

AIBR

Revista de Antropología

Iberoamericana

www.aibr.org

Volumen 19

Número 3

Septiembre - Diciembre 2024

Pp. 411 - 430

Madrid: Antropólogos
Iberoamericanos en Red.
ISSN: 1695-9752
E-ISSN: 1578-9705

Hablando de otros: La cristiandad como distinción social en los contactos tempranos de Latinoamérica

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Recibido: 05.08.2024

Aceptado: 15.09.2024

DOI: 10.11156/aibr.190302e



ABSTRACT

Mopan (Mayan) oral histories have preserved for over three hundred years precise details of their early contact with Spanish missionaries. The Mopan histories supplement Spanish documents in documenting significant Mopan resistance to Christian conversion and testify to an extended period in which Christianized Mopan living in Spanish mission villages co-existed as neighbours and trading partners with their non-baptized kin. From the perspective of Mopan inside the Christian villages, a specific contrast of forest to village was doubly determined, not only by Spanish policy that made forest fugitives of those who did not wish to take Christian baptism, but also by an older understanding that the forest and other wilderness areas such as the venerated mountains were the domain of supernatural and non-human creatures. Data from linguistic-anthropological analysis of voice, gaze, and manual gesture reveal how modern-day Mopan tellings present forest residence not as incidental to or the result of non-Christian identity, but instead as a crucial part of constructing, causing, or explaining that identity.

KEY WORDS

Mayan, linguistic anthropology, Spanish conquest, geography, ethnicity, Christianity.

HABLANDO DE OTROS: LA CRISTIANDAD COMO DISTINCIÓN SOCIAL EN LOS CONTACTOS TEMPRANOS DE LATINOAMÉRICA

RESUMEN

Durante más de trescientos años las historias orales de los mayas *mopán* han conservado detalles muy precisos sobre sus primeros contactos con los misioneros españoles. Estas historias aportan información significativa a los documentos españoles sobre la resistencia *mopán* a la conversión cristiana y dan testimonio de un período prolongado en el que los *mopanes* cristianizados que vivían en aldeas misioneras españolas coexistieron como vecinos y comerciantes con los que no estaban bautizados. Desde la perspectiva de los *mopanes*, dentro de las aldeas cristianas había un claro y doble contraste entre el bosque y la aldea. Por un lado, porque la política española convertía en fugitivos del bosque a aquellos que no deseaban recibir el bautismo cristiano, y por otro porque ya existía una concepción de que el bosque y otras áreas naturales, como las veneradas montañas, eran dominio de criaturas sobrenaturales y no humanas. Los datos del análisis lingüístico-anropológico de la voz, la mirada y los gestos manuales revelan cómo los relatos *mopán* modernos presentan la residencia en el bosque no como incidental o como resultado de la identidad no cristiana, sino como una parte crucial de la construcción, causa o incluso explicación de esa identidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Mayas, antropología lingüística, Conquista Española, geografía, etnicidad, cristiandad.

Introduction

There is no reason or necessity for you to submit to the archbishop. When he comes you shall go and hide yourselves in the forest (Roys 1933, p.123).

The Mopan are swidden agriculturalists of Eastern Central America who speak a Mayan language of the Yucatecan subfamily (England and Elliott, 1990). Mopan people live today in a region that largely corresponds to their homeland at the time of European contact and before: an area stretching from the central Petén region of Guatemala to the Atlantic coast of Belize.¹ Present-day rural Mopan maintain village traditions, their Indigenous language, and traditional ways of life (Danziger, 2001; Saqui, 2012), even as many Mopan also leave their farms to pursue urban lifestyles and higher education.

During the years 1986-2011, a substantial corpus of histories and teachings in the Mopan language were recorded in the Toledo District of Belize, in traditional Mopan country. In what follows I use material from this corpus to apply a linguistic anthropological lens to phenomena of cultural contact and diversity in the Mopan region. Thanks in part to a cultural philosophy of language that emphasizes truth over fiction, the content of these Mopan accounts includes precise details that corroborate 17th century Spanish chronicles documenting the first European contact with Mopan. Analysis of Mopan word-meanings and their histories then reveals a history of implicit equivalence between religious affiliation and place of residence that dates to the Spanish colonial era. During that era, Spanish policy forced Christian converts to live together in villages, and non-converts became associated with life in the mountainous forests outside these villages. But forest and mountain already had meanings associated with the more-than-human for Mayan peoples. Close multimodal analysis of recorded Mopan utterances shows how the question of geographic residence remains important in Indigenous understanding of the distinctions of identity that followed from the Spanish-Mopan encounter.

Mopan and Missionaries

Spanish arrival in Mopan territory was comparatively late. Dominican missionaries under the leadership of Friar Agustín Cano arrived in the area of modern San Luis Petén in the year 1695 (Cano, 1942; Villagutierre,

1. The ethnonym “Mopan” is known from 8th century Classic Maya inscriptions that are found in this area (MacLeod and Stone, 1995).

1983; Ximénez, 1929-31). The missionaries had travelled from Guatemala City with a company of soldiers, and their goal was to subdue and convert the famous kingdom of the Itza Maya on Lake Tayasal (today Lago de Flores) in the northern Petén. Their route followed pathways already established by Indigenous traders, through the territory of the recently contacted Chol Maya, and into Mopan country:²

Pasada la provincia de el Chol... llegamos a otra nueva nación, que se dice de los mopanes, donde nunca habían entrado españoles en ministro del Santo Evangelio... (L)es declaramos el fin de nuestro viaje, el cual por entonces se logró en algunos adultos que estando en peligro pidieron el santo bautismo y en algunos niños enfermos que ofrecieron sus padres y fueron al cielo por primicias de aquesta nuestra nación (Cano, 1942, p.66).

After passing through the Province of the Chol ... we came to another new tribe which is called the Mopanes, among whom Spaniards or ministers of the Holy Gospel had never/ entered ... (W)e declared the purpose of our journey to them. This was successful with some adults, who, being in distress at that time, asked for holy baptism, and with some sick children, whom their parents brought and who went to heaven as the first fruits of this tribe. [Cano, 1984, p.8-9].

Further contacts – sometimes violent – with the Mopan followed this first occasion, and were intermittently documented by Spanish chroniclers. Mentions of Mopan in the Spanish documents of this era often appear only as short digressions or asides in the Spanish accounts of other matters that were their primary focus: the military conquest of the neighbouring Itza kingdom, and the related project of constructing a ‘Royal Road’ (Camino Real) to connect the Spanish provinces of Yucatan and of Guatemala (Jones, 1998; Villagutierre, 1983). From these occasional mentions we know however that the Mopan were certainly among those included in the general Spanish policy of *reducciones*, the ‘reduction’ of far-flung Indigenous settlements into nucleated villages for purposes of religious instruction and surveillance. Cano speaks of the neighbouring Chol, but with an aside that includes Mopan:

(C)uanto mas penetramos aquellas montañas, tanto mas numerosas familias hallamos en sus rancherías, sin forma de pueblos. A todos los decíamos que el fin de nuestro viaje era buscarlos para que se congregasen en pueblos de mane-

2. I provide both the Spanish original and a published English translation of Cano’s account. Translators’ editorial notes embedded in the published English version have been removed from the citation. Translators’ use of original Spanish words (*pueblos*, *montañas*) with intermittent italicization is as in the original.

ra que pudiéramos vivir con ellos para enseñarles la luz de Dios y administrarles los Santos Sacramentos; y que también deseáramos que todos los de su nación y las demás naciones de todas aquellas montañas conociesen a Dios y se juntasen en pueblos (Cano, 1942, p.66).

(T)he more we penetrated that/ wilderness the more numerous did we find families in their communities without the form of *pueblos*. To all these we said that the object of our journey was to search for them, so that they should come together in pueblos in such a way that we would be able to live with them, in order to teach them the law of God and to administer the holy sacraments to them, and we wished that all of the people of their tribe and the other tribes of all those montañas should know God and come together in pueblos (Cano, 1984, p.7-8).

In what follows, I use several strands of language-related evidence to supplement the relatively meagre Spanish mentions of Mopan, and to illuminate the Mopan perspective on this momentous encounter and its aftermath. I conclude that although the Spanish focused on differences of religion, the Mopan themselves have remained at least equally interested in location of residence as a criterion with which to mark the social differences that arose with the coming of the Spanish.

Christians and Humans

One noteworthy testimonial to the importance of Spanish missionary presence among the Mopan during the extended contact period does not require written documentation for its confirmation. Today, in both Belizean and Guatemalan-administered Mopan communities, the modern word for ‘human being’ is a borrowing from Spanish: the word *christiano*.³ This word in Spanish denotes only those persons who follow the Christian religion. But today in Mopan, the word does not centrally refer to a person’s religion. If today in Mopan country, one asks whether someone is a *kristiaano*, one is asking simply whether that person is a human being. To question a person’s status with respect to the Christian religion, one asks instead whether the person has or has not been baptized.

3. The same borrowing, with the same extended reference, is also found in other areas - for example in the Mayan languages Chol (Danziger and Rodriguez Cuevas, 2023), and Q’eq’chi (Kockelman, 2016, p.55) which are Mopan’s closest geographic neighbours and which experienced missionization from the same direction and during the same period as Mopan. The extension of borrowed *christiano* to all humans is apparently not found, however, in the Yucatec Maya language, one of Mopan’s closest linguistic relatives but with a very different history of Spanish colonization.

Example 1, from a story in which three loyal dogs are rewarded for their heroic exploits with luxurious treatment, illustrates how Mopan *christiano* is used to contrast human with animal status rather than denoting any particular religion:⁴

Ma' ta'achoo' u ch'ab'äl wa jab'ixoo' pek'i.

They were never treated as if they were dogs.

Jamás los trataron como perros.

Walakoo' u ch'ab'äl jab'ixoo' kristiaano.

They were always treated as if they were humans (*christiano*)

Todavía los trataron como personas (*christiaano*).

Example 1: Dogs as if People [Salam, 1989a, 01:12:55 to 01:13:05].

This semantic extension, from an original meaning which denotes Christian religious affiliation only to a meaning that denotes all of humanity, perhaps appears initially to indicate some degree of extraordinary enthusiasm for Christian conversion among earlier generations of Mopan. But in fact it is more likely that this word was first borrowed in order to distinguish those Mopan -- initially a minority-- who accepted Christianity fairly early, from the majority who did not. The borrowing of Spanish *christiano* into Mopan testifies not to unanimous early acceptance of Christianity among the Mopan, but to a sustained and significant era of resistance to conversion. During this era, to describe someone as *christiano* was to invoke a meaningful contrast with socially important non-Christian humans. Mopan oral histories, still repeated in the present day, can help us to shed light on that era.

***Mopan* Philosophy of Language**

One of the highest cultural values among traditional Mopan is that of *tzik* 'respect' (Danziger, 2001 and 2013). This virtue requires humans to maintain appropriately considerate and mindful behaviour both in relation to other humans and to the non-human world. The virtue of 'respect' forbids such crimes as murder and incest (Danziger, 2001), and also dictates that permission should be sought and thanks given when hunting or planting crops (Saqui, 2012; Thomson, 1930). The practice of 'respect' has a cos-

4. Translations from Mopan into English and Spanish are by the author. In citations from recordings, I use the Mopan orthography recommended by the Academia de las Lenguas Mayas (England and Elliott, 1990).

mic dimension: if it is violated too often or too intensely, natural disasters and other inversions of the desired order will result. These consequences follow quasi-automatically from violations of respect; negative consequences are not avoided even if violators have good intentions or mistaken information (Danziger, 2010 and 2011).

Speaking the truth is an important aspect of Mopan *tzik* ‘respect’, and disastrous consequences follow from violations of this aspect of respect as surely as from any other (Danziger, 2010). As a result, fictional narratives do not find approval among traditional Mopan (Danziger, 2006). Indeed, the traditional Mopan philosophy of language holds that not only invented narratives but any modification or embellishment of what one has been told by one’s elders counts as ‘lying’ (Danziger, 2013). The philosophy maintains that it is virtuous to repeat as accurately as possible what one has been told by elders and ancestors, and that whatever is thus accurately repeated can be trusted as truth. These understandings and practices protect the integrity of oral history in this non-literate society.⁵

The *Che’il* ‘Those of the Forest’

Among the various denizens of the surrounding rainforest, Mopan traditional narratives describe in detail the habits and exploits of those whom they call the *Che’il*. The name is a transparent combination of the word for “woods; forest; trees” and a suffix indicating relationality (see Example 2). Although often translated into English as ‘the forest people’ or ‘the wild people’, there is no word corresponding to “people” or “person” in the Mopan original:⁶

che’ woods

- *il* RELATIONAL

Che’il ‘those of the forest’

Example 2: Those of the Forest

5. Classic Mayans in the Petén and Yucatan regions, including the linguistic ancestors of the Mopan, used written script to record their history from roughly 300 to 1000 A.D. (Coe and Houston, 2015). But knowledge of the script was probably always confined to a few specialists. Traditional Mopan today are for the most part not literate in their language, and they do not speak in their histories of a time when they were.

6. And in contrast to the most idiomatic Spanish rendition, there is no obligatory gender in the Mopan original either.

Che'il are described as human-like shape-shifters who have the capacity to take the form of animals and birds, and even of familiar members of our families. They could therefore be anywhere around us at any time. As their name indicates, their homes are deep in the forest. But although there exists a distant kinship between *Che'il* and ordinary humans, and although *Che'il* may sometimes even visit human villages, it is extremely dangerous for ordinary humans to approach *Che'il* settlements. This is because the *Che'il* love the scent and taste of human flesh. Indeed, the *Che'il* are tempted not only to kill and eat ordinary humans, but even to lick the salt from our living sweaty skins (Salam, 1992). Many stories tell how one member of a group of captured Mopan hunters escapes from a *Che'il* settlement after the rest of his companions have been killed and eaten (Bol, 1989; Coc, 1986; Salam 1989b and 1992). Because of their magical shape-shifting powers, *Che'il* are rarely seen by ordinary people, but their bones, their belongings and their structures are often encountered in the forests.⁷

In light of their terrifying habits and powers, it is interesting to discover that the *Che'il* in modern Mopan accounts also have certain traits and habits that are exactly like those of ordinary Mopan people. *Che'il* are understood to have houses and families like those of the Mopan, and to grow corn and eat tortillas like Mopan. Perhaps most significantly for the question of 'ethnicity', the *Che'il* speak to others and among themselves in fluent Mopan "just as we are doing now!" (Cal, 1992, 00:03:17 - 00:03:45). In fact, says one Mopan expert (Choc, 2011, 00:03:00 - 00:03:20), the *Che'il* are *tiw et'ok* 'our companions'. Although they live so far away from us, they come regularly at Christmastime to buy what they need – salt, for example – in Mopan village shops.⁸

I argue in what follows that the stories of the *Che'il* represent true histories. They preserve centuries-old memories of those Mopan who, during the early contact period, refused Christian conversion. My argument rests on several details in early Spanish accounts that correspond to oral stories of the *Che'il* recorded during the period 1986-2011.

7. Mopan live in the archaeologically rich territory that was once home to the Classic Mayan civilization (Coe and Houston, 2015).

8. Other tellings confirm that visits of the *Che'il* to Mopan tend to occur at Christmastime (Chun, 1996). The mention of Christmas time as the season when *Che'il* are most likely to come to Mopan villages also has resonance with colonial Spanish accounts, Ximénez (1929-31) tells us that in the late 17th century, the season of "The Nativity" was the time when pagan Indians would visit Christian villages to trade.

Historical Details

Already in Cano's first account of Spanish-Mopan contact, there is evidence of significant divergence within the Mopan population as regards interest in Christian conversion. Immediately after celebrating the initial conversions in the passage cited above, Cano continues:

Su cacique Taxim-Mam huyo de nosotros, y aunque hicimos varias diligencias por atraerlo siempre nos engañó con falsas promesas. ... (pero) cada día venían muchos indios Mopanés a comprar cuchillos y otras cosillas que les vendían los soldados a trueque de mantas. Nosotros les regalábamos con sal, y por ella venían a vernos y a vender sus frutas con que parece que iban pacificando (Cano, 1942, p.66).

Their principal cacique Taximchan fled from us, and although we made various endeavors to attract him, he always deceived us with false promises. But ... each day many Mopán Indians came to buy knives and other trifles which the soldiers traded in exchange for blankets. We presented them with salt, and for this they came to see us and to sell us their fruit, and with this they were apparently becoming very friendly⁹ [Cano, 1984, p.8-9]

We are thus made aware that not all Mopan in those first days and years accepted christianization. In fact, from the parallel account of the historian Francisco Ximénez, who was present in Cano's company, we learn that from the point of view of the missionaries, for the most part the Mopan were "muy rebeldes, y mala nación, muy mentirosos y caribes" (Ximénez, 1929-31, p.18) [very rebellious, a difficult (*mala*) nation, terrible liars and cannibals/savages]¹⁰.

At the time when he wrote it, Ximénez' use of the word *caribe*, literally 'Carib', conveyed a characterization of extreme savagery that was associated with the accusation of cannibalism (Whitehead, 1984). It was in fact common for Spanish colonials to freely accuse resistant Amerindian groups of cannibalism (Arens, 1979), a practice in which "political expediency, rather than an attempt at objective reportage, was the most influential factor" (Whitehead, 1984, p.81).¹¹ Recall now that the *Che'il* 'forest

9. As a translation of the Spanish feminine "frutas", English "fruits" here should be understood as "agricultural products" in general, rather than simply "fruits" (thanks to Brian Owensby for insisting on this point). The "agricultural products" of the Mopan at that time would certainly have included cacao, which was highly valued in the region at that time (Machault, 2018).

10. English translations of Ximénez are by the author.

11. By royal decree, only those Indians within the Spanish empire who were declared cannibals could be sold into slavery: "an accusation of cannibalism in colonial South America

beings' of the Mopan oral histories are always described as inveterate cannibals. It is certainly probably that in the years succeeding the initial encounter, Spanish tales of cannibalism became securely attached to the characterization of those Mopan who refused Christian baptism, literally demonizing them in the process. Echoing the intermittent violence documented in the early Spanish accounts, one 20th C Mopan expert (Cal, 1992) also recounts the fact that *Cheil* have in the past been shot and killed by white men.

Tales of hostility notwithstanding, the earliest Spanish chroniclers also recount that many Mopan during those first encounters had an interest in establishing trading relations with the Spanish:

Dijímosles á estos bárbaros á lo que veníamos que es á predicar la ley de Dios y hacerles cristianos, no á matarlos ni á hacerles mal, y digeron, ... que eso querían y que querían sal, machetes y abalorios (Ximénez, 1929-31, p.21).

We told these barbarians that the reason we had come was to preach the law of God and to make them Christians, not to kill them or hurt them. And they said ... that they desired this, and that they desired salt, machetes, and glass beads (Ximénez, 1929-31, p.21)

The interest in trade extended also to those who refused to accept baptism: “el Cacique del Mopan llamado Taximchan no quería recibarnos ... lo que quería era muchos machetes, hachas, abalorios y sal” (Ximénez, 1929-31, p.18) [The Mopan Cacique Taximchan did not want to receive us ... what he desired was many machetes, axes, glass beads, and salt].

In the Spanish accounts, there is repeated mention of Mopan interest in salt. For centuries before European arrival in the Maya area, there existed a vigorous trade in salt from the Atlantic coastlines and from the saline lakes in the Guatemalan highlands to the Petén, where cacao was a commonly counter-traded commodity (McKilop, 2002). In 1695, the date of Cano's journey therefore, Mopan by longstanding custom would identify salt as an item that outsiders might bring for trade. They would perhaps also calculate that mentioning their desire for it, and their willingness to offer cacao in exchange, could be a way to establish new trade relationships. But also by 1695, Europeans controlled both the entire Atlantic coastline and much of the Guatemalan highlands. The Indigenous trade in both salt and cacao from these areas had become severely dis-

functioned ... to place groups of people beyond the normal political process and in this way be able to justify various forms of extraordinary violence against them” (Whitehead, 1984, p.76).

rupted:¹² “La escasez de sal y el crecimiento de la demanda de cacao son consecuencias directas del establecimiento de la sociedad colonial” (Machault, 2018) [The scarcity of salt and the growing demand for cacao were direct consequences of the establishment of colonial society].¹³

Already before Cano’s arrival in the Mopan area then, salt would have become a difficult commodity to acquire there. Over the succeeding decades, those Mopan who refused Christianity would have remained dependent on the Spanish, and eventually on christianized Mopan, to acquire it.

All of this is difficult to ignore in light of a persistent detail in modern-day oral Mopan accounts: it is very frequently said of the *Che’il* do not have access to salt and are highly motivated to trade forest products such as cacao or game meat in order to acquire it. The accounts of Christmas expeditions by *Che’il* to the villages explicitly mention their interest in purchasing salt, and a repeated element of the recorded stories tells how friendly *Che’il* request presents of salt in exchange for goods or favours provided. Example 3 is representative:

“Jali’ ka’ a talesten in taab” kut’an.

“If you could just bring me some salt” he said.

“Solo si puedes traerme sal” dijo.

“ka a p’ätä’ ten waye’ ich a kol” kut’an.

“You could just leave it for me here in your cornfield” he said.

“Deberías dejármelo aquí en tu milpa” dijo

“Le’ek in k’ati.

“That’s what I want.

“Eso es lo que quiero.

Taab’ in k’ati.

It’s salt that I want.

Es sal lo que quiero.

Je’ l’eeek in talesik a k’äk’äjä

I can bring cacao

Puedo traer cacao

Ka’ talakech a molo’

so that you can come and pick it up.

para que lo recojas.

12. Spain exacted cacao as tribute from colonized peoples of the region and diverted locally produced salt for its own purposes (Machault, 2018).

13. Original in Spanish. English translation by the author.

Waye' in p'ätik””
 I'll leave it right here”.
 Lo dejaré aquí mismo.”

Example 3. Salt for Cacao (Coc, 1986, 00.14.30 – 00.14.40).

One final detail from the contemporary Mopan *Che'il* stories is very relevant to the argument that the *Che'il* stories are historical accounts describing the existence of Mopan who have refused Christian conversion. It is well understood and often repeated by modern Mopan that the *Che'il* have never been baptized: “They are our ancestors, but in some kind of way we are not related to them, because we are baptized and they are not baptized. ... They talk the same language but ... they are different” (Sho, 1996, 00:10.46 – 00:11. English language in original).

Che'il then, are terrifying and mysterious beings who live far from normal human settlements. They are not baptized but they otherwise share many characteristics of what could perhaps be called “ethnicity” with human Mopan (house-style, subsistence practices, cuisine, and language). Indeed, a sense of lost kinship with the *Che'il* pervades modern Mopan understanding of these beings. Conforming to Spanish descriptions of Mopan who resisted initial attempts at Christian conversion, *Che'il* are described as cannibals, and are extremely interested in trading for salt.

The evidence is strong that the modern-day Indigenous accounts are historical: they tell of those Mopan who held aloof from Christian conversion from the very first moments of Spanish arrival, and of their descendants who, continuing to resist baptism, made their homes far from the Christian villages of the *reducciones*.

Village and Forest

A longstanding cultural architecture in the Mayan world that dates to long before the era of Spanish contact (Taube, 2003) frames the forest as an awe-inspiring and dangerous territory in explicit contrast to the ordered world of human habitation (Sicoli, 2016). Stone describes: “a model of socially constructed space that cleaves along the lines of two polar spatial categories: the domestic center or community and what might be termed the wilderness, forest, or bush” (Taube, 2003).

In the Petén region and elsewhere, the notion of the mountain also figures alongside the forest as a source of supernatural wonders and dan-

gers (Schele and Freidel, 1992). Still today, the mountains (*witz'*) in Mopan are invoked as wild and sacred spaces associated with forest mysteries and non-human practices.¹⁴

At the time of European contact then, Mopan certainly did not live in the forest. Mopan settlements of the period are frequently described by the Spanish as *rancherías*, homesteads or hamlets of several houses which were located close to the agricultural fields of the inhabitants. These were known by the family name of the senior living patriarch, suggesting that they were structured as patrilineal kinship groups and that they tended to endure for less than the span of a single human lifetime.¹⁵ But during the years of forced *reduccion* to Christian village life, those who resisted would have found themselves obliged more and more to take refuge in areas formerly considered wilderness.

As Spanish control of the Petén intensified, mention of the role of the forest as a haven for those who refused Christian conversion is repeated and explicit. A semantic equivalence now existed in which Christian was to non-Christian as village-dweller was to forest-dweller. The fact that the forest had also from time immemorial been associated with non-human and supernatural life-forms, in opposition to the ordered space of human habitation, would now play its role in assisting the identification of Christian villager (*kristiaano*) with ordinary human, and forest-dwelling non-Christian (*che'il*) with more-than-human magicians.

In Mopan stories about the *Che'il* recorded at the turn of the 21st century, we indeed find linguistic-anthropological evidence that dwelling in the forest is not perceived as incidental or subsidiary to the absence of baptism among the *Che'il*. Rather, close analysis of the manner in which these two factors of social identity are presented suggests that, as much or more than the fact of Christian baptism, the fact that *Che'il* belong to the forest is still today a criterial fact in describing and explaining their difference from ordinary humans.

14. Cano (1942) refers in Spanish to the Indigenous areas of the Petén as *las montañas* 'the mountains' in a similar sense.

15. In modern times, traditional Mopan live in patrilineal, patrilocal residential compounds in which each married couple and their children occupy a separate house. But individual families frequently establish new settlements (and eventually new patrilocal compounds) in order to be close to their fields and to minimize friction with neighbours. Traditional Mopan houses require re-building every 7-10 years, and this also is often an occasion for re-settling in a new area. In any case, houses are traditionally destroyed at the death of the inhabitant(s) (Thompson, 1930).

Multimodal Evidence

In one striking example, taken up in detail below, both baptism and forest residence are mentioned, but nonverbal cues provide the evidence that the relation of causality goes from forest residence to baptism and not the other way around. In this example, a Mopan expert has already explained during a recorded conversation with Eve Danziger that *Che'il* communities include men, women, and children of all ages. The interviewer then asks whether *Che'il* also get married. The answer is immediate and vehement:

ED.— *walak b'in u b'el ti - ti tz'okolb'el?*

Do they get married?

¿Se casan?

MC.— *aa ma' ta'achoo' u b'etik laji*

Oh no, they never do that!

¡Oh no, jamás hacen eso!

ma' porke...

No, because...

No, porque...

ma' ucha'an uy ok ja'i

they have never been baptized

nunca han sido bautizados

ich witz' ke'eno'.

They live in the mountains.

Viven en las montañas.

Example 4. Do They Get Married? (Cal, 1992, 00:03:45 – 00:03:52).

The speaker is referring of course to the doctrinally orthodox rule that one cannot undergo the Catholic sacrament of marriage unless one has first undergone that of baptism. And *Che'il* are not baptized, as we have heard before. What is noteworthy here is the way that the statement of *Che'il* location in the forest immediately follows this doctrinal edict, with vocal and gestural emphasis on the word *witz'* “mountains/ wilderness”, as if this location explains the lack of baptism rather than (as the Spanish histories would understand it) the other way around. The sense that forest location underlies and determines the unbaptized and hence

both non-Christian and non-human quality of *Che'il* identity can be traced through microanalysis of this particular utterance.

We are most interested in the final two sentences of the utterance: 'They have never been baptized. They live in the mountains.' Although syntactically these two sentences are independent of one another, analysis of the accompanying gesture shows that the second sentence ('They are in the mountains') is to be construed as the explanation, cause, or reason for the first ('They have never been baptized'). In addition, analysis of the nonverbal cues reveals that the speaker considers it important that his addressee, (the anthropologist interviewer), should understand that fact.

In our example, the first of the two sentences of interest ("they have never been baptized") occurs without any gesture. But the second ("they are in the mountains") coincides with a manual gesture and concludes with a marked and sustained alteration of head and gaze direction on the part of the speaker. The line drawings below (Figure 1) are tracings from the video recording, showing four moments during the speaking of the second sentence ('They are in the mountains.') at intervals of 5 frames (1 second) apart. Directly below each of the four images appears the speech that occurs at the same moment.

In the first image (*ich* 'in'), the speaker looks into the distance. Although his hands appear inactive on his lap, the left has begun to stir, and gesture onset has begun. In the second frame (*witz* 'mountain') the hands have been raised and they have reached the stroke phase of the gesture – the physical maximum and apparent goal of the hand movement (MacNeill, 2000). The fact that the gesture stroke occurs here tells us that this word (*witz* 'mountains') is the most important word in the sentence. In Image 3 (*ke'en-oo* 'they-are-located'), the gesture has not yet been released. At this point, the handshape is altered slightly. The right hand begins to relax in preparation for releasing the gesture, but the left hand now shapes an index finger point that targets the addressee (the interviewer, who sits at the position of the recording camera). At the same time, the speaker's gaze lifts, and he regards his addressee full in the eye. The locked gaze of speaker and addressee is maintained in Image 4, after both manual gesture and speech have finished. Although he is no longer speaking or gesturing, the speaker's interactional stance as conveyed by his gaze is markedly different in this fourth image from his stance in the first.

Together, the multiple phases of this gesture indicate not only that the word *witz* 'mountain' is the most important in the gestured sentence, but that the speaker is concerned that his addressee should comprehend the importance of that fact. Given what has immediately preceded ("They have never been baptized"), it is easy to construe this importance as a

form of explanation or expansion – even perhaps a reason for – the *Che'il*'s lack of Christian baptism. If we take the gestural component of the utterance into account, the full English translation would be 'They are in the mountains, you see?'

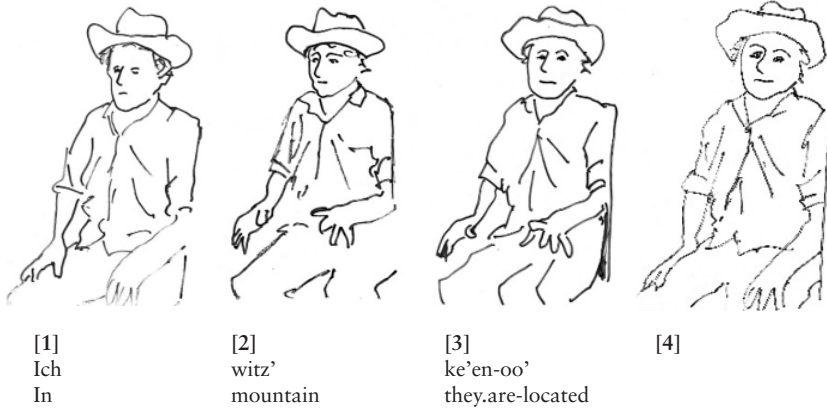


Figure 1. They are in the mountains (you see?) (Cal, 1992, 00:03:49 – 00:03:52).

In another recorded example, from a different expert, the importance of forest residence in defining the essence of the *Che'il* is even more explicit. In this case, a knowledgeable teller explains why it would be dangerous to encounter *Che'il* in person:

Sab'eentzil waj ma' – sab'eentzil u kimsikech pues.

There's a risk that – well there's a risk that they might kill you.

Ma' jed'ek a cha'ik porke ma' ketech etele.

You can't go with them because you are not the same as them.

Jun paay tawich a la'.

They are different from you.

Pues le'ek tun a b'e u nuk'ul ti ke'eno'on jab'ixo'on ino'ono.

And that right there is the main point of how we ourselves are the way we are.

Ino'ono kristiaanojo'on.

We ourselves, we are human (christiano).

A la' jun paayoo'.

But they are different.

Ma' ta'ach ti ketikoo'

We are not at all like them

Komo k'u ka jun paay tub'a ke'eno'o'.

Because why, the place where they are is different.

Example 5. Where they are is different (Choc, 2011, 02:40 - 02:59).

The final phrase ('the place where they are is different') is accompanied by a large pointing gesture indicating a maximally distant location (Figure 2). The pointing gesture is made with an open palm facing away from the speaker, indicating also the social distance that derives from this faraway location of residence.



Figure 2. Where they are is different (Choc, 2011, 02:58).

This passage is explicit that forest residence is the reason for the dangerous differences between *Che'il* and humans. Baptism is not even mentioned – the entirety of the ontological distinction between *Che'il* and *kristiaano* is expressed and gestured in terms of forest residence.

The emphases apparent in these recorded utterances allow us to confirm that *Che'il* may be defined at least as much by residence in the forest as they are by lack of baptism. While from the Spanish point of view, the question of Christian baptism explains and motivates differences in place of residence, for the Mopan it is the other way around: residence in the forest can explain and motivate absence of baptism or even simply the felt ontological difference between *Che'il* and ordinary humans. This follows from the cultural status of the forest not as a residual location where those not christianized may be found, but as an active location of supernatural activity from before the Spanish arrival, and, since then, as an actively chosen destination of refuge from forced conversion to Christianity.

Conclusion

Thanks to a philosophy of language that emphasizes faithful transmission of oral stories, for over three centuries of time, narratives related to the

original contact of Mopan with Spanish missionaries have been recounted by Mopan narrators. These narratives, as recorded at the turn of the 21st century, provide a supplementary perspective to that of the missionary chronicles on the kinds of social distinctions that became important during the contact era. Close linguistic-anthropological analysis of style and emphasis in the recorded texts was instrumental in showing how, for the Mopan speakers of those texts, geographic habitat is construed not as an incidental consequence of colonial policy, but as an essential marker of ontological essence.

The Spanish intrusion into Mopan country created a social category that was significant enough to merit separate denomination with the Spanish word *christiano* ‘christian’. Because of the sustained Spanish policy of settling converts into centralized villages, this social category was also from early in its existence marked by a distinction in ecological habitat. For Indigenous Maya living in the new Christian villages, an association with “non-Christian” would now be added to the age-old association of “non-human” that already characterized the forest and other wilderness locations. A semantic transition followed logically, in which, by contrast with the non-Christian, non-human *Che’il*, ‘those of the forest’, the characterization as *christiano*, came to signify simply “human” in modern Mopan.

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