

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

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

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

## **Introduction**

This article is a theoretical reflection on the diverse ways in which new age seekers engage “the Maya” as a source, method, and target of their spiritual practices. Although grounded in three decades of research on Maya culture, tourism, and heritage, including New Age inventions

of Maya culture, this is neither a textual analysis of Maya spiritual literature nor an analysis of ethnographic research (see Castañeda, 2019, 2005, 1996; Himpele & Castañeda, 1997).<sup>1</sup> It is also not in any sense a review and assessment of research in the study of New Age movement or spiritualities, much less the field of Latin American religions/spiritualities. Instead, this is a programmatic essay on the study of the new age movement in general via questions about how to conceptualize and investigate spiritual seeking of the Maya in particular.

Spiritual seeking as a concept was developed in light of the limitations of studying new age phenomena in terms of cults and NRM (Campbell, 1972; Dawson, 2003; Hanegraaf, 1996; Hammer & Rothstein, 2012; Oliver, 2012).<sup>2</sup> This theoretical turn cleared the space to articulate a new object of study: the relationship between “spiritual seeking” and the “society of seekers.”<sup>3</sup> Spiritual seeking has been and is a key descriptive concept that focuses analysis on both the heterogeneity of new forms of religiosities and of the cultic milieu in terms of the “society” of consumer capitalism and (post)modernity that generates these new forms of spiritualized subjectivities (e.g. Fuller, 1989, 2001; Heelas, 2008, 1998, 1996; Redden, 2005). However, this analytical framework for studying the new age movement and cultic milieu is mostly developed by a Europe-based sociology of religion that primarily focuses on “Western” spiritual cultures of Europe and to some extent the US and Canada. These works are illuminating and interesting, but not altogether useful for understanding the Americas, specifically the underlying transcultural dynamics of syncretism, cultural appropriation, and hybridity, on the one hand, and the politics and power configurations of these transcultural processes, on the other hand.<sup>4</sup> My pointed use of the term Americas—even “our” Americas—shifts our analytical and theoretical attention not simply out of the narrow purview of anglophone US and Canada and the attendant Eurocentrism (i.e., privileging of a specific presumption of “Western” civilization and religiosities) to include Latin America, but also points to the history of forging nations, cultures, and religions in the dynamics between nations, races, mentalities, indigenities, and (neo)colonialities throughout the hemisphere. For a long time now, an array of scholars from diverse fields and theoretical traditions have demonstrated that modernity and coloniality are intricately intertwined (e.g. Bamba & Holmwood, 2021; Mignolo, 2011, 2021; Mignolo &

Walsh, 2018). To theorize or investigate New Age spiritualities in terms of modernity without rigorous attention to the coloniality constitutive of capitalism and modernities, is only to reproduce the neocolonial, Eurocentric epistemologies that perpetuates disenfranchisement and marginalization. There is, in other words, the need to develop a decolonial thinking and analyses of spiritualities, not just of religion (Fitzgerald, 2020; Nye, 2019; Yountae, 2020).

Thus, while the theoretical innovation of the conceptual binary seeking/society of seekers has been quite productive, the “middle” region (cults, NRM, communities, religions) that was purposefully sidelined as a primary focus must be reinstated as crucial primary objects of investigation and frames of analysis. This article is an initial rethinking of this paradigm of how to study new age religiosities and spiritualities in the Americas via the case of spiritual seeking the Maya. In order to begin to grasp the heterology and heterogeneity of these phenomena in such a way that allows for the investigation of transcultural dynamics and for the politics/political processes of transculturation, I advocate for the development of a more thorough typology of seeking, specifically that takes into account cultural communities, cult forms, and transcultural interactions. This article therefore begins this work by discussing key questions in studying New Age Maya spiritualism and proposing criteria for creating an analytical ideal-types framework.<sup>5</sup>

This article is organized in three sections. First, I explain my terminology of “spiritual seeking” that introduces the problem of “leadership” and nomenclature. In this context, I point to some shortcomings that I perceive in the study of new (age) spiritualities and thus I propose a shift in focus in the adaptation of the new age theoretical paradigm to the Americas. Second, I discuss the confusing and contradictory uses of the words Maya and Mayan in academic and popular understandings. My goal is not only to clarify the correct usage of \*Mayan as the ethnonym of Maya peoples, but to draw out the significance of the common misuse of these words for the study of spiritual seeking of the Maya. These first two sections are necessary to clear a space for the preliminary presentation, in the third and fourth sections, of an ideal types analytical framework that I am currently developing. The framework I present is neither an ethnography nor a textual reading and does not present ethnographic or exegetical analyses: It is offered as

initial steps in the development of a theoretical and programmatic vision for research.

### **New Age Maya Spiritualism: Seeking and Shortcomings**

The heterogeneity and heterology of religiosities related to the Maya are quite extensive. The task of comprehensively grasping the diversity of these is quite daunting even as the unity is defined by criterion that “the Maya” are the target, source, motivation, method, goal, means, medium, or mode of spiritual seeking. While this diagnostic might seem to ground and set the parameters of a definitive object of study, this criterion is quite porous: It allows an inclusive understanding of what is articulated as spiritually seeking the Maya. As is typical of new age spiritualities in general, there seems to be little (sociological) “there-there” or persistently visible and identifiable ethnographic communities of New Age Maya spiritualism: There are no established (or consensually recognized) institutional structures, community forms of organization, spiritual-therapeutic practices, norms and criteria of training to be either a spiritual “leader,” a practitioner, or a believer. There is no ethnographic specificity (of persons, places, beliefs, texts, practices, experiences) to New Age Maya spiritualism. Instead, there are only dispersed multiplicities and heterologies that nonetheless form a diffuse movement, even arguably “a” “religion.” What provides some degree of substantive consistency or solidity is the constellation of theological and therapeutic-spiritual texts that emerged beginning in the 1970s, increased in the 1980s, and that proliferated and took shape as the 2012 phenomenon. I borrow Hoopes and Whitesides’ label of Mayanism to refer the academic, spiritualist, and popular literatures generated by and articulated to the question of the spiritual meanings/messages of Maya culture, specifically, for example, the Maya calendar (Hoopes, n.d., 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Whitesides & Hoopes, 2012, 2014; see also Aveni, 2009; Restall & Solari, 2011; van Stone, 2010). As these authors effectively demonstrate, engagement with “the Maya” goes much deeper than the 1970s into the 19<sup>th</sup> century and pervades literatures and discourses one might not otherwise anticipate as having anything to do with either the Maya or with spiritualism.

New Age Maya spiritualism, then, should be understood to have three facets. In theoretical terms, it is a cultic milieu and movement in the manner elaborated by Hanegraaf (1996: 14-18, 97, 514-522; see

also Campbell, 1972). It is also in some empirical measure “a religion” and a diffused cultural (if not precisely religious) “movement” articulated by Mayanism—that is the aforementioned extensive corpus of texts spawned in no small measure by and orbiting around the work of José Argüelles (e.g. 1987, 1988, 2002, 2011). New Age Maya spiritualism however is not simply this diverse range of theological and therapeutic texts. It is also a heterological series of spiritual practices, locations, activities, understandings, and communities—including potential self-identification as a spiritual seeking “Mayan”—that have no clear and definitive sociological shape, ethnographic specificity, and geographic location. Thus, there is a fundamental ethnographic problem of studying new age Maya spiritualities: If spirituality and spiritual seeking is to mean something more and other than a set of spiritual treatises and literal text-based discourses that invoke “the Maya,” how are we to study it and—more significantly—why? How is the heterogeneity of seeking the Maya as embodied, lived experiences and practices to be analytically constituted as objects to be investigated and what can be among the goals of understanding?

This is, of course, the general problem of studying new age spiritualities that scholars have grappled with over the last thirty plus years (e.g. Dawson, 2003, 2006; Fuller, 1989, 2001; Hammer & Rothstein, 2012; Heelas, 2008, 1998, 1996; Oliver, 2012; Pike, 2004; Redden, 2005). Methodologically, solutions have been developed based on finding these ephemeral communities in whatever type of corporate, momentary, or virtual form they may exist, especially in relation to those venues and forms of marketing spiritual seeking: conferences, lectures, workshops, websites/blogs, retreats, therapeutic venues and treatments, locations in the public sphere that are marked for any everyday social interaction (e.g. coffee shops and bookstores; see Fuller, 2001: 153-174), pilgrimages, and other activities or locations that do not fit the model of institutionally organized forms of religiosities (churches, temples, etc.). Theoretically, these solutions are intimately articulated to the conceptual framework of seeking/seekers and cultic milieu: These concepts were devised to shift priority and attention away from the more sociologically formalized and visible cults, and NRMs to individuals seeking spiritual “fixes” of various types through spiritual consumerism and the analysis of these self-focused individuated activities and experiences in relation

to the fluid, momentary, mobile, and ephemeral communities and *communitas* that are created. Analytically, this approach has resulted in provocative and persuasive interpretations of the relationship between new forms of subjectivity and self-making—that is, spiritual seeking—in relation to modernities and capitalism—that is, to cultural milieu constitutive of the “society” of seekers.

While this paradigmatic approach has yielded significant and stimulating results, the framework is not altogether useful for the study of the new age movement (in the most inclusive sense) in the Americas. This term references not simply “Latin” America as if somehow different than Canada and the US.<sup>6</sup> Rather, the foundational violence of colonialism and European settler colonization throughout the hemisphere entailed wholesale cultural and racial mixings that constituted a different context than the “Western” spiritualities and their locations in Europe and anglophone Americas, that have tended to be the focus of new age scholarship. In the Americas, new age spiritual seeking—past and present—is to a great extent constituted by seeking the cultural alterity of ex-colonized, enslaved, and otherwise marginalized peoples. While certainly it can be contested and debated, I would argue that even the establishment of religiosities that do not seem to have this characteristic are grounded in a history of Christian colonialism and evangelism: In other words, the colonizing religions that were implanted from Europe are directly shaped and informed by a history of negotiating the alterity of cultural and racial others in contexts of transcultural “contact,” dynamics, and exchange. This is indisputable in the cases of Spanish and Portuguese colonialisms, but less visible, perhaps, in English colonization: Pearce (1988: 3-49; see also Jennings, 2010) tracks how the different colonizer religions of what was to become the US forged specific modes of engaging Indigenous peoples in constituting their churches in the white settler colonies and the colonist mentality that was constitutive of the nation-state that later emerged.

One essential move in this direction is to reinstate the sociological “middle” region (cults, NRM, religions, sociohistorical contexts of communities, and communities of cultural and racial difference) between seeking and the society of seekers that generates seeking. Bringing these back into play as objects and elements of study allows for both the politics and political processes, on the one hand, and for

dynamics of syncretism, innovation, invention, transculturation, on the other hand, to be targeted for theorization and investigation. The development of decolonial approaches not only offers new concepts, tools, and focalization of research, but also provides a new framework of motivations, significance, and goals of studying these phenomena.

## The “Maya” of the Maya and Mayan Spiritual Seeking

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We will be celebrating the end of a many-thousands-of-years cycles that the Maya foresaw [correct use], at one of the New Modern Seven Wonders Of the World. Now, you have the chance of a lifetime to be present in the very complex the Mayans [incorrect use] built to convey their great knowledge to future generations. (< [https://powerplaces.com/Yucatan\\_2012.htm](https://powerplaces.com/Yucatan_2012.htm) >, accessed October 24, 2012).

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Figure 1. Source: Power Place Tours.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Between Practices and Beliefs: “Desperately Seeking Cults”**

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

These qualities make New Age Maya spiritualities and spiritualism fundamentally different than many other seeking in the new age milieu, such as Wicca or other varieties of Paganism, neo-Aztec brotherhoods and revitalization, ayahuasca spiritual tourism or other entheon religiosities, Trinitarian Espiritistas of México, Regla de Ochoa, and other hybrid Afro-Christian spiritualities, as well as theosophy and other hermetic-gnostic NRM. These all have discrete, however, fluid and porous, boundaries determined by any one or more diagnostic feature such as defined set of practices, shared consensus of beliefs, community of belonging or identity, norms of self-identification if not also membership, and established—that is, calendarized—events of *communitas*. Instead, precisely because there are no sociocultural criteria of belonging, identity, practices, and belief and because Maya seekers only form virtual, porous, pervasively global, de-localized, provisional, and ephemeral “communities,” it is more likely that Maya seekers are primarily visible and identify as followers, members, and adherents of some other recognizably discrete brand of spiritualism or spiritualist community.

The Rainbow Family has similar heterological and dispersed qualities, but this is conscious of itself as a movement and purposefully uses annual gatherings to constitute itself as community. This is not the case for spiritually seeking the Maya. One might have anticipated that the central significance given to the Maya calendar would constitute if not the basis for the sociological institutionalization of Mayanism it would provide a cultural institution for constituting orthodoxy. This, however, is not the case: Instead, the calendar offers those who develop scriptural Mayanism a near infinite possibility of inventing exegeses that may or may not coincide with any other esoteric calculation. Thus, for example, the new age ritual pilgrimage at Chichén Itzá is anchored by the Gregorian calendar to be March 21 (except leap years), but it is never calculated according to the Maya calendar! In any case, for example, in 1997 many different individuals and groups of spiritual seekers came for the equinox on the 21<sup>st</sup> to seek the Maya, but a different group intentionally organized its own separate event on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, with the argument that  $2+3 = 5$  and this is a sacred Maya number (Castañeda, 2000; Himpele & Castañeda, 1997). There is no pre-given hermeneutic framework or “ordained” body of interpreters from which to argue that this event of celebrating the symbolism of “5” should not have been held on any other

day, such as January 4<sup>th</sup> or April 23<sup>rd</sup>, that “adds up to” five. In other words, the interpretation of the calendar is ad hoc, invented, whimsical, and based more on the calculations of one or more Maya spiritual leaders to determine propitious dates to organize a spiritual pilgrimage or tour package “to become Maya” than on the actual mechanics of the Maya calendar or an established orthodoxy of exegesis.

How can these asociological and an-ethnographic features be explained? First, new age Maya spiritualism most tangibly exists primarily in the form of a discourse or discursive formation, which Hoopes designates as “Mayanism,” and this discourse, as he, Whitesides, and others analyze, is pervaded by perennialist assumptions and a variety of both generalized and specific gnostic understandings. Second, the articulation of this horizon of gnostic-perennialism within the imaginary of Maya mystery generates and motivates a specific kind of onto-theological project. This is a project of inventing (a) totalizing ontological and cosmological theology that actively cannibalizes any other readily available spiritualities, religiosities, cultures, beliefs, techniques, and ritual practices as if they were “ready-mades” to be used within Mayanism. I propose that analytically we understand new age Maya spiritualism or Mayanism in De Certeau’s (1984b) sense of a scriptural economy in which the writings of those engaging the Maya are scriptures in the literal sense of literature and in his analytical sense of a “text”—which he defines as a strategy of colonizing and cannibalizing all with which it comes into contact in order bring the outside into itself (De Certeau, 1984a).

The evidence par excellence is any and all the publications by José Argüelles who Mayanizes “western” gnosticism and esoterism. But also consider Hunbatz Men who is always stating in writing and telling his followers on his pilgrimage tours: “Do your own work” (Bryant, 1995: min 30). Barbara Hand Clow reiterates this message: “Hunbatz has often taught Westerners that we must do our work. We must seek the knowledge. What he is talking about is accessing the fifth dimension of cycles of time. The Maya calendar is a fifth dimensional time-cycle coding device” (Bryant, 1995: min 30). Perennialism is all-inclusive, but we need to differentiate between styles of theology making that foster a multicultural relativism that appreciates appropriated cultural practices as distinct and those appropriations that hybridize other

cultures in a syncretic blender that creates spiritual smoothies, as it were. The latter style cannibalizes to make a totalizing singularity. This is a dominant diagnostic of Mayanist theology in the scriptures, for example, of Argüelles (1987, 1988, 2002, 2011), Hunbatz Men (1989, 2009; Men & Martin 2020), Barbara Hand Clow (1995), Greg Braden (2010), John Major Jenkins (2009), Daniel Pinchbeck (2007, 2019). All of these authors are mostly engaged, with crucial exceptions such as Braden and Hand Clow, with “philosophizing” rather than providing prescriptive practices, that is, mandates of discernible (not vague and generalized) corporeal practices and activities. The contrary example of this tendency is Ac Tah (2010, 2011a, 2011b; Needham & Needham, n.d.), who became a Mayan teacher based on training from Hunbatz Men in a workshop retreat held in northern México. While he has written one spiritual-cosmological treatise on “sacred Maya geometry” (Ac Tah, 2010), his focus has been on creating and promoting his own technique of spiritual attainment: This corporal practice was invented by Ac Tah and can only be described as a Macarena stylized dance step smushed into Tai Chi-like movements sometimes conducted over a “Mayanized” “rug” similar to the game *Twister* but decorated with Maya day-sign glyphs to symbolize the “sacred Maya geometry.”

We thus have to differentiate between spiritual seekers who are consumer-clients of such charismatic cult leaders and these spiritual seeking cult leaders, however they identify-brand themselves. In so doing we are therefore confronted with the radical bifurcation between the onto-theological cosmologies of the Mayanist “scriptures” (and their authors) and the spiritual seeking of the Maya by the client-persons who consume-subscribe to spiritual Mayanism. This creates analytical and methodological problems of investigation. On the one hand, the scriptures of Mayanism do not connect to any specific, i.e., discrete, practices and experiences: Anything goes! “Do your own thing,” says Hunbatz Men. Ac Tah takes this a bit further in describing his “Mission: We are not looking for followers, nor promoting a certain philosophy; we are uniting and motivating people so we can live as one body, in peace and harmony!”<sup>16</sup>

Thus, there is no “archiving” development of a stabilized repertoire of prescribed activities (a.k.a., a canon of practices) around which seekers could self-identify as adherents, much less members.

There is no identifiable collectivity in an ethnographic community or sociologically organized group nor self-identifying members. As Hoopes puts it, “seekers have been meeting in private homes, hotel rooms, music festivals, and spiritual retreats to learn the details of the Maya calendar and its asserted implications” (Ibid.). Who then are the practitioners of this new age Maya spiritualism and how do they manifest sociologically so as to provide ethnographically accessible objects of study?

Certainly, in terms of our academic vision, they are definitely “occult” as they are invisible to our normal scholarly vision. New Age Maya spiritualism is globally pervasive, generalized religious movement that has discrete sociological expression primarily in the discernable forms of audience and client cults—thus, seekers of Maya are the consumers and clients of these cults. How do we look for, see, and analyze what is everywhere and yet nowhere? I suggest that we need to return to that middle region between the theoretical framework of “seeking” and the “society of seekers” to think through the heterology and heterogeneity of seeking with the goal of developing the appropriate analytics of ideal types of cults, seeking, and community.

## **Toward An Ideal Types Analytics of Spiritual Seeking**

What is the unity and diversity of modes of New Age Maya spiritualism in these two bifurcating approaches—that is, as spiritual Mayanism and as experiential-embodied practices of seeking the Maya? What is the specificity of these modes of seeking and how do they express similarities and differences with other modes of cults, NRM, seeking, and experiences? In this section, I first address this problem of comparing and contrasting spiritual Mayanism, which I have defined as mostly consisting of writings and texts, that is, as Mayanist scriptures, to other expressions and manifestations of new age spiritual seeking.

The most easily identifiable of these authors market themselves and their writings into brands with labels of self-identification such as “teachers,” “shamans,” “elders,” “Mayans,” or combinations of these. Several market themselves as “public intellectuals” (Daniel Pinchbeck) and “independent scholars” (Major Jenkins). We need to refurbish Weber in order to think how charisma is in our age “market branding”; this is clearly necessary to analyze contemporary politics—and populism—(consider Trump), but especially required in the study

of any spirituality or religiosity because of the way the logics and markets of capitalism pervade “belief” and create the conditions that enable “believing” in ways that the analytical concepts of “culture,” “ideology,” “religion” do not access (see Fuller 1989, 2001 on spiritual branding; De Certeau 1984c on believing). Market branding and niche selling thus leads to an ever expanding diversity of spiritual products within the logics of capitalism. Branding and commercialization, in turn, lead us to rethink the fundamental contradiction of “new age religion”: The “new age movement” is historically wedded to a romanticist anti-capitalist aesthetics, logics, consumerism, and materialism; indeed, Hanegraaf (1996: 515-520) argues that the New Age is culture critique of modernity. Yet the emergent spiritualities are consciously aware of being imbricated in capitalism and modernity in ways that are viewed not as a contradiction but more as an unproblematic “duality” we might say. Thus, we might also tweak Hanegraaf’s definition of “the New Age [as] synonymous with the cultic milieu having become conscious of itself as constituting a more or less unified ‘movement’” (1996: 17): This ironic or dual sided awareness—which may or may not be “duplicitous”—and attitude towards the capitalist culture of modernity should be understood as another diagnostic feature of the contemporary cultic milieu.

To understand the diversity of self-ascribed role types and labels, we must create ideal types that sort both client-consumers and spiritual “leaders” as well as their sociological articulation in a variety of different types of cults that account for branding, their relation to capitalist ideologies, and the products that are being produced-consumed. In the context of my teaching over the last ten years I have been developing criteria for constituting ideal types. I present these below as questions for comparing and contrasting expressions of spiritual seeking:

1. What are the terms and forms of self-identification and claims of spiritual expertise? What kinds of sources are asserted as authorizing such status, role, expertise? Sources might range, for example, from individualized achievement, training within an ethnographically existing “other” cultural community, or training by workshops and courses led by client cult spiritual leaders.
2. What are the forms of social organization of specialists, including recruitment, training, forms of expertise, and types (or domains)

of expertise knowledge? This might range from institutionalized corporate hierarchy of formal leaders and the cultural forms of distinct cultural communities to non-organized.

3. What are the types of sociological organization of cults—e.g. lifestyle, community, audience, and client? And what types of relationships do seekers and leaders establish with racial and cultural *other* communities that are the targets, source, means, and method of attaining spirituality? With whom do they interact and engage (what actors and segments of the community) and in what forms of sociological and commercial interaction?

4. What are the types and forms of the spiritual content that are produced as spiritual commodities for client-consumers (e.g. books, films, workshops, websites, social media, blogs, spiritual tourism)? What are the commodity forms of the spiritual content? how do seekers find and consume these? what are the material corporal-bodily practices and experiences of spiritual consumerism?

5. What are the strategic uses of spiritual branding in relation to the audience and client based cults consumption of spiritual, to create, consolidate, and transform the forms and modes of associated seeking by consumer-clients and adherent-followers? How is the spiritual commodity and expertise of the leader marketed?

6. What are the forms of “religious belief” that the spiritual leaders create and that spiritual seekers consume? This is a question not only whether spiritualism manifests elements of the “macro-traditions” of perennialism, esoterism, gnosticisms, shamanisms, and therapeutic curing, but also what ethnographically and historically cultural traditions are being sourced?<sup>17</sup> How are these transculturally “blended” or syncretized to prioritize what tradition?

Full discussion of these questions and how to formulate them in to criteria by which to develop ideal types requires an entirely different article for another day. Nonetheless brief clarifications can be made.

Criteria 1 and 2 are crucial for working through questions of how spiritual seeking articulates to formally coherent sets of “spiritualities,” whether or not such “traditions” are actual or projected. Stated another

way: how do self-identification, practices, and material system of objects correspond to academic and popular reifications such as “shamanism,” “gnosticism,” and “curanderismo”? Consider that “shaman” is an ascribed and self-identity term that may be used among seekers and in popular culture even in situations in which the practices are not shamanism in the critical academic restricted sense or even in expanded “core” and “classic” shamanism senses? This is often the case with Maya ritual specialists who are not shamans; many new age Maya “shamans” also turn out to be “plastic” or “white” shamans.

Criteria 3 builds on existing sociological typologies, such as the modified Stark and Bainbridge (2003) and Wallis (2003) typologies. These however were designed to study cults and NRMs within a specifically European context of emerging spiritualities and religiosities. They are not capacitated, in my view, to comprehend the kinds of transcultural and syncretic phenomena of the Americas. Further, the spiritual seeking of cultural and racial alterity must be explicitly theorized within the framework of ideal types.

Criteria 4, 5, and 6 are interconnected, but need to be differentiated to develop an adequate set of ideal types and, thus, analytical framework. Although these also require extended elaboration and exemplification, I limit myself to discuss, as a way to close off this section, the question of spiritual or sacred journeys as a crucial analytical locus of study.

## **Spiritual Branding, Spiritual Commodity Production, and Sacred Journey**

Spiritual seeking the Maya arguably has its greatest bodily-corporal manifestation and ethnographically “visible” expression in spiritual tourism. “Sacred journey” is its own unique category of ritual practice and is increasingly significant if not a predominant form of practice and experience for the spiritual seeking of racial and cultural alterity in the Americas. The technological transformations of the last thirty years, referring to digital and social media, have transformed the consumer-audience-client into a spiritual seeker in socio-geographic space. The spiritual market has expanded from books, lectures, conferences, DVD films, and workshops that required face-to-face interaction at the store or at the local spiritual center to blogs, websites, podcasts, and an

endless array of autoethnographic multimedia documentation that are consumed in private on the web. Spiritual providers—gurus, teachers, shamans, elders, public intellectuals, independent scholars, and others—have strategically created developed these media to reciprocally create/promote their brand and sell/communicate their teachings. This privatization of spiritual seeking via the web has involuted the dynamics of individual/group, self/personhood in baroque patterns. In this context the “sacred journey” has materialized as spiritual commodity fundamental to the continued success of one’s brand and to the social externalization of seekers’ experience as legitimately and “authentically” spiritual. It is only a slight exaggeration to assert that every new age website has a spiritual journey to sell. During the pandemic of 2020 the global stop to this must have created an enormously vital—truly vibrating and resonant—market of spiritual zooming. Let’s hope for a multitude of articles, dissertations, and books on this.

Spiritual tourism is the crucial entry point into the ethnographic study of spiritual seeking the Maya. This point can be generalized for many other emergent spiritualities and spiritual seeking in the Americas, whether or not they fall out of or in the strict or extended senses of “new age” (e.g. Castañeda, 1996, 2021; Feinberg, 2003; Fotiou, 2020; Himpele & Castañeda, 1997; Oosterbaan, 2021). Note that I do not use the word tourism in any way that implies a value or moral judgement, neither about the “authenticity” of the experience or the sociopolitical, cultural, or economic effects on societies that host tourism. As demonstrated by seventy years of tourism scholarship, spiritual pilgrimage has been and is always a form of tourism (e.g. Feifer, 1986; Di Giovine & Choe, 2019; Di Giovine & Picard, 2019). The point I underline here is that scholars of spiritualities and new religious movements must engage the extensive interdisciplinary research of tourism on the question of “sacred journey” as a dominant mode of new age spiritual practice.

### **To Close By Opening: What Next?**

This article is a theoretical essay that offers an approach to the study of new age spiritual seeking in general and for the study of New Age Maya spiritualism in particular. The theoretical framework of “spiritual seeking” and “cultic milieu” has been productive, especially regarding the relationship between emergent spiritual technologies of

subjectivity, forms of modernity, and capitalist logics of consumerism. The productivity of this paradigm of new age scholarship is premised on the theoretical move that de-prioritizes cults and NRM as the focalization of investigation; this has allowed for the society of seekers/seeking binary to become the privileged analytical object. In the present moment, however, it is time to now rethink how the analytical middle region of cults/NRM and cultural-religious communities can be reinstated into the same theoretical and methodological frames of analysis. Towards, this objective, this article offers a preliminary vision of how to develop an ideal-types framework that can move toward a more comprehensive understanding of a fuller range of the heterological and heterogenous forms of religiosities and spiritualities, including new “old” religions, new age spiritualities, and other alternative modalities spiritual seeking. Prior typologies from the sociology of religion have argued that simple typologies are better than multi-dimensional. In contradistinction, the argument here is that we actually need more and better ethnographically tuned criteria versus less: models based on one attribute but with three options does not actually provide a fruitful ideal type paradigm. I argue that we need to build a full panoply of criteria in order to create analytical ideal types that are robust enough to address the global heterogeneity of phenomena. The framework I propose here is designed as a way to investigate the lived politics, political structures, and transcultural dynamics that undergird both the society of seekers and spiritual seeking that target cultural alterities. These are dimensions of our present modernity that have yet to be addressed in full frontal interrogation.

This article, further, identifies shortcomings to the society of seekers/seeking when this research paradigm is imported to situations and contexts of the Americas. I pointedly use this term to refer not just to Canada and the US or to “Latin” America, but to all American nations which are all marked by histories of colonialism and white settler colonization that have created a significantly different kinds of cultural heterogeneity and racial pluralities than in Europe. The field of new age spiritualities has tended to focus on Eurocentric traditions of spirituality, whether orthodox or heterodox Christianities or reinvented religiosities that were assimilated into Christianity, and thus do not offer the analytical tools and focalization for understanding seeking spirituality through the alterity of other cultures and communities marked by

racial-ethnic difference. What is missing, therefore, are analyses of the politics not only of cultural appropriation, but of processes of invention, innovation, syncretism, and hybridity that are based in transcultural dynamics. I do not propose an open and shut case of outing “white” or “plastic” shamanism: Rather, we need to develop analytical tools that attend to the dynamics of transcultural exchange between individuals and communities that are marked by differentials of culture, religious beliefs, race, politics, belonging, and access to economic benefits.

This article used the contradictory and confusing use of Maya and Mayan as a point of entry to illustrate the need to focus on these politics as well as to point to complications in the transcultural syncretism that inhabits new age spiritual seeking. The briefly discussed case of Hunbatz Men, as well as Ac Tah, illustrates the complexities of power and how persons of diverse backgrounds can invent successful spiritual cults that have no relationship to any prior historical tradition of a people. But, further, Hunbatz Men illustrates how Maya identified persons can invent forms of spirituality that satisfy the spiritual consumerism of transnational seeker-clients whose place of origin may be anywhere in the world.

Although the “society of seekers” approach purposefully deprioritized questions of cult and community, these are essential frames for the analysis of spiritual seeking of the alterity (of marginalized cultures and discriminated racial communities) as the target, motivation, means, and method of attaining the desired spiritual subjectivity. By drawing from and significantly extending established work in the sociology of religion on cult typologies, I offer questions of comparison and contrast by which to develop an analytical ideal types framework. This move, I suggest, is vital to a reorientation toward a decolonial approach to spiritualities as it brings into focus the politics of transcultural invention that lies at very soul of the phenomena under question. Such a framework can generate productive comparison and contrast of different emergent spiritualities and religiosities in the Americas and elsewhere. It can allow for ethnographically grounded analysis of why specific cultural others are targeted as sources and means of spirituality and how persons from these communities of alterity respond, engage, and propitiate spiritual seeking as well as reject it as another form neocolonial and capitalist imperialism.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I use spiritualist in a generic anthropological sense of a person seeking spirituality. I do not mean or reference the restricted sense of a believer/practitioner of spiritist beliefs that is common to the field of religious studies.

<sup>2</sup> I continue to use the word cult but stripped of pejorative connotations as it links up with the typological work on cults and helps to think through ideal types in relation to consumerism.

<sup>3</sup> I sidestep the debate about whether the proliferation of emergent spiritualities and religiosities are *sensu strictu* “new age” or “alternative.” I use new age as cultic milieu and movement and thus alternative spiritualities that are not strictly speaking millenarian are included in this comprehensive purview just as much as traditional religiosities.

<sup>4</sup> The terms transculturation and transcultural, like syncretism, are concepts with complicated, dense, and often contradictory meanings that require lengthy discussion. This is not the goal of this article; thus, I ask the reader not to be distracted by the generic, fluid use to which I put these concepts.

<sup>5</sup> I do not use spiritualism in the specific meaning of spiritualist or spiritist beliefs and organizations. Instead, spiritualism is used in the sense of the general, philosophical idea of an ultimate immaterial reality that is expressed through beliefs and practices, which in turn articulate the inner being and value of humans.

<sup>6</sup> One might dismiss this by pointing to say volumes 3, 4, and 5 of Gallagher and Ashcraft’s (2006) massive reference work. Close inspection, however, of the contents reveals relatively little discussion of seeking cultural alterity and forms of “mixing” that are constitutive of the Americas.

<sup>7</sup> There are a number of websites that inform wider publics on this and related points: See < [http://www.osea-cite.org/program/maya\\_or\\_mayans.php](http://www.osea-cite.org/program/maya_or_mayans.php) > ; < <https://www.mayatraditions.org/maya-vs-mayan-by-laura-martin-ph-d/> >.

<sup>8</sup> I purposefully refer to US nationality with “US” not “American” as I use the latter to underscore my use of this term in the hemispheric sense. Guatemalans are also Americans.

<sup>9</sup> There is a duplicity in the concept of “civilization” and its application that often precludes thinking and understanding (in common discourse and popular audiences) that Maya civilization continues in existence and vibrancy in analogous ways as “Western” civilization. My statement seeks to provoke questioning these assumptions beyond this article.

<sup>10</sup> See < <https://www.innertraditions.com/author/hunbatz-men> > (Accessed May 29, 2021). It is impossible to fully interrogate either Maya identity or Hunbatz Men’s claims of being Maya/Mayan in this article. For Hunbatz’s “teachings” see Men (1989, 2009) and Men and Martin (2020).

<sup>11</sup> Tedlock argues that the daykeepers are hybrid or mixed “priest-shamans” in terms of sociological roles and positions. Daykeepers (or *ahk’ij*) and “mother-fathers” are fully integrated in the established religious hierarchy to attend

to the community and also do private divination as well as spiritual healings. While there is extensive and ongoing debate on shamanism (e.g. Kehoe, 2000; Wernitznig, 2003, 2006), I insist on the significance of one diagnostic: The presence or absence of trance and associated ritual performance of such ASC. In other words, because Maya healers and ritual specialists who serve individuals and communities, regardless of the corporate-institutionalized organization, do not use ASC, only prayer, it is only a racialized stereotyping that allows for these to be called “shamans” and for this idea to be propagated in popular cultures of the Americas as common-sense. Love (2012) is a unique example that contradicts the near complete agreement in the anthropology of Yucatán to call Maya healers and ritual specialists *hmèen* and to eschew the label of “shaman” as inappropriate and inaccurate (e.g. Arvigo, 1994; Sosa, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> See also Ayora-Díaz (1998, 2000), Christenson (2016), Deuss (2013), González and Sitler (2010), Hawkins (2021), Molesky-Poz (2008), Pitarch (2007), Sitler and González (2010) on ways in which Maya persons who are specialists in Maya healing, ritual, or religion turn away from attending to the communities in which they have a sanctioned role in order to attend to foreign tourists seeking Maya spirituality.

<sup>13</sup> On Maya identity in Yucatán and generally see Castañeda (2005), Castillo Cocom (2005, 2007), Hernández Reyna and Castillo Cocom (2021), Montejo (2005), Fischer (1999), Fischer and Mckenna-Brown (1996), Restall (2005), Restall and Gabbert (2017), Restall and Solari (2020), Warren (1998).

<sup>14</sup> This autobiographic novel or “experiential” narrative is a parodic re-writing and critique of Carlos Castaneda’s *Conversations with Don Juan* that both dismisses “shamanism” as opposed to a gnostic approach and discards Eurocentric religiosities by subsuming gnosticism and gnostic keyword concepts to the “Mayan” theology and terminology he has invented.

<sup>15</sup> I first met Hunbatz Men at the Hotel Misión (now under new ownership as the Hotel Chichén Itzá), Pisté, Yucatán, where his 1988 equinox pilgrimage tour group overnights. At that time he was unable to sustain a conversation with me in Maya. See Bryant (1995), Himpele and Castañeda (1997), and Vivanco (2003) on the Chichén equinox as a new age Maya event.

<sup>16</sup> < [https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Speak-With-Mayan-Spiritual-Leader-Ac-Tah-on-December-7.html?soid=1102532372455&aid=k8vHhQ8\\_QVY](https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Speak-With-Mayan-Spiritual-Leader-Ac-Tah-on-December-7.html?soid=1102532372455&aid=k8vHhQ8_QVY) > (Accessed June 5, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> It is impossible to enter into the thick debates about the status of the term Gnosticism. I gloss over these and use the word in the plural with lower case as a way to point to my position on this complicated set of issues.

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*“Buscando espiritualmente a los Mayas”:  
hacia un enfoque decolonial de las espiritualidades mayas  
de la Nueva Era*

**Resumen:** Este artículo es un ensayo teórico que ofrece una aproximación al estudio de la búsqueda espiritual *new age* en general y al estudio del espiritualismo maya *new age* en particular. El marco teórico de la “búsqueda espiritual” y el “medio cultural” ha sido productivo, especialmente en lo que respecta a la relación entre las tecnologías espirituales emergentes de la subjetividad, las formas de la modernidad y las lógicas capitalistas del consumismo. Sin embargo, en este artículo se identifican las deficiencias de este paradigma de investigación: no proporciona ni el enfoque analítico ni las herramientas conceptuales para entender la búsqueda de la espiritualidad a través de la alteridad de otras culturas y comunidades marcadas por la diferencia racial-étnica. Así también, se explica el uso contradictorio y confuso de los mayas y las mayas como punto de entrada para ilustrar la necesidad de atender a los procesos transculturales y a las políticas de transculturación. A partir de trabajos establecidos en la sociología de la religión sobre tipologías de culto, ofrezco criterios para crear un marco analítico de tipos ideales que pueda comenzar a abordar cuestiones de política, intercambio transcultural y dinámica de búsqueda/comunidad, así como permitir una comparación y contraste productivos de diferentes espiritualidades y religiosidades emergentes en las Américas y en otros lugares. Los primeros pasos hacia el desarrollo de este marco de tipos ideales se presentan pensando en las cuestiones de establecer la búsqueda espiritual maya de la nueva era como objeto de estudio.

**Palabras clave:** Nueva Era; Cultos mayas; Teologías; Rituales; Experiencia

*“Buscando espiritualmente os Maias”:  
rumo a um enfoque decolonial das espiritualidades maias da Nova Era*

**Resumo:** Este artigo é um ensaio teórico que oferece uma abordagem ao estudo da busca espiritual da Nova Era em geral e, em particular, ao estudo do espiritualismo maia da Nova Era. O marco teórico da “busca espiritual” e do “*cultic milieu*” tem sido especialmente produtivo no que diz respeito à relação entre emergentes tecnologias espirituais de subjetividade, formas de modernidade e lógicas capitalistas de consumismo. No entanto, este artigo identifica deficiências nesse paradigma de pesquisa: ele não fornece o enfoque analítico ou as ferramentas conceituais para a compreensão da busca da espiritualidade por meio da alteridade de outras culturas e comunidades marcadas pela diferença étnico-racial. Este artigo aborda o uso contraditório e confuso do termo “Maia” como ponto de entrada para ilustrar a necessidade de se atentar aos processos transculturais e as políticas de transculturaçã.

A partir de trabalhos estabelecidos na sociologia da religião sobre tipologias de cultos, ofereço critérios para se criar um marco analítico de tipos ideias que podem tanto começar a abordar questões de política, intercâmbio transcultural e dinâmica busca/comunidade, como permitir a realização de comparações e contrastes produtivos de diferentes espiritualidade e religiosidades emergentes nas Américas e em outros lugares. São apresentados os primeiros passos para o desenvolvimento deste marco de tipos ideias ao refletir sobre as questões referentes ao estabelecimento da busca espiritual maia da Nova Era como objeto de estudo.

**Palavras-chave:** Nova Era; Cultos maias; Teologias; Rituais; Experiência