico: The Case of Sixteenth Century Yucatan

NANCY FARRISS

*Department of History, University of Pennsylvania,
Philadelphia, PA 19104*

Summary. Through an interpretation of syncretic rituals in sixteenth century Yucatan, this paper argues that religion is not purely ideational, but also social, and therefore political. Prehispanic Maya rulership was dependent upon sacred power—the power to feed the gods and sustain the cosmos through rituals of sacrifice. The colonial prohibition of native rituals thus undermined the Maya political system. However, innovative elites in the sixteenth century incorporated Christian symbolism and the Christian God into their sacrificial schemata, thereby preserving their role as mediators between the commoners and the divine.

IN THIS ESSAY I shall explore two sets of relationships: the first in a very broad sense is the relationship between religion and politics, more specifically, the link between sacred and secular power via religious ritual; the second relationship is that between indigenous religious systems in Spanish America and Christianity, which first came into contact in the sixteenth century.

The setting is Mexico, or rather Mesoamerica (an area of closely related cultures that comprises much of Mexico and Central America), and within Mesoamerica I will make special reference to the Maya of Yucatan. Though the time and the place are particular, what took place in Yucatan can illuminate some of the general processes involved in the very dramatic confrontation between native American religions and Spanish Christianity, and perhaps some broader issues in the topic of religious change as well.

Until recently students of postconquest Spanish America have had two

standard models of religious change. Both of them are conveniently labour-saving because they preclude any need to study history:

- 1 A “cataclysmic” model, which portrays the total destruction of native religion, replaced by Christianity.
- 2 An “idols behind altars” model, which sees a thin veneer of Christianity superimposed over unmodified pagan reality.

These models have been discredited. Clearly neither the one nor the other will do: a much more complex set of responses is evident. Scholars working primarily with Mexican and Peruvian material have begun to explore that complexity. What I propose is to add a dimension that tends to be ignored—that of politics.

Christian evangelization has generally been seen in ideational terms, as an ideological conflict between different (and incompatible) belief systems. Good work has been done on how the missionaries and the Indians perceived each others’ religion: how they understood them and responded to them as systems of thought. What has often been missing is the relationship between thinking and action. And here politics can help: that is, the conflict was as much about power as about beliefs.

I shall focus on ritual as the main link between religion and politics. Beliefs cannot be ignored: they are necessary in order to interpret the meaning of ritual acts. But, while beliefs can be private and idiosyncratic—with individual variation—rituals are shared activities. They are collective expressions and thus *necessarily* of social significance.

Sacrifice

The particular ritual I shall focus on is sacrifice. Sacrifice is the central ritual in most recorded religions, including the Christian and Mayan. In both these religions, and wherever else it exists, sacrifice constitutes the chief link between man and the sacred. It commemorates past divine intervention in the world and is the instrument by which divine force is channeled into the world. The capacity to channel divine energy into the world, especially via the ritual of sacrifice is what I call *sacred power*. It can confer enormous secular power on the human mediators. And it is this dual aspect of sacrifice that interests me.

I should like first to sketch out my understanding of what sacrifice meant to the Prehispanic Mesoamericans—both its cosmological and its political significance—before the encounter with Spanish Christianity.

Sacrifice in preconquest Mesoamerica took many forms. They range from the simple pouring of libations onto earth prepared for planting, to

a variety of what we consider fairly grisly means of dispatching human victims. The Aztecs have achieved a certain notoriety for what one might call an early form of "open-heart surgery"—though this was in fact one of their simpler techniques. Underlying the variation in form was a common meaning throughout the region, a conception of sacrifice as a form of barter between man and the divinity. The idea of homage, or tribute to the lord (or lords) of creation, was decidedly secondary. In a sense all gifts suggest the expectation of some form of return. The expectations attached to Mesoamerican offerings are so explicit that the gifts constituted down payments at the very least. In return the gods were to provide "good health" or "good harvests" or simply "rain" to ensure good crops: a straightforward, businesslike transaction with no element of gratitude for favours received.

The mutuality of the relationship between man and the divinity, and of the rite of sacrifice in particular, centred around the exchange of food. Food, of course, is the most basic requirement of any organism, and it is a recurring one. It cannot be stored indefinitely, and the very periodicity of the need for nourishment is part of the larger pattern, or natural rhythm of things: energy or life force ebbs away unless it is continually renewed. The supernatural order, personified in the gods, participates in this same rhythm, in need of periodic nourishment. This notion is expressed especially vividly in the Aztec image of the sun, stripped of flesh—as a starving body—during its nightly passage through the underworld, too feeble to rise and make the daily journey across the sky unless nourished with human blood and hearts. All sacred energy in every one of its manifestations—sun, rain, vegetation, even time—is also subject to the same depletion and to the same inexorable need. Without this energy man would have no food. To feed the gods so that they in turn can continue to provide food for man is thus the basic purpose of the sacrificial rite.

In Mesoamerica food for the gods, not surprisingly, consisted of everything included in the local human diet, most commonly maize in a variety of forms. The more elaborate sacred feasts were proper banquets with many kinds of food and condiments and beverages and often—to top off any good meal—a cigar. All the food was consecrated and slain before being offered to the deity, and human sacrifice must be seen as part of the same schema. The logic of all blood sacrifice is the transfer of life force from the living creature to the deity and thus back to creation. All eating is in a sense a form of sacrifice. All creation feeds upon itself, in a continual transfer of energy from one life form to another. To complete the circle man must make his own contribution.

As the centrepiece of public ritual, sacrifice necessarily played as important a role in maintaining the social order as it did in maintaining

the cosmic order. First of all, it expressed and reinforced the social bond of community. The relationship with the divinity was conceived of as a corporate rather than an individual one, linking people together through the joint offerings they made and the joint benefits they received.

Sacrifice also expressed and supported social differentiation within the group. As suggested earlier, sacrifice links sacred power to secular power. In few societies have the two been more clearly joined through the intercessory role of the political elite than in Prehispanic Mesoamerica. Feeding the gods and thus ensuring man's survival may have been a collective enterprise to which all contributed. But not everyone had equal access to the gods; not everyone had equal responsibility for providing them with nourishment. The enterprise was organized and directed solely by the rulers, and access to the divinity was their exclusive preserve.

The concept of the ruler as conduit for all offerings to the deity and all blessings in return—symbolized by the ruler's presiding over the sacred feast—provides an unsurpassed ideological foundation for domination. Power and privilege are secured and gain legitimacy through a *three-way* reciprocal exchange in which, divinity, ruling group, and commoners are all joined together in bonds of interdependence. The ritual should not, however, be interpreted as *merely* a mechanism for domination; the point here is to establish a link between functions, and not reduce one to the other.

Since the public ritual of sacrifice was the linchpin that held together the interlocking cosmic and political systems, any disruption of these rites would necessarily shake the entire structure. The stage is set for the confrontation with Christianity that I mentioned earlier. The grave implications, in both the sacred and secular domains, are not difficult to foresee.

Evangelization and ritual

The forced introduction of Christianity produced a crisis throughout Mesoamerican society, a crisis far more immediate and profound than the imposition of Spanish rule. The overthrow or subordination of local dynasties by foreign warrior bands hardly constituted a novelty. That type of conquest had been a familiar feature of regional politics for as far back as written history can be traced. That the Spanish played by a new set of rules would become apparent only gradually, when at all, in many spheres of life. To the majority of Mesoamericans the first and most radical change, challenging the very foundations of their cognitive world and their social arrangements, came as a result of what historians have called the "spiritual conquest," undertaken by the missionary orders on behalf of the Spanish

Crown. Yucatan was assigned to the Franciscan order. The friars arrived in the late 1540s, at the tail end of a 20-year military campaign, to begin their programme of militant evangelization.

From the beginning, the confrontation between Christianity and paganism centred on ritual. Beliefs are intangible things, relatively easy to conceal and therefore difficult, if not impossible, for others to control. Aside from such practical difficulties, the Spanish acknowledged, in theory at least, that forced conversions were theologically unsound. Therefore, Indians could not be compelled to accept baptism, only to receive Christian instruction. However, they could be forced to abandon their pagan rites. We do not know how many genuine converts evangelization produced—as distinct from youngsters raised in Christian doctrine since early childhood in the convent boarding schools. True conversions seem to have been very rare, if indeed they existed at all. For the rest, the proscription of pagan ritual without an equivalent change in belief created a terrible dilemma. To continue their rites risked severe punishment from the Spanish. Not to continue them courted worse, their own extinction and the disintegration of the entire cosmos. Not surprisingly, prohibition merely drove the Maya rituals underground, often literally into caves, while Christianity took over the public domain of the sacred.

Systematic evangelization began in the late 1540s. By the end of the next decade the initial work of conversion was virtually complete, at least among the elite, which is the group that will concern us here. Of the more than 500 rulers and nobles mentioned in the records during the early 1560s, all but a few had received Christian baptism. Yet in 1562, the accidental discovery of sacrificial remains in a cave south of the provincial capital of Merida led to the further discovery that many of these same rulers and nobles had been actively engaged in “sacrifices and other idolatries” for the past seven years or so. In other words, with scarcely a break—if any at all—during the period of conversion, they had continued to perform their pagan ceremonies. The ceremonies were performed in secret and without the same prequest panoply of music and dance, but the core of the sacrificial rituals remained intact.

The friars expressed shock and dismay. They had assumed that Satan, in the form of the Maya gods, had been cast out, and clearly they had been deceived. Many of the old idols had been carefully hidden away, and new images had been manufactured to replace the ones destroyed by missionary zeal. These images, in clay, wood, and, more rarely, stone, were—or at least represented—the recipients of the offerings the Maya made “in the same manner as in pagan times”. A variety of animals—native dogs, deer, wild pigs, turkeys, iguanas and even turtles—were sacrificed in the presence of the images. The meat was then cooked and

shared with the deities, along with maize cakes and other prepared food and beverages, usually *balche*, the Maya's ceremonial drink fermented from honey and the bark of a certain tree. Worse still, human victims were also sacrificed, principally by the removal of their hearts, which were offered to the deities and their blood smeared on the idols' "snouts". (There is no evidence that the human sacrificial victims were included in the sacred feast; unlike the Aztecs, the Maya do not seem to have practised ritual cannibalism.)

The friars were, of course, distressed by the evidence of apostasy the persistence of pagan ways so widespread and so close at hand, yet so unsuspected. But what particularly appalled them was the incorporation of Christian elements into the pagan ritual in an apparent mockery of what the Spanish held most sacred. The Maya conducted many of their sacrifices and feasts at night in the churches themselves or sometimes in the church yards in front of the crosses erected there. They sometimes used the sacred vessels of the mass. Most horrifying of all, they added crucifixion to their repertoire of sacrificial rites.

The second added source of dismay—that is, on top of the basic fact of apostasy—was the identity of the participants. They were not the untutored and politically insignificant commoners, but the elite, and by all appearances the elite *en masse*, from provincial rulers down to local gentry. The friars felt betrayed. These were the same leaders on whom the missionaries had concentrated their evangelizing efforts, relying on the existing lines of authority and influence in Maya society, in order to convert the entire population to Christianity. Instead of allies the friars had discovered secret opponents, and opponents who could not be absolved on the grounds of ignorance. While a Maya commoner was considered a successful candidate for baptism if he could merely assent to each article of the Creed, the literate and highly educated Maya elite had received intensive instruction in Christian doctrine and liturgy, along with reading and writing in European script.

The two aspects of the Yucatan idolatries that were a particular source of distress to the friars bear emphasis. These aspects—the incorporation of Christian elements into the pagan rites and the fact that the culprits were the influential, well catechized and apparently devoutly Christian elite—were also to recur as salient features in subsequent cases. They are closely related and I think provide the chief keys to understanding the Maya's response to Christianity. The friars interpreted the Maya's acts as a rejection of Christianity and in the most noxious form conceivable: that of mockery. In their view, the Maya had merely feigned outward compliance. All the while they expressed their profound and *knowledgeable* contempt for the new cult by profaning consecrated churches and

vessels and, most especially, by performing grotesque parodies of Christ's crucifixion.

The friars were misled by their own conflict model of religious confrontation and by the exclusivist theology of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. They never grasped, or never chose to grasp, the pantheistic principles of Mesoamerican religion, in which the sacred is capable of almost infinite permutations. I should like to offer an interpretation more in keeping with these principles, though it is an interpretation that would scarcely have brought the friars more solace. According to this interpretation the Maya "idolators" were not *rejecting* Christianity. On the contrary, their acts signify a form of acceptance, although an acceptance on their own terms. I suggest that even at that early date they were attempting to achieve a satisfactory synthesis of the two systems, based on certain similarities that the friars also failed to perceive or at least to acknowledge. Perhaps more accurately, they were attempting to incorporate or co-opt Christianity. And the attempt answered to very pragmatic reasons—pragmatic cosmologically and politically.

Within the Maya frame of reference, to reject Christianity, in the sense of ignoring it altogether, was probably as inconceivable as admitting its claims to exclusivity. The Spaniards and their God were clearly forces to be reckoned with, in the sacred as well as the secular domains. Within that same frame of reference, it would be risky, if not futile, to oppose divine power. One does not *oppose* divine power; one seeks to gain access to it and, as far as possible, control it.

Both the Maya and Christian religions shared as their chief means of gaining access to divine power the same central ritual of sacrifice. Leaving aside for the moment some fundamental differences between the two, Maya sacrifice and the Christian sacrifice of the mass show striking similarities in form and meaning. The Maya elite gave every sign of having perceived these similarities and based their ritual innovations on a far from superficial understanding of Christian symbolism. The friars' mistake was to interpret as mockery what was an effort to appropriate the power behind the new symbols.

Maya and Christian sacrifice

An exhaustive list of the external similarities between Maya and Christian ritual would fill pages. The fact that many of them are not unique to these two religious traditions would have made the similarities no less manifest to the Maya and no less significant a stimulus for fusion. Differences exist in some details, though even many of these also show striking parallels: in the type of priestly vestments, for example, the use of flowers and incense,

the content of prayers. In general outline, the Maya's sacred feast could serve as a template for a sixteenth century Catholic mass—or, for that matter, for a twentieth century mass, pre-Vatican II of course—from the preceding period of fasting through the actual sharing of the sacrificed offering.

The similarities extend beyond form to the basic function and meaning of the rituals. For both the Maya and the Catholic Christian the sacrifice is the chief link with the sacred, the chief means of channeling divine power into the everyday world. More than a commemoration, it is a reenactment of divine sacrifice, by which the divinity continually and voluntarily undergoes immolation for the benefit of mankind and the cosmic order. Whether in the form of bread and wine or maize cakes and *balche* or turkeys or deer, the offerings are transformed through consecration into the deity, becoming divine flesh and blood, a process labelled transubstantiation in the Catholic faith. It is at one and the same time an offering *to* the deity, *of* the deity, and *from* the deity, of which the faithful partake.

The parallels are particularly close between Christ's own sacrifice and human sacrifice among the Maya and other Mesoamericans. The Mesoamericans also emphasized the efficacy of an innocent, unblemished victim, who dies that others may live; hence the favoured choice of children and youths. Indeed, the victims become gods before they are sacrificed. As repellent as the form may be to Christians, the confluence of conception is undeniable, in that survival, or salvation, is bought through the most precious gift of life.

The parallels, however, have their limit. Aside from the difference in the identity of the single Christian victim—God incarnate from birth, rather than chosen to become a deity at some later stage—there are two main contrasts in the meaning invested in the two sacrificial rites. The Maya and other Mesoamerican cults lacked a transcendental dimension. They conceived of their offerings to the sacred beings as the means of maintaining the cosmos, of keeping the world going in a larger sense. But their emphasis was on the immediate material needs of health, rain, sustenance. The central Christian tenet of divine sacrifice for the spiritual redemption of mankind was absent. The object of Maya and Mesoamerican sacrifice in general was not salvation in the *other* world but the ritual management of *this* world.

The second major contrast in the meaning of sacrifice, and one that so far as I know has passed unnoticed in comparisons between the Judaeo-Christian tradition and other religions, derives from differences in the nature of the divinity and his relationship with humanity. Emile Durkheim has analysed the paradox underlying the concept of sacrifice as an offering: the apparent contradiction in the idea, most basic to rites of sacrifice, that

all-powerful "sacred beings give men all they need but at the same time they get their existence from man." No such contradiction exists in the Judaeo-Christian system. Jehovah only demands sacrifice; he does not *need* it. He is more truly omnipotent, with an existence totally independent of human acts. He may become angry and punish man if He does not receive His due, but He will not *perish* from man's neglect. Therefore, although some notion of a contract exists in the covenant, it is made between decidedly unequal parties. Even negotiations with those less exalted sacred beings, the saints, partake more of the flavour of cajoling and pleading than of mutual dependence, at least in orthodox Catholic doctrine. The saints no more *require* human attentions for their well-being than does God.

Not so the sacred beings in the Mesoamerican cosmos, who cannot keep the world and time going, or even survive themselves, without man's help. Hence the greater emphasis on food in the Mesoamerican sacrificial rite and also its dual role. Unlike the food of the Eucharist, first offered to God and then given by God in its transformed state, the Mesoamerican sacred feast is also shared *with* the divinity. For, as I have said, even sacred energy becomes depleted and must be renewed. The reciprocal bonds are thus more equal. The relationship is a mutually sustaining one, in which the divinity's various manifestations are given food so that they can continue to provide food for man and gods in a never-ending cycle of renewal.

These differences are fairly subtle, if fundamental, points of theology, and how the Maya dealt with them is unknown. The differences mean that the two systems cannot be thoroughly blended without distorting one or the other, or both. My point is not that the Christian and Maya religions are identical, only that, contrary to the official missionary viewpoint, they are far from antithetical. There is still much that fits together in both form and content, enough to allow the Maya elite to incorporate some of the most central Christian symbols into a thoroughly Maya framework while preserving much of their original meaning.

The Maya incurred a much greater risk of detection, and therefore punishment, in their attempts at synthesis than if they had maintained a clear separation between their pagan rites and the new cult. They performed some of the sacrifices at *cenotes* or natural wells, in caves, and at other sacred sites removed from the towns. But more commonly they chose the churches and church yards, where they had to smuggle in their collections of idols, their offerings, and all their ritual paraphernalia and where they could much less easily conceal the sacrifices and the feasts that followed. Idols were brought into the churches and lined up on benches before the altar to witness and receive the sacrifices. They were also

brought there on a regular basis—every *Sunday*, to be precise (presumably on Sundays when the circuit-riding friars were absent in another town)—to be incensed with copal. The choice of the Christian feast day could be no coincidence. Nor was it coincidence that the interlopers should sometimes use the Christian holy vessels, experiment with Spanish wine instead of *balche* for their ceremonial drink, and introduce the decidedly non-Maya (certainly unrecorded as Maya) gesture of genuflection while the priest offered up the sacrificed hearts to the idols, in imitation of the Christian mass.

The cross played an important role in these rituals. The Maya's own cross symbolism, dating from preconquest times, is extremely dense and multivalent and has yet to be fully decoded. What seems to tie together all the many known manifestations in the Maya code is the notion of the cross as the *axis mundi*, or central meeting point of heaven and earth. A similar interpretation has been given to the Christian cross, the pre-eminent link, through Christ and the crucifixion, between man and the sacred. One can only guess whether the Maya had in mind this common idea of link or access when using the Christian crosses in the churches and churchyards, crosses that were heavy-laden with their own symbolic message. What is certain is that the message about the cross as an instrument of divine sacrifice came across very clearly.

According to the idolatry trials conducted in the 1560s, a number of children and youths had been sacrificed *after* first being either tied or nailed to a cross. In one case the heart was removed while the victim was still upright on the cross. These innovations were clearly made within the Prehispanic mode: The hearts, once removed, were offered to the idols, and the sacrifices were followed by the traditional type of Maya sacred feast, which is much closer to a Bacchanal, with *balche* flowing freely for all, than to a decorous Christian communion, with its wafer and a sip of wine—and none of the latter for the Roman Catholic laity. However, in my view, the Maya were equally clearly doing something more than adding a new twist to their sacrificial rite for the mere sake of variety. They were seeking to recreate for themselves the Christian sacrifice, a rite so efficacious that it should be appropriated, and, by the same logic, repeated, in order to renew its efficacy. Again, it can be no accident that in one town the Maya chose Holy Week, the annual commemoration of Christ's Passion, to recreate their own version. Lest there should be any doubt about their intention, they "gave the name of Jesus Christ [to the boys] while they were on the cross." In another town an infant was sacrificed in a similar way, and the local officials actually reported that a baby had been born with the stigmata of the crucifixion and then died. When a credulous friar examined the corpse he found indeed that it bore

the appropriate wounds on hands, feet and thorax, even lacerations on the head, as if from a crown of thorns. Only later, during the general investigations, was the origin of the wounds discovered.

The Struggle for Sacred Power

The Maya have left explicit explanations for why they continued to practise their traditional rites in secret, ample evidence that theirs was a conscious, deliberate choice and not mere force of habit. Most basically and simply they were convinced that they would perish if they abandoned their gods, the ultimate source of all their sustenance. Their most specific and immediate concern was usually rain, so uncertain in Yucatan and sure to fail without the appropriate sacrifices. They also believed that the Spanish would eventually disappear and take the Christian God with them—all the more reason not to abandon their own gods.

The Maya had other and equally pragmatic reasons for an outward observance of the forcibly imposed Christian cult of the conquerors. Simple failure to answer the roll call at weekly mass was punished by the whip. "Idolatries" were subject to much heavier floggings, sometimes exile. Although the death penalty was rare, a number of the accused died during interrogation, others were crippled, and still others committed suicide to avoid further torture. But why should they *mix* the old and new rites, using the Christian altars and vessels and crosses, at considerable added risk of discovery?

The reasons for religious innovation, like any form of cultural change, are most likely to be manifold. In the ideational sphere, the most plausible explanation for the Maya's actions is that they accepted at least part of the Christian message and sought to create a coherent blend of the two strands. The list of symbolic correspondences and substitutions that could, and should, be explored is a long one: Christ as Quetzalcoatl (Kukulcan) who, symbolized in the planet Venus, undergoes death and rebirth; the Virgin Mary as Ixchel, the female deity associated with the moon and with childbirth—to name only two possibilities. But I should like to explore another sphere or dimension, one that has received less emphasis; and that is politics. It is offered not as an alternative but as an additional element in the interpretive toolkit.

In this latter dimension, the dimension of power, the identity of those engaged in the experimentation with new ways is crucial to an understanding of Maya responses. All the recorded examples of ritual experimentation are the work of the Maya elite, the rulers and nobles who continued to direct the civil and religious life of their communities after the Spanish

conquest. The commoners, uninitiated into the esoteric lore of Maya cosmology and ritual, and with only rudimentary instruction in the new Christian cult, lacked the knowledge and perhaps the intellectual restlessness that fuelled the elite's innovations. They also lacked the same practical incentive.

At stake for the elite was their political power, which, as I have explained earlier, depended in large part on their role as divine mediators. Hence the profound political as well as ideational crisis produced by the forced introduction of Christianity. The Spanish, too few in number to rule by themselves, left the native political structure largely intact at the local level. Spared from direct Spanish assault, this structure could, however, crumble from within if its basis of legitimacy were destroyed. If the Maya elite were to preserve their position of dominance over their fellows they had to retain or recapture control of the sacred, a domain that had been expanded to include a new set of symbols and rituals.

It has been argued that the loss of power is the most fundamental change that the native peoples of America have experienced, the change from which all others have flowed. Ritual, or sacred, power should be included in the package, for its own sake and also for its close connection with political power. The Spanish themselves did not fail to make the connection within their own frame of reference. Throughout the Spanish empire Indians with few exceptions were excluded from the Catholic priesthood, despite an early flirtation with the idea of assimilation, which included advanced seminary training for some of the Indian elite. Opposition to the ordination of Indians was invariably cast in terms of their spiritual unreadiness. Rarely voiced but omnipresent was the Spaniards' own permanent unreadiness to share with the Indians the political and economic fruits of ritual power.

Ritual power—access to the sacred domain—lay at the heart of the conflict between Maya elite and the Spanish clergy. That the struggle was as much over *who* would control that access as over *how* that access would be gained—that is, whether through Christian or Maya ritual—can be seen even more clearly in later idolatry cases, as Christian ritual became an increasingly stronger component in the syncretic mix. One example is that of two Maya noblemen who were found in 1610 to have been conducting their own masses in the local church, masses that were totally Christian in form except for the addition of some idols. No human or even animal sacrifices, no *balche*, no dancing, simply a few idols. The Spanish clergy barely noted this one pagan intrusion in their indignation over the “audacious” usurpation of their own priestly role. Their reactions to later examples of clandestine masses, in which no pagan elements were present at all, were identical. And this reaction helps to strip away the issue of paganism from the underlying issue of ritual power.

Struggles over religious orthodoxy in Europe, such as those between “magic” and religion or between Cathars and Catholics, reveal a similar underlying criterion in the drawing of boundaries. Also clothed in terms of dogma and practice, the definition of orthodoxy and heterodoxy more often reduces to a question of *personnel*: of *who* rather than of *what*. If performed by the established clergy it is orthodox, religion; if by the “cunning man” or other unauthorized person, it is “magic”, or superstition, or heresy.

In Yucatan and other parts of Spanish America the power struggle was not solely or even mainly one between Christian priests and native elites. It extended to—more precisely, it originated within—native society. The Indians’ attempts to appropriate Christian symbols were not directed against the Catholic clergy. The Maya leaders harboured no illusions that they could successfully challenge Spanish supremacy in either the political or the ritual domain. What they sought was to maintain their *own* supremacy within the now subordinate Maya system. The Spanish officially supported this position of “subordinate leadership”. But at the same time they undermined it, no doubt unwittingly, by denying the native leaders the ritual role on which their legitimacy rested.

Early attempts to gain a public share in the Christian cult were severely rebuffed. Royal ordinances dating from 1552 and heavily influenced by the Franciscan missionaries, contained strong warnings to any Maya lords who continued to establish unauthorized churches and hermitages and who took it upon themselves to preach and baptize. I suspect that an attempt to gain not only a share in Christian power but also some recognition of that share from the Catholic clergy, lay behind the curious episode, mentioned earlier, of the infant crucifixion. The Spanish would never have learned of the incident if the Maya leaders had not reported the “miraculous” birth of a baby bearing the Christian stigmata. Why would the Maya notify the nearby resident friar and then exhume the body as proof of the “miracle”, unless they were seeking some validation of this syncretic sacrifice?

Needless to say, this and all other attempts to win public recognition were in vain. The effort to appropriate Christian power had to be carried out in secret. But precisely because the efforts were clandestine they provided a far from satisfactory solution to the political crisis. However spiritually satisfying the furtive rites might be to the participants, they could not serve to validate the elite’s position in society. Even if performed on behalf of the collectivity, the collectivity could no longer witness them. In remote parts of the Yucatan peninsula, public idolatries, in which the entire community participated, have been recorded up through the mid-seventeenth century. Still, the risk of detection existed even there;

otherwise we would have no record. In the more heavily settled regions the greater need for security demanded that commoners be excluded entirely. And sacred power cannot be translated into political power if it is kept totally secret.

The Maya political system was in danger of collapse not so much from without as from within. As long as their ritual role was a clandestine one, the Maya leaders could not be secure in their positions. Political power was up for grabs, since everyone had the same opportunity to lay claim to Christian power and make his own synthesis. Not everyone—for the commoners lacked the necessary knowledge, the enterprise and the prestige. The challenge came from within the ranks of the elite, from members of the nobility, who could detour around the established structure and the established procedures for laying claim to political power.

Ritual experimentation was not always carried out by the established leaders. We have evidence in addition of rival mediators, who also drew heavily from Christian symbols in establishing their claims to sacred power. One of these “dogmatizers”, as the Spanish called them, used a Maya rendition of the loaves and fishes, the power to multiply food—but at a ratio of only 400 cacao beans to one. We know that these and other miraculous powers familiar from Biblical stories could attract followers and that the leaders of what we might call “sects” created as much unease among the Maya rulers as among the Spanish. The evidence we have of course concerns only the failures, the ones who were caught. I suspect that the successes lay behind some of the political changes evident during the first postconquest decades when, although the native power structure remained intact, considerable changes in personnel took place.

Religious innovation was certainly far from new to Yucatan, and the prophetic leaders, known as Chilam Balam in preconquest history, may well represent the type of rival claimants to sacred power who appear in the colonial records. Nor were the Maya unfamiliar with political turmoil and factionalism. Their own literature is replete with references to “upstarts” and “newcomers”: that is, people either from within or without the socio-political unit who, while lacking proper genealogical credentials, nevertheless challenged the incumbent rulers. What was new, I think, was the means of challenge. For one thing, the *Pax Hispanica* denied political rivals recourse to arms. Claims to sacred power may well have been a weapon in Prehispanic political rivalries. (There is increasing evidence of the political role of alternative, “non-establishment” sacred power, at least in the highlands—the “Man of Gods” or “Hombres Dioses”.) But the necessarily clandestine context in which such rivalries were carried out after conquest gave all the experimentation an unprecedented degree of fluidity and fragmentation. It also gave disgruntled or ambitious upstarts

unprecedented opportunities to create rival bases of political power. The fact that all recorded challengers came from within the ranks of the elite would not lessen the turmoil. Nor would their own success provide any assurance that future challengers would not arise with their own new clandestine syntheses. If the Maya elite were to avoid a free-for-all, they would have to reestablish a *public* ritual role. They would somehow have to find a synthesis that was acceptable to the Spanish and at the same time preserved their own conception of divine mediation.

Cult of the Saints

The Maya did ultimately achieve such a synthesis, acceptable to themselves and to the Spanish. It took the form of the cult of the saints and the community fiestas in their honour which became the centrepiece of colonial Maya religious life. It remains so today and indeed is ubiquitous throughout Spanish America. Ostensibly a European transplant, the cult of the saints acquired its own Maya, or Mesoamerican—and probably Amerindian—twist that left both parties equally victorious in the struggle for control of sacred power. Each could view the other as auxiliaries in the crucial business of communicating with the divinity. The Catholic priests were in full charge of the mass, which the Maya regarded as important but decidedly secondary within the total fiesta scheme. The Maya elite were in full control of the other elements, most especially the offerings of candles, incense and food to the saints and the fiesta banquet that invariably followed the Catholic mass.

The cult of the saints represents accommodation to colonial realities at its most creative, a successful resolution, after much experimentation, of the crisis that Christian evangelization produced in both religion and politics. Through the fiesta system the Maya continued to purchase their own survival by nourishing the sacred beings who control the cosmos. The Maya elite, through their control of the cult and the fiestas dedicated to the saints, continued to provide the sacred feasts for divinity and community. In thus preserving their mediatory role—their sacred power—they preserved the ideological basis of their secular power.

General Bibliography

Abercrombie, T. A.

1986 *The Politics of Sacrifice: An Aymara Cosmology in Action*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, Chicago.

Archivo General de la Nación

1912 *Procesos de indios idólatras y hechiceros*. Publicaciones del Archivo General de la Nación No. 3. Tipografía Guerrero Hermanos, México.

Armas Medina, F. de

1953 *La cristianización del Perú*. Escuela de Estudios Hispanoamericanos, Seville.

Beidelman, T. O.

1974 *W. Robertson Smith and the Sociological Study of Religion*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Benavente, Fray Toribio de [Motolinía]

1941 *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España*. Reprinted. Editorial Salvador Chávez Hayhoe, México. Originally published 1858 in *Colección de documentos para la historia de México*, edited by J. García Icazbalceta. vol. 2. J. M. Andrade, México.

Bernand, C., and S. Gruzinski

1988 *De l'idolâtrie: Une archéologie des sciences religieuses*. Éditions du Seuil, Paris.

Boone, E. (editor)

1984 *Ritual Human Sacrifice in Mesoamerica*. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC.

Borges, P.

1960 *Métodos misionales en la cristianización de América*. Departamento de Misionología Española, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Madrid.

Bourdillon, M. F. C., and M. Fortes (editors)

1980 *Sacrifice*. Academic Press, New York.

Burkhart, L. M.

1989 *The Slippery Earth: Nahuatl-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*. University of Arizona Press, Tucson.

Clendinnen, I.

1982 Disciplining the Indians: Franciscan Ideology and Missionary Violence in Sixteenth-Century Yucatán. *Past and Present* 94: 27-49.

1987 *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Durkheim, É.

1965 *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Translated by J. W. Swain. The Free Press, New York. Originally published 1915, G. Allen and Unwin, London.

Farriss, N. M.

1984 *Maya Society under Colonial Rule: The Collective Purchase of Survival*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Feria, P. de

1899 Relación que hace el obispo de Chiapa sobre la reincidencia en sus idolatrías de los indios de aquel país después de treinta años de cristianos. *Anales del Museo Nacional de México* 6:477-487. Imprenta del Museo Nacional de México, México. Originally written 1585.

Gosner, K.

1992 Caciques and Conversion: Juan Atonal and the Struggle for Legitimacy in Post-Conquest Chiapas. *The Americas* 49: 115-129.

Gruzinski, S.

1985 *Les hommes-dieux du Mexique: Pouvoir indien et société coloniale, XVIe-XVIIIe siècles*. Editions des Archives Contemporaines, Paris.

Hubert, H., and M. Mauss

1964 *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*. Translated by W. D. Halls. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. Originally published 1898 as *Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice*. *L'Année Sociologique*, Paris.

Klor de Alva, J. J.

1982 Spiritual Conflict and Accommodation in New Spain: Toward a Typology of Aztec Response to Christianity. In *The Aztec and the Inca States, 1400-1800*, edited by G. A. Collier, R. I. Rosaldo, and J. D. Wirth. pp. 345-366. Academic Press, New York.

1991 Colonizing Souls: The Failure of the Indian Inquisition and the Rise of Penitential Discipline. In *Cultural Encounters: The Impact of the Inquisition in Spain and the New World*, edited by M. E. Perry and A. J. Cruz. pp. 3-22. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Kott, J.

1973 *The Eating of the Gods: An Interpretation of Greek Tragedy*. Translated by B. Taborski and E. J. Czerwinski. Random House, New York.

Kubler, G.

1961 On the Colonial Extinction of the Motifs of Pre-Columbian Art. In *Essays in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology*, edited by S. K. Lothrop et al. pp. 14-34. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge.

León-Portilla, M.

1974 Testimonios nahuas sobre la conquista espiritual. *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 11:11-35.

1985 *Los franciscanos vistos por el hombre náhuatl: Testimonios indígenas del siglo 16*. Centro de Cultura Náhuatl, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, México.

1990 The Spiritual Conquest: Perspectives of the Friars and the Indians. In *Endangered Cultures*, by M. León-Portilla. Translated by J. Goodson-Lawes. pp. 55-83. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, Dallas. Originally published 1976 as *Culturas en peligro*, Alianza Editorial Mexicana, México.

López Austin, A.

1973 *Hombre-Dios: Religión y política en el mundo náhuatl*. Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, Universidad Autónoma de México, México.

MacCormack, S.

1991 *Religion in the Andes: Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Peru*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Megged, A.

1991 Accommodation and Resistance of Elites in Transition: The Case of Chiapa in Early Colonial Mesoamerica. *Hispanic American Historical Review* 71:477-500.

Paso y Troncoso, F. del (editor)

1952 *Tratado de las idolatrías, supersticiones, ritos, hechicerías y otras costumbres gentílicas de las razas aborígenes de México*. 2 vols. Ediciones Fuente Cultural,

- México. Originally published 1892 as *Anales del Museo Nacional de México* vol. 6. Imprenta del Museo Nacional de México, México.
- Ricard, R.
1933 *La conquête spirituelle du Mexique: Essai sur l'apostolate et les méthodes evangelistes des ordres mendiants en Nouvelle Espagne, 1528–1572. Travaux et Mémoires de l'Institut d'Ethnologie* vol. 20. University of Paris, Paris.
- Roys, R. L. (editor)
1967 *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*. 2nd ed. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman. Originally published 1933, Carnegie Institute of Washington Publication No. 438, Carnegie Institution of Washington, Washington, DC.
- Salomon, F.
1983 Shamanism and Politics in Late Colonial Ecuador. *American Ethnologist* 10:413–428.
1987 Ancestor Worship and Resistance to the State in a Colonial Quechua Society. In *Resistance, Rebellion, and Consciousness in the Andean Peasant World, 18th to 20th Centuries*, edited by S. J. Stern. pp. 148–165. University of Wisconsin Press, Madison.
- Sánchez de Aguilar, P.
1937 *Informe contra idolorum cultores del obispado de Yucatan dirigido al Rey N. Señor en su Real Consejo de las Indias*. 3rd ed. Imprenta Triay e Hijos, Mérida, Yucatán. Originally published 1639, Viuda de Juan González, Madrid.
- Schele, L., and M. E. Miller
1986 *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art*. Kimball Art Museum, Fort Worth.
- Scholes, F. V., and E. B. Adams (editors)
1938 *Don Diego Quijada, Alcalde Mayor de Yucatán, 1561–1565*. 2 vols. Editorial Porrúa, México.
- Steck, F. B., and R. H. Barlow
1944 *El primer colegio de América: Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco*. Centro de Estudios Franciscanos, México.
- Taube, K. A.
1988 A Study of Classic Maya Scaffold Sacrifice. In *Maya Iconography*, edited by E. P. Benson and G. G. Griffin, pp. 331–351. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Thomas, K.
1971 *Religion and the decline of Magic*. Charles Scribner's, New York.
- Tozzer, A. M.
1957 *Chichén Itzá and its Cenote of Sacrifice: A Comparative Study of Contemporaneous Maya and Toltec*. Memoirs of the Peabody Museum No. 11 & 12. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge.