



Review of doctoral dissertation:

Sacred Landscape of the Ixil Maya of Guatemala: relationship between people and sacred places in ritual, oral tradition and contemporary storytelling written by Monika Banach

At the beginning, I must write that Monika Banach's doctoral thesis made a deep impression on me and I consider it one of the best doctoral theses I have read recently. It has an excellently chosen methodology, which she consistently applies to the researched material, and the value of the material itself is thus multiplied. At no one point does it deviate from the essence of the dissertation, which should be theoretical reflection at a high academic level, and it does not burden us with accumulated material without the continuous application of a methodological approach. Nevertheless, there are a few small things in the content of the work, which I will take the liberty of commenting critically below. However, within the framework of the entire work, these are only small notes and rather contributions to the discussion and topics for some possible improvements.

Somewhere in the introduction, I would like to see at least a brief information about the orthography within the Mayan languages used. This is usually a problem, due to various parallel ways, such as whether or not it is necessary to write the glottal sign above b (b') and the like (if it is automatically present everywhere). Personally, I was a bit surprised by the use of Tx instead of Ch, as I see similar terms written differently in other texts (including Ch'ol Winaq versus Tx'ol Winaq, /p.14/, I would also be interested (apparently it exists, but it is not defined in the work) phonetic difference between e.g. Ch'e'x /p.134/ and Tx'umilal /p.135/, I mean the pronunciation of initial Ch' and Tx' in both words etc. I appreciate that the orthography is consistent throughout the work, which is the most important thing of all, but I would like to see (maybe I just missed it) an introduction or explanation for it. As for the language(s), I miss a bit in the initial presentation of the Ixil region the broader language characteristics and connectivity /p.16-19/, i.e. language maps of the immediate area, language groups and subgroups, overlaps and differences.

In the citation, the term PRAX appears, which stands for Project Xacbal Final Report, but this report probably has an author or editor who should be credited. Without explanation, there are non-author abbreviations in the bibliography, e.g. CONIC, MARN, MINUGUA, which should be separated from the author's bibliography and provided with an appropriate explanation.

On page 20 it says "Pedro de Alvarado's campaing in Guatemnala in 1924...", which must be a typo, likewise Tacana volvano... /p.63/, Portestant churches /p.153/.

The categories "stillness" and "stillness in motion" are very interestingly defined /p.26/ from the point of view of the very complex issue of the "tradition". However, I am afraid that the heterogeneity of information sources is not fully reflected in the study and interpretation itself. It would probably be useful to first define the basic categories of informants in terms of faith or belief, for example: 1) Neo-Protestant /emic definition evangelist/, 2) Official Catholic /without affiliation to cofradias/, 3) Cofrade /member of local religious hierarchy or member of cofradias /, 4) Traditionalist /preserving the rituals and faith of the ancestors/, can be cofrade at the same time, 5) Neo-traditionalist /influenced by fragments of the original belief along with global culture, literature and movies, usually also New Age ideology, Pan-Mayanism and Pan-Indigenism. This often includes the young generation, or the so-called Madretierristas and the like. Alternatively, other categories (perhaps agnostics and others) that the author revealed in the specific environment of her research. It is then of course very important from which perspective that "tradition" is presented, while the information on the level of "tradition" or costumbre is handled relatively freely. The theoretical problematization of tradition as a construct and related anthropological definitions and concepts would help, too. Catholicism and costumbre are sometimes put on the same level even by informants /p.127/, which is an important indicator and would again require a more detailed analysis of the category.

Although their practical role in the community is mentioned, the global spiritual phenomena influenced by the New Age are not sufficiently developed theoretically. For example, the expansion of the concept of "energy" used not only when describing the influence of Cholq'ij on fate /p.129/, elsewhere as cosmic energy or



UNIVERZITA KOMENSKÉHO V BRATISLAVE

FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

Katedra porovnávacej religionistiky

Gondova 2, 818 01 Bratislava 16



confluence of cosmic energy /p.151/, over-exposition of the book Popol Vuh as a Mayan Bible and others. It is also necessary to mention the findings from the researches of archaeology, epigraphy and anthropology used in artificial contexts for the idealized Mayan past, which is constructed in an even more striking way than the mentioned "academic surrealism". The reverse influence of globalized currents such as the mentioned Circulo Sagrado de Abuelos y Abuelas Sabios del Planeta, International Mayan League, Gran Consejo Nacional de Autoridades Ancestrales Mayas Garifunas y Xinkas de Ixim Ulew, National Conference of the Ministers of the Maya Spirituality Oxlajuj Ajpop, many so-called guias espirituales, who have their numerous local organizations, Mayan philosophers etc. are often not only part of "revitalization" movements, as the paper /p.146/ states. They have a fundamental influence on the current perception of "tradition" and therefore costumbre, which is in fact newly constituted according to postmodern and global criteria. Although this influence is analyzed in the work /p.143-154/, its theoretical reflection is, in my opinion, somewhat underestimated. Also, their influence on the content, which is presented in the work as "costumbre", is not completely distinguished. The strengthening of influence in the community of non-traditional saints /p.154/, probably as a counterweight to neo-Protestant conversions, is one of the very interesting phenomena of the current religious dynamics of the region and belongs to the excellent insights of this work.

An analysis of the concept of syncretism /p.82 and further/ could perhaps belong to the introductory chapters. I believe that it is a very complicated category in Mesoamerica (significantly for the Maya) and it is not entirely obvious to use it when describing faith or belief. Namely, it presupposes a mixing of elements, and many authors rather believe that Christianity was integrated into the original belief and not vice versa. Structurally, the original belief was only minimally or almost completely changed, which does not correspond to the standard syncretism derived typologically primarily from Hellenistic patterns. So I would expect some discussion on the topic of syncretism, and not the "obvious" use of this somewhat problematic term.

The dissertation also carries elements of a certain activism /p.47-48 and further/. If I did not personally know the Guatemalan reality, I might argue that activism contradicts the method and does not belong to the dissertation, but.. unfortunately, the local reality is such that one who studies its tragic circumstances more deeply cannot remain without a personal bias or attitude. I think that in this case it is fully understandable, and this approach can even be understood as part of one of the goals of the work, not only to preserve very valuable data from the region, but also to support and help it in its struggle for survival.

I consider reporting the full names of informants to be a slightly more serious ethical problem. Such a practice is currently not common, even if the informants themselves give permission to state their full names. The problem is that they cannot always imagine the impact of such work (published in the press or on the Internet) on their private life. Especially in Guatemala we have very sad examples of attacks and even murders of ordinary "curanderos", also as a manifestation of hate (especially by neo-Protestant converts) towards representatives of the traditional belief. By publishing names and locations, they can be unwittingly exposed to this hatred. The second potential danger comes from tourists and enthusiasts of alternative spirituality, who may seek out and harass some of the described persons. I would therefore suggest to replace the names with invented or coded names when making this work available.

I consider the passage where the author mentions how during the research she had dreams that are strikingly reminiscent of the investigated spiritual entities (watching, listening and talking mountains) /p.95/ to be somewhat disturbing. Even though the author refers to the "reflexive approach" and similar experiences of other researchers, this is an element that, on the one hand, I do not dispute, on the other hand, I believe that it does not belong in the dissertation. Namely, it is too reminiscent of the emic perspective, which must be an object and not a subject of research, regardless of the ontological turn (even this method does not cancel the basic scientific subject-object approach, rather it corrects the status of objects). Such an experience should also be intersubjectively verifiable, that is, another research subject should have an identical experience under identical circumstances. Here, however, a vague reference to some other researchers is probably not enough... In research of the "participant observation", there is always the risk of being drawn into the game or, epistemologically: the so-called "merging horizons". However, it is necessary to programmatically avoid this exact moment. Not because they don't match the author's experience (there are many kinds of experience), but because putting it into a dissertation doesn't quite fit its genre and method. It should probably be expressed in another forum. However, this does not mean that it somehow interferes with the overall methodology of the work, which is excellent on all sides.



UNIVERZITA KOMENSKÉHO V BRATISLAVE

FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

Katedra porovnávacej religionistiky

Gondova 2, 818 01 Bratislava 16



I can agree with the quoted "surrealistic academic discord" /p.25/. I think this history started a long time ago, but the groundbreaking book *Maya Cosmos*, and Linda Schele brought it to the present level. As well as the flat applications of Mircea Eliade's theory to the study of Maya religion.

Dominical days defined by Lincoln /p.69/ would be good to compare with the first mention of such an arrangement of time and ritual, which we find in Diego de Landa very detailed and precisely defined (also labeled Dominical days), and also defines for the first time the five remaining special days.

At a somewhat weak level, map images are presented in the work. The maps are unclear, the signs used are non-standard. Contours, names of municipalities and localities, landmarks, global and local views are missing. Simply, the maps would require the help of a specialist to comply with topographical standards, otherwise their level of information needlessly lags behind the excellent text instead of helping it. Due to the amount and variety of data from the field of sacred topography, it would be appropriate to place the data in a GIS environment. The synergistic effect and variability of their use could be very useful for conclusions. Although such use is mentioned at the end of the work /p.273, 276/ for all 40 studied sacred places, I did not manage to identify any summary of the results of the work with GIS and perhaps (due to my own inattention) I overlooked the role of this tool defined in the initial methodology of the work.

The context of the mention of the dualistic perspective specific to Europeans is not entirely clear /p. 77/ as well as an allusions to binary oppositions /p.88/. In the first case, it may be a philosophical perspective from the time of Descartes, but it may be referring to the sacred-profane duality defined in the study of religion by Durkheim, Soederblom or Otto. However, it should not be forgotten that even the binary oppositions, so frequent among the Maya, represent a certain kind of dualism. If we want to contrast European dualism with Mesoamerican dualism (well-defined, for example, in various works by Miguel Leon-Portilla), it would be appropriate to define these terms and the differences between them more precisely in the mentioned places.

Archaeological evidence of the Lacandon presence in the region of Xakb'al river in the 16th-18th centuries /p. 163/ can form an important element for understanding the real historical context of some of the investigated narratives. However, an exact citation and description of such a local archaeological find is missing. Overall, when investigating the context of the historical Lacandon movement in space, it would be good to rely more than historical sources (which are often based on erroneous ethnic interpretations), especially archaeological and ethnohistorical sources. Part of the chapter Lacandones /p. 232-239/ could then probably offer somehow more useful context. Joel Palka's book: *Unconquered Lacandon Maya – Ethnohistory and Archeology of Indigenous Cultural Change* would be a suitable guide.

While reading the dissertation, I have to constantly express my sympathy for the methodological approach of the author, which is very systematic and up-to-date. Terms like Eco-systems of beings /27/, Polysemic places /31/ Multinatural perspectivism /38/ beings of manifold kinds /38/ etc. they are very suitable tools for grasping the raised topic. I also think it is excellent to take over the idea of multilocality and "topological stereotypes" /p.86/. I believe that these were excellently chosen and sufficiently critically confronted starting points for this type of research. I would also like to state that decolonizing methodologies are currently very important for this type of work. The author is right that the previous works are very often based on the imperial beliefs about the Other and we still have a great debt to correct this not only ethical but also methodological mistake. The work with perspectivist ontology in the adaptation to the Maya environment /p.103/ makes very good sense and results in the mentioned context, even in the adaptation to the investigated microregion /p.104 and further/, I appreciate it very much.

The search for the definition of "Mundos" /90-93/ also seems to me to be of high quality and methodologically innovative. I consider it one of several highlights of the work, there is a particularly successful connection of meaningful theory with the field data.

When interpreting or discussing Kamawiil /p. 167-171/ our article on the living ceramics of Dora Maritza García Patzán and Milan Kováč: *Vasijas animadas. Vida y muerte de la cerámica Maya*, might also contribute a little. In general, it is sad to find out about the role of archaeological excavations in the total destruction of original belief systems.

Very interesting are the data on Protestantism as a "civilizing agent", but also the transfer of neo-Protestant prayers to "montes de oración" /p. 153/. It would perhaps be appropriate to mention the general situation of



UNIVERZITA KOMENSKÉHO V BRATISLAVE

FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

Katedra porovnávacej religionistiky

Gondova 2, 818 01 Bratislava 16



Mayan communities in connection with the massive new wave of conversion to neo-Protestant churches (for example, well described in the book Mario Humberto Ruz and Carlos Garma Navarro: Protestantismo en el mundo maya contemporáneo) and perhaps a greater focus on neo-Protestant strategy of completion of the new "spiritual conquest". In this light, it would not be so surprising to adapt local spirituality to corporate systems as "part of their corporate social responsibility" or the participation of engineers in the ceremony /p. 175/ to the completely perverted "Communist sorcerers" /p.127/.

The explanation of the term Naloj in its entire context belongs to the best parts of the work /p.194-202/, as well as the stories and places connected with the concept of Paxil, and actually the whole part of the work about caves.

In considering the function of speleothems, I would like to offer as a comparison such an object in Yaxchilán (it was carved like a stela during the Classic period), which, according to my findings, plays a key role in the Lacandon cosmovision, because it represents the tree of life and the place where the gods descend to earth (more in Milan Kováč: The Worshipers of Stones. Lacandon Sacred Stone Landscape).

The whole part of the dissertation working with the entire semantic complex of Tx'ol Winaq is excellently processed and also excellently able to work with the categories of history and identity, in addition to valuable narratives, exactly in accordance with the proclaimed methodological discourse, framed by such authorities as Tim Ingold, Philippe Descola and others. I think that with this part, but also with others (where the author very consistently followed all connections and layers), she demonstrated the real multivocality of the Ixil sacred places in different context.

The entire dissertation is also an important contribution to the redefining of animism within the current extraordinary efforts within ontological turn methods. But also when examining contemporary religious dynamics, analytical work with narratives and the relationship to the landscape, etc. Above all, however, it is excellently processed as a unique non-linear view of the local history. I would like to recommend the work, after consideration of minor modifications, for publication, and to fulfill its purpose of serving also as the ancestral memory storage and for to declare the right to sacred land for the local community, certainly also in Spanish translation.

My overall conclusion is that Monika Banach's dissertation meets all the required criteria, it is a convincing combination of theoretical effort with excellent material of high heuristic value, and therefore I recommend her for defense and propose that she be awarded a Ph.D. (Philosophiae Doctor) or its local equivalent.

Professor Milan Kováč, PhD.

Chair of the Department of Comparative Religion and director of The Center of Mesoamerican Studies,
Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava

Phone: +421 948 509 140

E-mail: milan.kovac@uniba.sk

In Bratislava, October 26th 2022.