

# Persisting Worldviews and Conflicted Development along the Ruta Maya

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*How do Maya worldviews intersect with the cultural and environmental challenges facing Maya communities in contemporary Mesoamerica? Using an ethnographic approach, this paper focuses on how Maya activists and community leaders resist development projects perceived as encroaching on indigenous autonomy and placing stress on local community resources such as forests and water. Two cases, one involving resistance to the so-called Tren Maya (Maya Train) on the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico and the other a community reforestation project in highland Guatemala, demonstrate how Maya ways of knowing challenge Western approaches to development and modernity. Concepts such as human environmental rights and the notion of “integral ecology” from Pope Francis’s Laudato Si’ are referenced as potential points of convergence with Maya agendas. Yet, this paper emphasizes Maya frameworks for preserving cultural identity and how these contrast with state-driven and entrepreneurial conservation and development models that impact indigenous lifeways throughout the region. Issues such as reforestation, resistance to megaprojects, reforestation, and the link between territory and cultural identity are discussed in light of the neglect of ancestral lifeways highlighted by activists.*

**Keywords:** cultural activism, territory, Maya cosmovisión, ancestors, megaprojects



“With globalization of the economy, it is evident that indigenous resources such as land will be the focus of problems in the future. With the shift from a use-value economy to exchange-value capitalist production, the ancestors’ gifts of land and seeds are being abandoned in favor of foreign cash crops, thus distancing Jakalteq from their traditional way of life. Land has become a commodity, and it is more expensive to buy a house or a piece of land in Jacaltenango than in Quetzaltenango or Guatemala City. Even though the capitalist economy now prevails in Jacaltenango and surrounding municipios in the Guatemalan highlands, Jakalteq are also striving to revitalize traditional ways that will sustain them even in a modern world.” (Montejo 2004:255)

This paper is an effort to think across national boundaries in the consideration of Maya responses to development agendas in Mesoamerica. We have opted for a comparative focus in line with the volume *Pluralizing Ethnography: Comparison and Representation in Maya Cultures, Histories, and Identities* that grew out of a seminar at the School of American Research in 2000



(Watanabe and Fisher 2004a). The work sought to account for how Maya at the most recent turn of the century in both Mexico and Guatemala had “become prominent political actors in national and international arenas routinely challenging government policy makers and foreign scholars alike” (Watanabe and Fisher 2004b:5). More to the point, the editors of the volume were inspired by “activists who counter political challenges to Maya cultural authenticity by invoking Maya languages and cosmologies, memory and experience, practices and values, not as timeless survivals from their ancestors but as living proof of a history of creative cultural resilience in the spirit of those ancestors” (Watanabe and Fisher 2004b:5). At that moment, the most prominent activists (at

least internationally) were the Zapatistas in Mexico and Maya Movement intellectuals in Guatemala who were articulating a cultural activism that emphasized “*reivindicación* – recognition, as well as restitution” (Watanabe and Fisher 2004b:20). The comparative thrust of the volume asked readers to look across national borders in an effort to develop a pluralistic perspective in considering the contingent nature of Maya practices in the midst of change emanating at various scales of analysis, change we reference with terms like globalization or transnationalism.

Although written nearly two decades ago, the epigraph from the Jakalteq academic and writer Victor Montejo (2004), points toward the theme of this article: an explication of how residents of some Maya communities seek to respond to the social change rooted in the forces of globalization and the development agendas pushed by the national governments in the region, particularly in Mexico and Guatemala. This change is often marked by the dispossession of lands belonging to indigenous peoples and communities and by the alienation of people from persistent lifeways and cosmologies tied to *costumbre* (practices resulting from the overlay of Spanish colonial impositions on indigenous belief systems) and place in the Maya communities of Mesoamerica (MacKenzie 2016:61-64). Historically, these lifeways and knowledge systems were rooted in subsistence agriculture tied to maize cultivation. Montejo points to the tension that results when the commodification of land and production practices impinge upon local community life, frequently pushing people to migrate transnationally in order to seek better life opportunities in the U.S.A. The burden of this

essay is to provide the outlines of an ethnographic approach to contemporary human-environment relations in the Maya culture region and point to possibilities for the revitalization and renewal of lifeways that will be sustainable into the future.

In line with Montejo's thought, we seek to engage a pluralistic perspective by considering contemporary Maya activism in relation to environmental issues, specifically the interplay between Maya worldviews that motivate activism in the face of development agendas frequently marked as megaprojects and labeled as extractivist extensions of the colonialism tied to the Spanish invasion of 500 years ago. The lens might be considered a kind of advocacy or activist anthropology in some frameworks, although most days perhaps we should be content with the modest thought of a kind of ethnographic engagement that bears witness to Maya interpretations of their own reality and practices of resistance. Although less focused on particular projects than long-term archaeological research that actually seeks to respond to local community members in its design and implementation, reading the landscape of sociopolitical interaction is no less dependent upon contextualization than is reading the archaeological record. Archaeologists Aline Magnoni, Traci Ardren, and Scot Hutson (2007:373) favor "a relational approach to identity formation." Following the work of Tim Ingold, they emphasize the "perpetuation of indisputable cultural continuities that link ancient and contemporary Maya in the daily practices re-enacted in cultural meaningful landscapes and not in a genealogical ancestral connection." This approach provides space for heterogenous understandings of Maya identity and responses to social change—as opposed to the homogeneity implied in terms such as *Mundo Maya*. While the emphasis here is on resistance to what we might loosely refer to as the vagaries of globalization, it is true that many Maya have worked to accommodate so-called modernity into their production systems as well as their religious practices. One example among farmers from the Guatemalan highlands has been the adoption of non-traditional agricultural exports such as broccoli for the consumer market in the United States (Fischer and Benson 2006). Adaptation and accommodation have been major themes in Maya responses to colonial agendas since the beginning of the Spanish incursion. Making sense of these processes is a space for collaboration between anthropologists and community members in applying different forms of knowledge to immediate social problems such as education, health care, or the search for culturally appropriate development models.

Some contextualization is necessary to frame the two case studies addressed here. The first study centers on resistance to the Tren Maya project that is envisioned to extend from the Mexican states of Chiapas and Tabasco and throughout the Yucatán Peninsula, and the other is a local-level reforestation effort in a K'iche' Maya community in the Guatemalan highlands. Both cases foreground a language of resistance to development and development projects that takes its impetus from understandings of Maya identity and territorial attachment that are essential to making sense of human-environment relationships from the standpoint of Maya cosmivision.

This worldview, according to the Accord on the Rights and Identity of Indigenous Peoples, adopted as a side agreement before the signing of the final peace accord that formally ended the country's 36-year civil conflict in 1996, "is based on the harmonious relation between all the elements of the universe, in which the human being is only one element more, the earth is the mother that gives life, and maize is the sacred sign, the way of its culture. This cosmivision has been transmitted from generation to generation through material production and writing and through oral tradition, in

which women have played a determinative role” (Cabrera and Cifuentes 1997, 81, our translation). A more complete formulation would consider specific ceremonies or ritual activities tied to the 260-day Mesoamerican divinatory calendar or *Cholq’ij* (Cabrera 1995), the work of the spiritual guides or “daykeepers” (*ajq’ijab*) who lead these ceremonies (Tedlock 1992), the conceptualization of a quadrupartite cosmos (Rice 2004:19-21), and an even more direct connection between maize production and human identity as narrated in the *Pop Wuj*, the sacred book of the Maya K’iche’ language community that in Guatemala is sometimes called the Maya Bible (Christenson 2007). The emphasis here is on how enduring memory and cultural practices transcend any static sense of identity or essentialism and embody a response to the demands of modernity.

Maya cosmivision, then, underpins persistent identity formulations that claim continuity with millenarian, or ancient, Maya culture. One study on the effort to define and disseminate a unified sense of Maya worldviews by Maya themselves in Guatemala concludes that “their appropriation and redefinition [of Maya Cosmovision] shows, yet again, that cultures are dynamic, and discovers horizons for the decolonialization of political, medical, cultural, and knowledge practices. Without falling into idealism, it is a notion that weaves together symbolism, spirituality, politics, and self-management” (Cano Contreras et al. 2018, our translation). In both Mexico and Guatemala, Maya identity references a connection with the ancestors and ancestral ways of thinking presenting a challenge to the history of colonialism in Mesoamerica, the sovereignty of the nation-state, and imposed development agendas, the latter frequently embodied in so-called megaprojects that are portrayed as crossing borders or uniting people even as they all too often exclude the voices (and the desires) of those they impact.

## Context

We use the idea of the Ruta Maya in the title of this essay as shorthand for efforts over the past three decades to frame touristic activities and promote development in southern Mesoamerica. The ideas received particular impetus three decades ago in *National Geographic* (Garrett 1989) when the Ruta Maya was promoted as “the idea of a developed route to connect the many tourist attractions” in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador (Taylor 2018: 46), the region some of us might refer to as the Maya cultural region. By 1992, the Ruta Maya had been rebranded as Mundo Maya, which received money from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) “to develop a circuit of Maya archaeological sites along with eco and adventure tourism across Mesoamerica” (Grandia 2007: 492).

This branding connected with other initiatives that focused on conservation agendas and economic development. The Calakmul Biosphere Reserve (1989) and the Maya Biosphere Reserve (1990) were part of the so-called Maya Forest in Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize and make up the largest expanse of contiguous rain forest north of the Amazon Basin. The Mesoamerican Biological Corridor (MBC) was founded in 1997 and portrayed as a “transboundary conservation and development project” including the seven Central American countries and five states in southeastern Mexico (Holland 2012: 56; Grandia 2007). The agenda behind these reserves is complicated, and restrictions on productive activity in core reserve areas have focused more on conservation or modes of cultural tourism that often have detrimental impacts on the subsistence activities of local

residents and contribute to population displacement when people migrate either temporarily or permanently in search of work opportunities. The stakes can be seen in the debate surrounding deforestation in the Maya reserve in Guatemala where communities in the eastern Petén receiving concessions to use core biosphere areas for production have done a much better job of preserving forests and preventing fires than in the west where access is more restrictive (Malkin 2015).

To all appearances these environmental projects would be considered “soft” development projects more in line with sustainable development models. Nevertheless, in the Mundo Maya, the issues quickly become more complicated when conservation agendas are considered in tandem with trade agreements like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 that precipitated the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, the Puebla Panama Plan (PPP) in 2004, and Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) between 2006-2009. Returning to the MBC, Liza Grandia refers to it as “green neoliberalism” (2007:486) and reports that a 2001 policy paper for the MBC ultimately shifts to “advocate that a more explicit involvement of the private sector in conservation could make economic growth and sustainable development mutually reinforcing.” She continues by noting that in “such planning documents the Mesoamerican people are described as amorphous ‘stakeholders’ (a peculiar word itself not easily translated into Spanish)—thereby implying that they may participate in the MBC through ownership, but not as citizens with inherent rights and freedoms” (2007:487). This reflects similar contradictions that Juanita Sundburg (2003) noted between protecting the environment and democratization in her research in the Maya Biosphere Reserve. When Grandia turns again to the PPP, she glosses the acronym as “privatisation, profiteering, and poverty” (2007:490-492).

The intent here is to place perspectives grounded in indigenous, specifically Maya, knowledge systems in conversation with other perspectives that at least initially are more directly tied to Western conceptions of development and progress. From the Western perspective and the realm of political ecology, we might think of the concept of human environmental rights articulated by Barbara Rose Johnston (2011), rights which encompass meeting basic needs in human relationships to the environment but also extend to frames that include what we might refer to today as intergenerational justice and collective rights. Likewise, Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Laudato Si’* uses the notion of “integral ecology” to define what environmental anthropologists might refer to as an ecosystems approach in defining human-environment relations (2015: 85-89; cf. Moran 2010: 63-69). The Pope links this integral ecology to a sense of the common good that “calls for social peace, the stability and security provided by a certain order which cannot be achieved without particular concern for distributive justice; whenever this is violated, violence always ensues” (2015: 96). This reference to the common good and distributive justice is a point of conversation with indigenous knowledge systems that take into account ongoing histories of colonialization while simultaneously engaging a more pluralistic approach to ways of knowing that are both experiential and more “scientific.” One study of reading the encyclical in Q’eqchi’ Maya communities in the Verapaz region of Guatemala emphasizes how approaching social problems requires “calling on the collective knowledge of the *ancianos* [elders]” (Hones del Pinal 2019:299), and in an aside to her discussion of indigenous law in Latin America, Grandia even expresses a preference for “the terminology of ‘indigenous science’ over the Victorian-inflected category of ‘traditional ecological knowledge’” (2020: 108n2). So it is that one of the activists we interviewed for this essay referred



**Figure 1.** Maya Train Route (source: Trainspotting34, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons)

to the “clash of two logics, one Maya and one Western”; the conflict arising from this clash results in the dispossession (*despojo*) of Maya peoples from their ancestral territories when they come face-to-face even with projects that are sometimes labeled as sustainable or promoted under the banner of human rights.

### Múuch’ Xiinbal

Although frameworks of democratization and citizenship themselves can be debated, the environment itself provides the point of transition to two cases of resistance and concrete action from the community base in the Maya region. The first case involves the communal assembly *Múuch’ Xiinbal* and resistance to the *Tren Maya* proposed by Mexican President Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador in 2018 as an infrastructure project that is expected to redistribute the wealth from tourism throughout southeastern Mexico (Figure 1). The *Tren* project has come under critique from many angles, including from one academic who remarked that the development model would “try to reproduce 19 Cancúns, a predation of nature” (*Infobae* 2021). Other resistance has come from the Calakmul area, where the train will supposedly bring some 8,000 tourists a day—putting stress

on water and cultural resources surrounding the archaeological site and the surrounding biosphere reserve, according to another local activist, Ernesto Martínez Jiménez (Beatley 2020). In many ways, the train project has become emblematic of these threats.

We were introduced to the communal assembly Múuch' Xíinbal in an interview with activist Pedro Uc who described himself as person who grew up as a *campesino* and identifies as an indigenous person who speaks Maya as his *idioma maternal* (mother tongue). He reflected on his trajectory that included involvement with evangelical religion and a degree from a Presbyterian seminary in Mérida before eventually parting ways with the denomination because of its closed response to his focus on issues of culture and social justice, sentiments that were formed in part through experiences in Chiapas with Bishop Samuel Ruíz and in Central America among Maya pastors who were involved in ecumenical networks. Following another degree in education, he was a teacher for over twenty years before he was forced out after leading a student protest in demanding justice for the normal school students from Ayotzinapa who were disappeared and murdered in Iguala, Guerrero, in 2014. Pedro views language as inseparable from identity, and he is a published author who has won prizes for poetry in Yucatec Maya (the term linguists use for the language Yucatecos refer to as Maya). He also received threats for his activism in 2019.

For the purposes of this essay, Pedro's discourse when discussing the work of Múuch' Xíinbal manifests a critique of hierarchical organizational structures. The assembly was founded on 13 January 2018 to respond to some of the threats faced by local communities on the peninsula that resulted in the displacement of Maya people from the land (personal communication, 11 June 2021). The name means *caminamos juntos* ("walking together") and "the idea is that in this Assembly community decisions are cultivated, that there is a communitarian pilgrimage" (personal communication, 30 April 2021). Múuch' Xíinbal has no formal office, but it has filed seven *amparos* (requests for protection) against train construction, resulting in four cases where construction activities were suspended. The organization also has a *demanda* (demand or claim) against FONATUR, the Mexican government agency responsible for fomenting tourism throughout the nation.

Current activism extends beyond the Tren Maya to a series of what environmentalists and other activists refer to as megaprojects throughout the peninsula. In this sense the train is symbolic of other incursions into Maya communities that threaten communal territory and lifeways. To counter these developments, Pedro spoke of a series workshops they organize with youth that focus on *derechos indígena* (indigenous rights) and *formación política comunitaria de los pueblos indígenas* (community political formation for indigenous peoples). He spoke of doing this with conviction, with both *alegría y sufrimiento* ("happiness and suffering"), and continued:

"They will [likely] end up crushing us, but as they have told us (our grandparents, our parents), our learning comes from the natural world itself, from the wild animals. And none of them are conscious of their death. We have to struggle until the last moment; we're not going to make it easy for our predators. We have to struggle. [...] The people who organized themselves in this modest assembly (men, women, children), I think that we are pursuing a clear objective, the defense of our territory, not of the land but





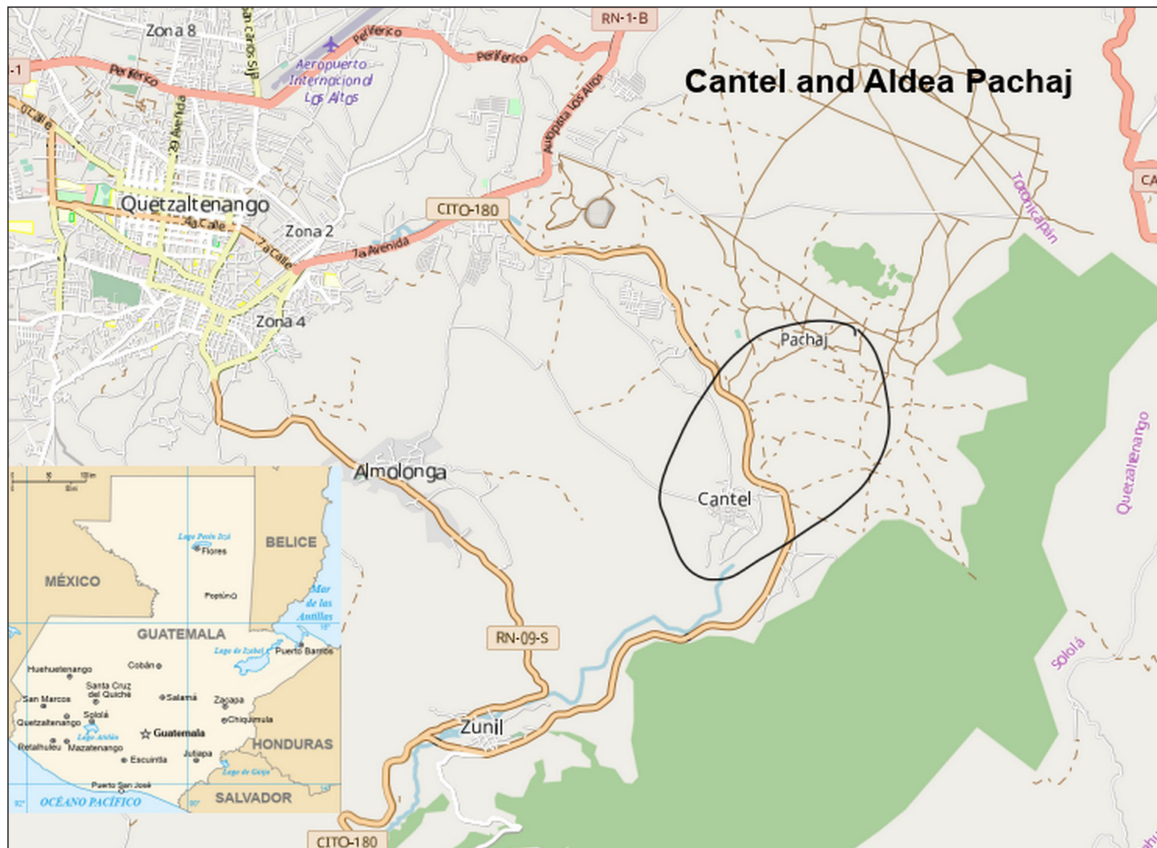


Figure 2. Map of Aldea Pachaj with Mountain Forests (sources: © OpenStreetMap, license: <https://www.openstreetmap.org/copyright>; Guatemala map fr.svg: STyx (talk · contribs) derivative work: Rowanwindwhistler (talk) ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Guatemala\\_map\\_es.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Guatemala_map_es.svg)), embedded by C. M. Samson, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>)

of the territory because this is where everything is: there is the air, there is the sun, there is the light, there is the darkness, there is the water, there is the rain, there are our dreams, there is our strength—and our rebellion too.”

This statement links the Maya people to their place of habitation (territory) rather than to the land as mere material substance. From the standpoint of Maya cosmivision, such habitation requires an intimate relationship with forces that are essential to being itself—air, sun, light, darkness, water. One implication is that there is a complementary or reciprocal relationship between human beings and those forces that sustain life itself. And in the Maya world, dreams are often revelatory of the destiny of individual people and of groups. Dreams empower the struggle and rebelliousness necessary for the defense of a place of habitation against megaprojects and other environment threats to Maya ways of being.

Among other environmental issues facing the indigenous communities on the peninsula is plantation monoculture dedicated to commodities like African palm, sugarcane, and soybeans, the

latter associated with land clearing by a Mennonite community that is also disrupting apiculture and local honey production. Intensive pork production facilities, largely producing for Asian markets, has impacted the quality of water sources near Maya communities. The limestone karst of the peninsula makes for a porous landscape, and these *cenotes* have served as water sources for millennia, with the result that they also maintain a sacred valence for many who continue Maya spiritual practices in the same communities. The struggle is an intense one, and an informational tri-fold brochure from Múuch' Xíinbal's website explains,

“Here in our territory we learn to speak a language, Maya, learn to be families and to be communities where we have received with respect all of those who have arrived from afar. But we don't understand why they hurt us, pursue us, defame us, imprison us, expelled us from our houses and jungles, and even killed us after we have received them with goodness and respect in order to live together with them.”

### **The Proyecto Chico Mendes**

In the Guatemalan highlands, the Proyecto Chico Mendes was founded 23 years ago in the K'iche'-speaking highland community of Cantel (Figures 2 and 3). Matt first met the organizer, Armando López, in 2010. At the time, Armando said the goal was to “*rescatar nuestros nacimientos de agua, y generar oxígeno para todo el mundo*” (“to rescue our springs of water and to



**Figure 3.** Landscape of Aldea Pachaj, Guatemala, where the reforestation project, Chico Mendes, is located. Photo by Samson.

generate oxygen for the world”). He also defined himself as an ecologist, who had to produce his own plants without chemicals. His work, he said, was “against the injustices in our environment and [injustices] against indigenous peoples.” There is more to unpack in his discourse, but it is significant that over time it has become more focused on issues like mining and megaprojects, which not only are perceived as threats to local villages but are also central in the discourse of activists who insist upon a persistent connection challenging discourses of state sovereignty. For this discussion, an emphasis on working with students in reforestation activities shows how the expectation of reciprocity binds generations and reinforces the sense of community with the broader Maya cosmovision. Armando was clear about the connections in one interview conducted several years ago:

“We’ve got right[s], but we also have obligations. This is something I have always managed (*manejado*) with the 380 students at the Choquiac school where my wife works, saying to them, “We have rights, young people, to drink water, to breathe, to receive all the benefits the trees give us, but we also have obligations to reforest.” But [this is] a voluntary reforestation, a conscientious reforestation in which we believe that if we say that we have three thousand trees planted, large trees, then we have rights to fight and not see our mountains [given away?] in concessions to the mining companies.”

Such obligations and resistance to exploratory licenses and mining concessions are linked in Armando’s ecological practices to the protection of endangered plant species and relationships with forest fauna, the care for which itself is a kind of political activism. It is an activism grounded in care of the local environment which, in turn, reflects a challenge to development practices perceived as destructive to both life and lifeways in local communities. At the same time, the act of planting trees on the mountains reflects the reciprocal or mutual relationship between human beings and the forces of the natural world. Montejo discusses the way in which ancestors have been angered in another part of Guatemala because of a shift from the production of maize to coffee production, evoking Michael Taussig’s (1980) work on commodity fetishism to show how, among the Maya “the change from a traditional use-value mode of production to a capitalist, or exchange-value, system disrupts their traditional worldviews and religious practices” (2004: 232). Herein lies the complicated intersection between efforts “to revitalize traditional ways” and the forces of globalization that cannot be avoided (2004: 255). In Montejo’s telling, the abandonment of *costumbre* creates conflict between the generations with telling consequences in the present:

“The peasants who become coffee planters are angering the ancestors because the ancestors’ precious gift of corn is being relegated to a secondary position. These Jakalteq are more interested in getting rich than in the maintenance of the sacred food. Because of this rejection, the spirit of corn is abandoning Jakalteq territory.” (232)

The idea of the spirit of corn abandoning Maya territory is something we should take seriously in Mesoamerica. In our interview, Pedro noted that “to convert land into a territory, we convert it by living in this land and producing and reproducing life in all of its manifestation on this piece of

land.” The struggle against neoliberal development agendas in the Maya world portrayed in the two cases considered in this essay is a confrontation wherein the social reproduction of Maya lifeways and of life itself is threatened. In moving toward a conclusion, we highlight the linkages between development agendas and climate change in Mesoamerica with issues of environmental justice in a broad sense. These connections are rooted in the way in which anthropogenic climate will continue to serve as an impetus for thinking about environmental issues such as land and water use in the coming decades.

By some accounts, Guatemala is one of the ten most vulnerable countries to climate change (Kreft et al. 2016), while the larger Mesoamerican region has long been known for its geopolitical vulnerability and its susceptibility to natural disasters. These include earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, and more recently droughts along the so-called Dry Corridor (*Corridor Seco*) that extends through much of eastern Guatemala and southward into Honduras and El Salvador (FAO 2015; Ruano and Milan 2014). In terms of extreme climate events, the long list from the past 20 years should be updated by adding Hurricanes Iota and Eta, which both had major impacts throughout eastern Central America in the latter half of 2020. Taking into account the way in which local and regional cultures are impacted by climate change requires a multiscale analysis that demonstrates the impact of environmental change at the local level and “how climate change is adapted to human lives” (Rasmussen 2015:xv). In a time that has been labeled the Anthropocene (Crutzen 2006; Crate and Nutall 2016), visions of development and progress cannot be separated from issues of climate and climate justice any more than indigenous identity can be separated from the ancestors and the places where the ancestors walked. These are the territorial connections we see in Múuch’ Xíinbal’s response to a megaproject like the Maya Train and Chico Mendes’s efforts to protect communal water sources.

## Conclusion

So, how does a persistent Maya identity tied to place and territory resist extractivism in the face of government and developmental agendas that activists contend are designed to foster the *despojo* of the Maya (and other indigenous peoples) from their ancestral territory? This can include the removal of the people altogether as well as threats to lifeways tied to place and custom extending at least three millennia into the past.

In emphasizing persistence, we note that we are not trying to construct an essentialist view of the Maya; the intent is to put Maya perspectives in conversation with issue of development and development agendas promoted by the state. These are particularly important concerns in a time when the solution to forced migration from Central America, often emanating from largely Maya communities in Guatemala, is tied to the failure of development models linked to what some have even referred to as failed states (The Guardian 2018). The issue is not change versus some kind of static cultural continuity; rather it has to do with the way in which local reality has engaged with and adapted to transnational and globalized forces that impinge upon the lives of Mesoamerican peoples. If these forces are tied to nation-states, they are also linked to larger social forces. What is



**Figure 4.** Mural “El Bosque es la herencia de los ancestros . . . cuidémoslo”. A mural that reads “The forest is the inheritance of our ancestors, let’s take care of it” on site at the Chico Mendes reforestation project. Photo by Samson.

clear is that development is also in tension with Maya worldviews tied to the reciprocity between human beings and the “other than humans” with whom they interact (de la Cadena 2015). Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena (2018:4) have defined this pluriverse as a practice of “heterogeneous worldings coming together as a political ecology of practices, negotiating their difficult being together in heterogeneity,” taking their lead from the “Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle” of the Zapatistas in which they express a desire for “a world where many worlds fit” (2018:1; see also Gahman 2017). This vision of a pluriverse might be a pan-indigenous one in their telling, but it resonates with Maya concepts of reciprocity that John Early describes as covenantal in nature in the sense that “the gods will protect and sustain humans in return for humans praising and nurturing them” (2006:69). It resonates not only with the sustaining practices of reforestation but also with Pedro’s sense that learning comes even “from the wild animals.”

Evoking the Zapatistas is certainly contentious in the Mundo Maya where conflicting development agendas are prevalent—and where their agenda hasn’t gained as much traction.

Instead of revolutionary images, some will prefer a language of community-based development or even alternatives to development (Taylor 2018). Time will tell how these agendas play out in the future. But perhaps the impetus for confronting both environmental and cultural challenges resides most directly in resistance and reframing, even in a return to the teaching of the ancestors (Figure 4). Hearing a Yucatec Maya activist say that some of his activist sentiments were nurtured in an evangelical context and the belief that God is a “God of justice” might be surprising at the end of an interview centered on affirming territory as a form of resistance to the Tren Maya. Maybe as anthropologists it is easier to hear Armando’s commentary on broken connections, where he reflected on how the elders used to respond when the rain clouds appeared on the horizon, and how human beings bear some responsibility for the current situation. The elders said,

“It’s getting cloudy. Oh, yes, we have to light the candles” (or place the candles in the four cardinal directions). We have to call out, to tell the rain that it is welcome. . . So, it is a very, very difficult system now. And I also think, in the way all these changes that have occurred affect Maya cosmovision, that really we have lost our principles, and our values, and the respect toward all of these principles that our parents have left us in the past.” (Armando Lopez cited in Samson 2021:140)

In a present filled with pandemic and crisis, it is the commitment to lifeways based on the principles (and the gifts) of the ancestors that underlies a persistent Maya identity in the territory that outsiders have called the Mundo Maya. These lifeways and gifts do indeed offer the possibility of creating a world in which other worlds are fully taken into account—and definitions of progress are consistently called into question.

### **Acknowledgments**

Matt Samson is grateful to Max Lamoureux-St-Hilaire and Mat Saunders for the opportunity to present at Maya at the Lago and for the invitation to submit a publication for *The Mayanist*. Co-author Alisha Kendrick-Pradhan has a Fulbright grant for research in Ecuador at the beginning of 2022. Her work with transcriptions and comments on shaping the manuscript were meaningful as she begins her own academic career. Jamie MacKenzie of the University of Lethbridge gave us insightful commentary in a peer review that strengthened the essay considerably, and we wish we could have taken into account even more of his suggestions. Maya residents from several communities in Guatemala (and now Mexico) have given hospitality, time, and insight as over the years by sharing understandings of their cosmovision and something of their lifeways. We can only hope to be faithful ethnographers who communicate a meaningful version of what they have shared. This essay is an attempt at reciprocity.

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