

**Maya in the Mountains:  
Ecology and Cosmology in the Rocks and Caves of Highland Guatemala**

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*“To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.” Simone Weil*

*This paper explores the ancient and modern Maya use and understanding of mountains for sustenance and ceremony, in quotidian life and cosmological conception. It reviews established research about the ancient Mayan concept and image of Flower Mountain and offers conclusions about the continued modern importance and centrality of mountains from personal field research (through participant observation) about the place and space of the volcanic mountain surrounding the Kaq'chikel-speaking village of Santa Catarina Polopó in the department of Sololá in Highland Guatemala.*

About sixty years ago, cultural geographer Felix McBryde noted that there is probably "no region in the New World that surpasses western Guatemala for illustrating the relationship between culture and nature" (as quoted in Carlsen 1997). The concept of "nature" is a perilous one in any place, but it seems to gain particular complexity in the language and understanding of people whose livelihoods remain quite connected to what English speakers understand as "nature." So it is in the culturally and biologically diverse Maya world. As Karl Taube notes, "In Maya thought, the relation of people to the environment is more complex than simply a contrast between a positive world of humans and a negative world of nature" (Taube 2004). Indeed, an indigenous man in the Highland town of Santa Catarina Polopó told me that "naturaleza" in the modern Maya language of Kaq'chikel, is "*richin wachulep--el mundo entero, una obra de Dios, todo lo maravilloso y todo lo peligroso*" -- the entire world, the work of God, everything marvellous and everything dangerous.

In the highlands of Guatemala, where the majority of the country's 40% indigenous population resides (CIA World Factbook), nature means mountains. "Everything marvellous and everything dangerous" is found in the rugged landscape which one conquistador famously described as the form of a crumpled piece of paper. As Linda Brown writes in her ethnoarcheological exploration of several modern sacred sites, "Some of the most potent places in contemporary Maya highlands are

mountaintops and moutaintop shrines" (2004). Many argue that it is the mountainous landscape that in some sense saved Maya culture from complete annihilation by conquering Spaniards--they simply could not access or control every town and hamlet tucked up and away in the highland mountains where Maya already lived or fled during the Conquest (Carlsen 1997). *Muy antes*, the ancient Maya built mountain-like temple pyramids and depended on the diversity of food and goods made available through the proximity of the mountainous highlands and the tropical lowlands. Finally, much of ancient Maya art and architecture expresses cosmology through the concept and images of a "Flower Mountain."

In this way, mountains have had central importance to Mayan communities throughout history, as places of sustenance and spaces for ceremony. In this paper, I will first discuss the significance of mountains, and particularly the concept of "Flower Mountain," in the cosmology of the ancient Maya. I will then trace the continued significance of mountains in the ecology, and culture of modern Mayan communities. I will finally elaborate upon the use and conceptions of the space and place of the mountains surrounding one modern Maya community, Santa Catarina Polopó, a Kaq'chikel-speaking community on the shores of Lake Atitlán in the department of Sololá in Highland Guatemala. I will focus on the place of the mountain in sustaining the population in this town, faced with the same population pressure encountered throughout the highlands of Guatemala (Hoy and Belisle 1984), and the sacred space that it provides for Maya ceremonies as practiced by Mayan priests, known as *aqj`ij*.

### **Methodology: Space, Place, and Avoiding Essentialization**

As a prelude to what will basically boil down to the issues of an indigenous community and the environment, I feel it is essential to clarify that which is important and deeply interesting but *not* essential: the relationship between indigenous people and

the environment. As Liisa Malkki so rightly asks, "Why should the rights of "Indigenous People" be seen as an "environmental" issue? Are people "rooted" in their native soil somehow more natural, their rights somehow more sacred, than those of other exploited and oppressed people?" (Malkki 1992) These are fundamental, and certainly not simple, questions surrounding the sort of research that I am about to lay forth, and about which I choose to be forthright: I believe, in the way Malkki expresses above, that the indigenous community of Santa Catarina Polopó is indeed more "rooted" in their "native soil" than, for example, an average *estadounidense* or even any member of the urban Ladino population of Guatemala. I think this is confirmed by the myriad ways the communities use (and have used through a long history) the space and place of the mountain that surrounds their village, as I will detail below. Additionally, there are undeniably deep connections between indigenous communities and so-called "environmental issues," as the overwhelming majority of the world's last remaining natural resources are found on indigenous lands.<sup>1</sup>

However as rooted as indigenous people may truly be, I nevertheless reject the problematic scourge in anthropology research that, as Malkii reviews, "has tended to tie people to places through ascriptions of native status" and, in a way, incarcerate or confine them to those places, as if they are biologically determined, "ideally adapted to their environments...mutely and deftly unfolding the hidden innards of their particular ecosystems, PBS-style" (Malkki 1992). For example, one of the few extant articles about environmental/indigenous issues in Guatemala states that the "traditional Indians...concentrated in the Western Highlands" have "a heritage of land stewardship that is deeply imbedded in their culture and religion" and "a long-term commitment to conserve their resources" (Hoy and Deslisle 1984). The article does proceed to detail real environmental issues in the Highlands. The problem is that the rhetoric of

conservation as a long-term, culturally-committed heritage in indigenous Highland Guatemala does just what Malkki rightly criticizes--it confines or incarcerates indigenous Guatemalans to the Highlands that they supposedly have always been deeply committed to conserving. It denies the indigenous communities any agency in their own history of resource use and environmental management (or mismanagement). Such generalizad rhetoric also ignores the early conquering and modern capitalist economic processes that have exploited the labor and resources of such communities for centuries.<sup>2</sup>

So this is the conundrum: indeed, indigenous people *are* often uniquely rooted to the environment. In ecological terms, they are more a part of the processes that compose their ecosystem. However, the critical point is that indigenous people are *people*, with agency and mobility, their struggles and exploitation are just not like those of plants, animals, or other environmental resources.<sup>3</sup> With all of this in mind, I therefore tread lightly through the realm of this research, cautious of avoiding any essentialization of the relationship between ancient and modern Mayan communities and their mountainous environment, but confident that this topic is of central importance to their cosmology and culture.

Methodologically, my concern about the issues above translated into the desire to therefore discover and portray, as much as possible, the use and understanding of the mountain in Maya minds, through Maya words. In three short weeks of field research in Santa Catarina Polopó, I engaged in informal interviews through participant observation in Maya ceremonial spaces (caves and altars) and subsistence places (homes and *milpas*). I worked to learn the native categories, in Kaq`chikel, through which people describe their use and understanding of "nature" and the spaces and places of the mountain that surrounds them.

My differentiation of "spaces" and "places" comes from the use of practice theory by several authors in their research into Mayan sacred geography. Linda Brown notes, "in practice theory, ritual is defined as a specific form of action by which people strategically distinguish certain practice in relation to more quotidian activities" (2004). In my research, sacred spaces on the mountain surrounding Santa Catarina Polopó are distinguished from the quotidian use of the mountain by the rituals of prayer and ceremony in the particular places of boulders and caves. As Jean Molesky-Poz elaborates in her study of modern Maya spiritual practice, citing the work of Michel de Certeau, "space is a practiced place...space is determined through actions, the daily practices, of historical subjects in a specific place and through the narrations, the stories, which articulate the experience... 'stories thus carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places'." Thus, "sacred places are not only "storied places,"...but are designated as sacred through an embodied, interactive engagement with place" (2006). Those stories about and engagement with the different spaces and places of the mountain in Santa Catarina Polopó are what I sought in my field research, and what I hope to shed light upon in this paper.

### ***Ancient Axis Mundi***

In his study of Mayan religious syncretism, John Watanabe argues that rather than giving primacy to some sort of "underlying 'deep structure'" of Maya culture, the culture that modern Maya have (or have not) inherited from their ancient ancestors should be seen as a "structure" that "circumscribes possibilities but constitutes a constantly emerging process rather than its own primordial essence" (Watanabe 1990). Just as modern Maya communities should not be incarcerated to their environmental inheritance, so too should their culture not be seen as "primordial," stagnant, or unchanging throughout their history. "What endure for the Maya," concludes Watanabe,

"are the immediacies of a struggle for meaningful social existence--that is, for a community--rendered in local languages of received but continually reinterpreted conventional forms" (Watanabe 1990). Watanabe suggests that "eternal land and ancient church, saint's image and ancestor's grave, all must serve as indispensable conventions of Maya community."

And where is that land and church and grave? Where has that saint's image been seen? Where has the continual but changing struggle for "meaningful social existence" been realized? On the mountain. In his perhaps controversial application of a phylogenetic model to the Maya, Evon Vogt acknowledged the ceremonial use and cosmological value of mountains and pyramids as one of the potential continuities among ancient and modern Maya. Archeological evidence shows that for the ancient Maya, "every patio-group has its shrine; every localized lineage its sacred cave, waterhole or small mountain; every ceremonial center its churches, waterhole, or larger sacred mountains" (Vogt 1994). Modern ethnographic research reveals continued use of caves and mountains as sacred and sustaining places for Maya communities (Vogt 1994, Brown 2004, Molesky-Poz 2006).

"It has become increasingly clear that [the ancient Maya] were profoundly aware of their surrounding world," notes Karl Taube in the introduction to his extensive study of the central concept of "Flower Mountain" among the Classic Maya. Flower Mountain is an ancient holistic concept of creation, culture, and cosmology that can be found in various expressions throughout Mesoamerica and the American Southwest. It "appears widely in ancient Maya art," (Taube 2004) and is represented in much of the architecture. As opposed to the bloody offerings and dark underworld that have filled recent studies of ancient Maya ritual and belief, Flower Mountain represents "a cult of

life...a cult of beauty" which was also a part of Maya spirituality, an expression of their profound awareness of the surrounding world (Taube 2004).

In ancient Mayan art, Flower Mountain is the "axis mundi," the dwelling place of the gods that rises out of the watery underworld and connects it to the sky. It serves as the connection between the gods and earth, and communication happens through caves, the flowery mouths of the mountain, the mouths of the gods (Taube 2004, Molesky-Poz 2006). Ancient Mayan architecture was used "to create sacred environments for the unfolding of ritual performance and to freeze the ephemeral actions of rituals into narrative sequences that locked history into the center of sacred space" (Schele and Mathews 1999). The actual centers around or with which these sacred spaces were created were the physical places of temple pyramids, which were known as mountains, or *witz* in the ancient Maya glyphs. "The ancient Maya conceived of mountains as living beings" and thus represented them with zoomorphic forms. Caves were represented by wrapping a zoomorphic *witz* monster around the door of a temple, such that this opening into the temple pyramid was in fact the mouth of the mountain (Schele and Mathews 1999). Thus Flower Mountain, represented through ancient Maya art and architecture, was "the pivotal world axis...the home of gods and honored ancestors" (Taube 2004).

The connection of this axis mundi Flower Mountain to a watery underworld, and a "means by which rain-making moisture entered the sky," (Taube 2004) is worth a particular note. Throughout Mesoamerica and the Southwest United States, water has been portrayed and understood as a terrestrial phenomenon as water ascends from the underworld to the sky.

## Modern Mystical Geography

In terms of the centrality or importance of mountains to modern Maya communities, the fact that the majority of modern Maya communities in Guatemala are located in the mountainous highlands is certainly not insignificant. Molesky-Poz notes, "mountains, caves and water--local *mystical geography*--were and are important foci for settlement, social organization, and ceremonies, they influenced the placement and construction of temples, dwellings and tombs" (2006). As a "biodiversity hotspot," ([www.biodiversityhotspots.org](http://www.biodiversityhotspots.org)) facing dramatic population pressure (Hoy and Belisle 1984), the questions of how basic life necessities will be met along the crowded mountainsides, let alone how sacred sites may be preserved, become increasingly relevant. Indeed, "increasing population pressure is probably the single most important factor leading to ever-increasing environmental degradation in Guatemala, especially in the Western Highlands" (Hoy and Belisle 1984). That degradation is primarily deforestation, which then affects water resources that are left unsheltered by tree cover and more susceptible to erosion and draught.

It is within these fragile environmental places that culturally and spiritually significant places continue to be visited and continually created by indigenous people throughout the Highlands. Connecting through the continued use of mountain/cave sacred sites, Mayan *ajq'ijab* ceremonial practice and expression certainly remain the most vital continuity between ancient Mayan mountain-centrality and modern Maya life. As Molesky-Poz elaborates, "Geological formations are linked to this aesthetic envisioning of a people's relationship to the earth. Specific topographical features have accumulated value and meaning through human narrative, memory, and history as sites for ritual practice" (2006).

In the volcanic basin of Lake Atitlán, the specific topographical diversity is particularly rich. Seventy-one sacred sites, or sanctuaries, have recently been documented there (Molesky-Poz 2006). My research in the area addressed (and visited) only a few of these essential sites, these "portals to the sacred" (Molesky-Poz 2006). I turn now to these experiences in the small, Kaq`chikel-speaking village of Santa Catarina Polopó and the spaces and places of the truly stunning mountain that surrounds it.

### **The Place of *Amates*: The Mountains of Santa Catarina Polopó**

Cultural geographer Felix McBryde noted that the Lake Atitlán basin displays the highest degree of micro-geographic diversity anywhere in Guatemala, if not the world, noting, "many of the villages may be separated from their neighbors by two miles or less, and yet being isolated by physical barriers such as precipitous headlands, cliff shores, and a dangerous lake surface, they may have distinct economies, dress, and even vocabularies" (as quoted in Carlsen 1997). Indeed, once cannot even see the village of Santa Catarina until practically within in, as you crest the northern ridge of the surrounding mountain, likely in the back of a pick-up truck overloaded with villagers returning from the market in the larger neighboring town of Panajachel, less than 3 kilometers away. A town of around 3,000 people within the parenthesis of a mostly rocky, steep mountain and a normally blue, but increasingly polluted, volcanic lake, the town provided a fascinating landscape for research. I will first describe the physical space and myth-history<sup>4</sup> of the mountain and its sites within and around the community of Santa Catarina as I saw it and as it was described to be by villagers through many informal interviews. I will then articulate the ways in which certain places on the mountain have become sacred spaces through the belief and practice of *aqj`ijab`* and villagers of Santa Catarina.

The *Polopó* of Santa Catarina indicates an environmental history much more than the reality--in Kaq'chikel, the word is *amate* (*pó*) tree (*polo*), as the village used to be a place of many *amates*, the large, imposing trees with deep green leaves, shiny with that particular tropical polish. When asked to describe the village as they remembered it from their youth, those villagers of middle-age or older often reminisced about the village's tree cover. "What was the village like when you were young, during your childhood?" I asked. My host father/key informant Pedro immediately answered, "It was green! There were so many more trees!" and many other villagers remembered it the same way, saying that trees are a "fountain of life" and that they "give life and give water." In fact, Pedro described that without electricity (it did not arrive until the mid-1970's) and with large *amates* that would grow like "great mushrooms," branching down to the ground, the village was a lot darker, and people could see ghosts. Pedro recounted stories of the people who would "do three somersaults and become ghosts in their dreams" wandering around in the dark, surprising or waking up their neighbors. One other person told me they remembered seeing ghosts, and many remarked that while they had never seen them, they knew of family or friends who had. Without such darkness, however, there are no ghosts to be seen. That does not necessarily mean they no longer exist, as my family was pretty sure that their guard dog had been carried off by some. There are just too many lights, which in this case actually obscure the things in question from view.

Many lights...many people. Aside from the present lack of tree cover, villagers also lament *jtanta gente!* in the village now as opposed to the past. There are so many people crowding up the mountain, crowding out the trees. Wandering the tiny winding streets that traverse across, but mostly straight up, the surrounding mountain, one is faced quite directly with the places that have been constructed out of the natural rocky space

of the mountain. Huge boulders divert the path of one bit of construction and forms walls in another. Stairs are carved out of the boulder crevices for footpaths or flower planters or chicken shacks. As a physical obstruction into people's walk to the mill or the *tienda* or the lake, the mountain certainly has an obvious place in their lives.

The rugged rockiness of the mountain around the village is indeed a critical reality. The trees that villagers miss were found only down in *el centro*, closer to the water of the lake and the sediment-rich soil. Much of the surrounding mountain is sheer rock--"no se puede cultivar" Pedro would continually remind me, pointing up and around to all the scrubby, rocky, barely green land (rock) surrounding the village. What does this mean for the village? With all of the lakeside land filled by vacation *chalets* and the foothills packed with wall-to-wall houses (in many cases, what would more likely be called shacks), the closest cultivatable land is at least a one-hour hike away, straight up the mountain. Even from the lake, with a full view of the surrounding landscape, one cannot even see the private and community-owned *milpas* high above and around the crest of the mountain, where many villagers still grow the essential corn, beans, squash, avocados, coffee, and chili peppers for their own consumption, and maybe some fruit for sale.

But what, or who, is the mountain for the people of Santa Catarina?

### ***Katé Kechelach***

*"Según me han dicho los abuelos, the lake and volcanoes formed when Santa Catarina came and had a little accident...she was weaving, or maybe she had gone to fetch water...but either way, she spilled her tecomate gourd of water! She tried to clean it up but it just kept growing larger, and in an effort to cover up the puddle with dirt, Santa Catarina formed the surrounding mountains. As a woman, Santa Catarina stayed*

*down here by the lake because she needed the water for her washing. San Andrés, as a man and a farmer, stayed up on the mountain where he could plant and cultivate."*

Such is the myth-history that was recounted to me by various individuals of all ages in Santa Catarina. Others, when I asked, knew of no histories of their lake, *kachoj* in Kaq'chikel, ("*nuestro lago*") or the mountain, *kechelach*. But when I asked about *naturaleza* (nature) or *ambiente* (environment) and what it meant or how it was talked about or what it included, many people had something to say. I had heard people use the Spanish word *ambiente* in Kaq'chikel conversation about new efforts to clean up the lake, and so assumed that there was perhaps no word in Kaq'chikel, and that the concept of "environment" was just captured by the globalized language of Spanish. When I asked about it however, my host father/key informant Pedro exclaimed, with my host grandmother Maria nodding in agreement, "Yes, we do speak of *ambiente* in Kaq'chikel. It is *chaj choj reij*. It means environment and cleanliness and health, because *si no hay limpieza, no hay salud*."

From most people whom I asked, a question about *naturaleza* or *ambiente* brought up *katé ulep* or *richin wachulep*, Mother Earth or Mother Nature. "Yes," people would reiterate, "in Kaq'chikel we speak of the earth or nature as our mother." Why? "Because she *gives* us everything. It is from her that we receive the harvest. She nourishes us." One man told me that *katé ulep* was one and the same as *katé kechelach* in Santa Catarina--Mother Earth is Mother Mountain, because that's where the harvest and water and nourishment comes from. And who is the father? *Dios* for some, *Ajaw* for others, the sun for one man's grandmother. It is "He who is in heaven, he who gives us rain." For *aqj`ij*, it is He who speaks to them through caves and rocks, as described below.

## **Rooted: Sustenance and Sacrifice**

Villagers currently use the mountain for two things: sustenance and sacrifice. Their "intimate linkages," or "rootedness" (Malkki 1992) to the place are through their hoes in the *milpa* or *hortaliza* and their hearts and prayers to stones or in the cave. On several treks up and down the mountain I learned that every little fold of its topography has a name-- *Chue pó* (above the *amate*), *Che arca* (place of the arched rock), *Che oj* (place of the avocado tree), *Sanhuyu* (the central peak, from which you can see the whole town), *Che pun* (the craig, "where the sun lives," as it lands there first in the morning and leaves there last at night"), *Chue kixa che* (place of the twisted spiny tree), etc. Trees do still exist where the natural springs that supply the village's water are located. Many children told me of their reforestation projects around the springs, where they plant pine trees "to protect the water from drying up."

Though a map of the town's streets is available in the *Municipio*, everyone told me that there is no map for the boundaries of the village, or the property lines on the mountain. "Every part of the mountain is owned by someone," Pedro told me, and everyone just knows who owns what and who farms where. The remaining communal land is a tiny peak on the other side of the mountain ridge, for which villagers pay small taxes to be able to farm. The lack of available land on the mountain was a ever-echoed lament of villagers. Not only are there few remaining places to build houses, but of the farmland that was available near the village, little remains.

Pedro thinks that in ten years, there will be houses all the way up to the peak of the mountains. As he sees it, the process of subdividing the communal land *es muy complicada*, because it is what prevents people from continuing their *costumbres* but is in some ways also a result of practicing them. The chief complaint of the two barely surviving *cofradías* in Santa Catarina is that they do not have the space they need for

gatherings and fiestas. According to Pedro, land began to be divide up and sold into smaller and smaller parcels because *cofradía* cargo holders would sell it off to pay for the *costumbres*.

But ceremonies are certainly still practiced on the mountain, or the mountain rocks are brought to ceremonies. While I began my research with the assumption that there were no sacred places on the mountain (after a few people from the village had told me that no one practices Maya ceremonies or spirituality anymore), when I specifically asked about *ajq'ijab`* in the village, I was immediately greeted with the response that "yes of course there are!" and was told there were between five and ten who had altars in their homes or practiced ceremonies elsewhere. In the end, I was able to speak with two *ajq'ij* in Santa Catarina and another one in a nearby well-used cave.

For the *ajq'ijab`* and many villagers, places on the mountain are considered sacred because they are where people go to pray. They are, as described by Molesky-Poz, "imbued with prayers" (2006). In Santa Catarina there is one huge boulder called *El Calvario* (Calgary, "estar bajo sufrimiento") and another mountain peak on the very edge of the village that are commonly acknowledged (at least in my interviews) as sacred spaces by *ajq'iqab`* and villagers alike. In the nearby village of San Jorge, there are several large caves that are visited by *ajq'ijab`* and villagers from all around the department of Sololá and probably from farther away as well. The greatest connection to the mountain, however, is found on small shrines in people's homes or in their pockets, where *aji'jiab`* and many villagers keep their sacred stones (*camahuiles*) or pebbles that they find (usually through dreams), and use for ceremony and sacrifice. I will now turn to their experiences, as they are the "interactive engagement" that has converted the place of the mountain around Santa Catarina into sacred spaces; "practiced" and "storied" spaces (Molesky-Poz 2006).

## The Mountain Is the Answer

Walking in the dry water run-off channel along the side of the highway, I asked Pedro question upon question between the interruptions of chicken buses loudly blasting by. I wanted him to translate every bit of the stories and thoughts that I had just watched *aqj'ij* Jose Maria share with him, in Kaq'chikel, on the precarious ledge of the cave we had just been led to by Gladys, a 5-year-old curious child-turned-guide who happened upon us in the San Jorge cave and led us to this and several other caves that Pedro had never known prior.<sup>5</sup>

"Jose Maria said that the cave is the answer," Pedro explained. "It is the authority. He gave the example that if you have some sort of problem in the community, you go to the mayor or to the community authorities. But if you have a spiritual problem, or a problem with your business or your work, you have to go to the mountain. *Allí está la repuesta, la solución Es la última palabra.*" Why is the answer in the cave, in the mountain? Because that is where *ajq'ijab* are called to practice ceremonies, because that is where *Ajaw* lives and speaks--in the caves, through the rocks. The largest of the three caves that I learned of and visited around San Jorge is called *Nimajay* or *Nimamesa*—large house, or large table. It is indeed the house of *Ajaw*, the table where his ceremonial, sacrificial food is laid.

And it is where *Ajaw* speaks. While we were standing with Jose Maria in front of the great burning pile of copal beneath the cave ledge, black with the soot of centuries of ceremony, he thanked *Ajaw* as the eggs he had scattered around the fire exploded one by one, a sign of *Ajaw* accepting the ceremonial sacrifice. At one point, Jose Maria paused, put his hand between his ear and mouth, and began to speak as if he were on the telephone. Indeed, he told us after the conversation ended--that had been a phone call from a *Ajaw*, there in the cave where Jose Maria can speak with him.

A week later, in his large home altar and shrine to *Maximón*, *ajq'iq* Alejandro explained his large collection of *camahuiles*, which he called “the bones of Mother Earth.” They are large stones (many with ancient-looking carved faces or animal shapes) that have called him to collect them since he was a young boy, after months of his nausea and sickness convinced his father that there must have been something important about the stones that his son said he needed to go find on the mountain. *Ajaw* called Alejandro, through dreams, to the mountain to collect *camahuiles*. They continue to do so (he showed us two small *Maximón*-like figures that he had just found) and *Ajaw* continues to speak through them, to tell him the work he needs to do--where he needs to go to do ceremonies and why. Alejandro agreed that people must go to the mountain because “it is the authority and it has the answer.” He further elaborated, however, that caves were like the first *camahuiles*, calling people to the mountain. The mountains and the caves “*ya existía*” when people came about. The caves were made by God in the creation of the world, and they called people to them for ceremony and sacrifice.

I think the importance of the stones and pebbles that people collect from the mountain cannot be underestimated as a real means of their connection to the mountain (the answer, the solution, the final word), and *Ajaw*, who speaks through them. Reflecting on our visits to the caves and altars, Pedro reiterated that stones are “very important, very powerful” and that “they must be respected.” He recounted a few stories of a stone in the center of the vilalge that fishermen and midwives say they encounter blocking the road sometimes at night, and another on the road to Panajachel that has been known to open unexpectedly, and then people disappear within it. Emphasizing the importance of the small stones that he and others have collected through their lives, another man declared that “*todas las piedras tienen poder*.” Even people who had never

dreamed about a stone to find, or encountered one that then gave them meaningful dreams, acknowledged that stones have power, that large boulders and caves are sacred places, and that they know people for whom stones or visits to the mountain for ceremonies have been important and powerful throughout their lives.

When I finally got to go to *El Calvario* in Santa Catarina (which required a surprising amount of deep-breath rock jumping), I found it surprisingly devoid of any evidence of ceremony--no copal wrappings, no ashes, no candle wax, no agua florida bottles tossed hither and yon. There was none of the thick black soot that had immediately denoted the site of altars in the other caves I had visited. It is interesting that though it had no evidence of ceremony, many people in Santa Catarina still mentioned it as a sacred place on the mountain. *Che pun*, the high point of the mountain called the home of the sun (as it is first lit in the morning and last shaded at night), did have candlewax and other evidence of ceremony surrounding it.

### **Maya in the Mountains**

Simply put, mountains are important to the Maya. The image and concept of Flower Mountain was central to ancient Maya cosmology, as expressed through art and the very structure of ceremonial temple-pyramid (mountain) architecture. Mayan culture stayed vital through the Conquest, in villages tucked away in the rugged, crumpled Highland landscape. Mountains have a newly central importance to modern Maya communities facing intense population pressure and subsequent environmental degradation, water contamination, and lack of available land. However, even my small bit of field research reveals that through prayers in caves or to rocks in their pockets, at least one Mayan community maintains an “interactive engagement” (Molesky-Poz 2006) with the mountain that surrounds them, into which they remain firmly rooted.

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<sup>1</sup> As discussed in the work of Jerome Levi for the World Bank, “Becoming Indigenous: Identity Strategies and Global Activism for the 21st Century.” Presented as a *lectura* in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Mexico, February 2010.

<sup>2</sup> As presented particularly in the politics and action of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico. Discussed at the Centro de Investigaciones Económicas y Políticas de Acción Comunitaria in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Mexico, February 2010.

<sup>3</sup> I acknowledge that this is an anthropocentric view. I am not a Deep Ecologist. I believe that humans have more fundamental value than other parts of the ecosystems of the World, and I value human rights above the rights of all other living things.

<sup>4</sup> I do not believe it is within my jurisdiction to doubt a story into the place of myth, or to elevate it to the place of history, as modern research tends to value or devalue such accounts. For more into this topic, see Levy, J. M., 1988. “Myth and History Reconsidered: Archeological Implications of Tzotzil-Maya Mythology.” *American Antiquity*, 53(3), 605-619.

<sup>5</sup> I find it noteworthy that my host father/key informant Pedro, a devout and ever-God-blessing, Bible-reciting Catholic, knelt and said prayers as we entered and left each and every of the three caves and two home altars that he so graciously introduced to me.

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