



Tradition, improvisation and modernity in Yucatecan Mayan shamanism: The *suhuy* art of Juan Cob, *h-men* of Yaxcabá

Tradición, improvisación y modernidad en el chamanismo maya yucateco: El arte *suhuy* de Juan Cob, *h-men* de Yaxcabá

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ABSTRACT Through the history of a Yucatecan Mayan shaman (*h-men*), this article analyzes the changes and continuities in Yucatecan shamanism, and more specifically, in one of its main functions: *tsak*, healing. The results presented here are part of fieldwork carried out over 40 years, from 1976 to 2016. The author lives in a community in central Yucatán (Tabi, Sotuta) and has carried out a number of research studies on Yucatecan shamanism in communities in the Mexican states of Yucatán, Campeche, and Quintana Roo. Juan Cob, *h-men* of Yaxcabá, is not only an informant but also the author's friend and neighbor, with whom he has created a number of films.

KEY WORDS Traditional Medicine; Shamanism.

RESUMEN A través de la historia de un chamán maya yucateco (*h-men*), este artículo analiza los cambios y las continuidades en el chamanismo yucateco y, más específicamente, en una de sus funciones principales: *tsak*, "curar". Los resultados presentados aquí son parte de un trabajo de campo de 40 años, de 1976 a 2016. El autor vive en una comunidad del centro de Yucatán (Tabi, Sotuta) y ha realizado varias investigaciones sobre el chamanismo yucateco en comunidades de los estados de Yucatán, Campeche y Quintana Roo. Juan Cob, *h-men* de Yaxcabá, no es solo un informante sino también vecino, amigo del autor con el cual realizó varias películas.

PALABRAS CLAVES Medicina Tradicional; Chamanismo.

IMPROVISATION OR THE ORIGINAL USE OF THE WORD

"Il faut être absolument moderne" (We must be absolutely modern). Arthur Rimbaud, *Une saison en enfer* (A season in hell)

"Virgin" is the most common translation for the word *suhuy* in dictionaries, with an apparently strange variation, *suhuytal*, "to become virgin," meaning to return to the original condition. "*El ritual de los Bacabes*"^(1,2), the most important manuscript in Mayan language written in the colonial period, proves the relevance of this concept: it appears 34 times to describe the cosmic Mother or the original needle (*suhuy* puts) that allowed the perforation of the cosmic uterus to give birth to the world.

In the everyday language, people refer to *suhuy* water in sinkholes or caves as the water that never saw the sunlight, *suhuy* or "new" clothes that were never worn by a human, a *suhuy* work done in a state of "purity," *suhuy* moments, such as *suhuy ak'ab*, "midnight, the origin of the night," or *suhuy k'in*, "midday, the origin of the day". In Mayan language, "midday" also refers to the origin of time/day and "midnight," the origin of the night/cosmic creation: days, as nights, start at twelve o'clock.

In 2011, I found a final meaning for the word *suhuy*, jointly with Giovanni Balam, Luis Balam's grandson, h-men of San Francisco. Some weeks later, Juan confirmed this translation: a *suhuy meyah*, a *suhuy* work is also an improvised work.⁽³⁾

IT'S BEEN 40 YEARS...

When I arrived in the region, 40 years ago, there were *h-menes* in all of the communities. My neighbor, don Tono, started working as *h-men* in 1983, when I got my PhD. First, he joined the most ancient *h-menes*, and when they grew old and died, he became

h-men and worked in Tabi, Tibolon, and Sotuta, the main communities in the municipality of Sotuta.

In Yaxcabá, which is the head of the biggest municipality of Yucatán and is at the border of the municipality of Sotuta, there were some *h-menes* that would attend different schools, and among them there was Juan, a young *h-men* who was twelve years older than me.

It is important to make clear that *h-men* is not the only term that can be translated as "*shaman*". We also have the terms of *ah k'in*, *chilam*, *espiritista*, and *way*, being this last one very polysemic. All those terms are still used in a very marginal way by some people. For a detailed study of those "categories" of shamans, I recommend reading my book *Saints, chamanes et pasteurs: La religion populaire des Mayas, II*⁽⁴⁾.

One of my first films, shot in 1989 and called *Una conversación con Don Juan*, is a one-shot scene in which there is a 13-minute conversation between Juan and I.⁽⁵⁾ According to a technique that was improvised that day and was used in our following meeting, I took my camera when the conversation began. That day, Juan was the first to film and, some minutes later, he gave me the work equipment, *u nukul u meyah*, to continue with the research work..

My first question was about spiritism, one of the key items of Yucatecan shamanism⁽⁵⁾:

Michel: –¿Bax forma ku meyah un tu espiritista? [How does a spiritualist work?].

Juan: –¿Bax ten u meyah wa bax klasi ku meyahtik? [How do I work? Or what kind of work do they do?].

Michel: –Bax forma, bax klasi ku meyahtik. [What kind of work do they do].

Juan: –Le espiritista ku korporar ti ula espíritus, ka meyanak, ti tsak, ti u bet operación, le operación invisible kya'ala, ku xotik mak, ma chikan tux ku xotke. [Spiritualists embody another spirit to work with, to heal, to perform an invisible operation, as they call it because they cannot see which body part was cut off].

Michel: –¿Entonces ku inkorporar ulak pixan? [And then you incorporate another spirit?].

Juan: –*Ichi le bako.* [In its flesh].

Michel: –*Ichi le kuerpo.* [In its body].

Juan: –*Ka meyah nak yete.* [To work with it].

Michel: –¿*Tal vez yan uchbe makobo, uchbe yerbateros ku inkorporar?*

[Perhaps they are ancient people, the ancient healers they embody?]

Juan: –*Leti uchbe yerbateros ku meyah beyo espiritual mayormente. Leti obe yohlo bax tsak u betko, yohlo bax... ti yohlo bix u tsako mak ti este... un pe koha'ani ku padesertik, kohanilo incur-*

ableo men a doktor... [They are the ancient healers who work spiritually. They know which medicines to prepare, they know how to heal people and their diseases, the diseases that cannot be cured by a doctor...]

At that time, in France, I joined what was going to be my research team “psychoanalysis and social practice,” and studied mythology by means of texts of Freud, Lacan, Klein... When Juan told me that spiritualists performed operations without cutting, I answered that there were also doctors in Europe who operated without cutting and were called psychoanalysts: “There are specialized doctors who work spiritually and perform spiritual operations too... they are called psychoanalysts”.

Some years later, when I settled in the south of France, I also met shamans, but they work differently. For instance, my friend Pierre Capelle worked with the spirit of trees, which he put his patients in contact with. As I stated in the book that we wrote together, ⁽⁶⁾ a tree is like a pendulum (another prediction tool), but a person is better than a pendulum: in Pierre’s opinion, a tree answers our questions if we know how to ask them. As trees have a will and a personality, they may answer or not: not all of them are good or well-disposed⁽⁶⁾.

On the other hand, unlike *h-menes* in Yucatán, French *h-menes* are secret because they may be persecuted by the mighty *Ordre des Médecins* [French Medical Board] under

the charge of “illegal practice of medicine”. However, that secrecy protects them since, and it is not the smallest paradox, there are as many healers in my tiny place in the French countryside as in the municipalities of Sotuta and Yaxcabá jointly, which cover a larger surface.

In Yucatán, for these last 40 years, I have been part of a radical transformation of ways of production, lifestyles, traditions, and beliefs... Almost everything changed... and, however, nothing changed. This is what the old cheetah, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, used to say, “everything must change so that nothing changes...”⁽⁷⁾.

Nothing changed:

Mayan language is still spoken.

Cornfields are still cultivated.

Omsikil is still eaten on Good Fridays.

Women still wear *ipiles*.

Houses still have palm-thatched roofs.

And Juan still makes the *k'ex* and the *santiguadas*... (Also called *santiguación*, the term *santiguada* refers to a ceremony in which the healer heals the patient of certain diseases or curses, like the evil eye)

And everything changed:

Children learn Spanish before learning their own language, so nowadays there are teenagers who hardly understand Mayan language.

Young people prefer wage labor in the city to working in cornfields, and almost nobody works in others’ cornfields.

Onsikil is already eaten with tortillas made by a machine and with French bread (wheat bread) as well.

While palm-thatched roofs are lacking, concrete-blocked houses are gradually taking wooden houses’ place.

Even, in Juan’s clinic, his granddaughter makes face massages with cream to lose weight... whereas Juan presents himself as the last *h-men* in Yaxcabá, though there is still another *h-men* who is a spiritualist and learnt his trade in Cancún, where spiritualists flourish.

It is necessary to clarify that not all the spiritualists are *h-menes*, which lets us differentiate two kinds of shamans.⁽⁴⁾ And, at the same time *h-menes* disappear, a new category of doctors is born: the “traditional doctors”.

H-men and traditional doctor

H-men or *Ah men* is one of the names for “shaman” in Yucatán. In colonial Mayan dictionaries, that term does not refer specifically to the shaman, but rather to the master, the person who masters the trade, “a master or an artificer of any quality or trade, and a skilled person.”⁽⁶⁾ We have a long list of *ah men* referring to different trades, among which we find *ah men loo'*, “the witch doctors”. Only in the most recent sources, dated in the 20th century, we find the term *h-men/ah men* which means healer and is considered as “skilled in almost any art and profession.”⁽⁸⁾ Since dictionaries are sexist, we do not find the form *x-men*, the female term for *h-men*, which still exists in the common language and is used to denote the female healer.

Therefore, we can suggest as a hypothesis that the term *h-men* has recently appeared to call the healer, in other words, the shaman. Forty years ago, there was a term – some old people must still know it and maybe in the East it is still used – which was applied as a synonym of *h-men*: *ah k'in*. This term, unlike *h-men*, is in most of the ancient sources and, particularly, in the documents of the Spanish inquisition.⁽⁹⁾ It was also the Mayan name for the Spanish priest.

If the hypothesis of the recent appearance (at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century) of the term *h-men* to denote the shaman is correct, then we can conclude that such appearance coincided with the transformation of *h-men's* function: *h-men* became more multi-faceted and took on some functions of the priest and the foreign doctor or *dzul*, who appropriated the *h-men's* functions in the same way.

We know that there were *dzules* doctors who used traditional plants, as well as there

were very probably Spanish healers who applied mythical Mayan and African methods. The black Africans who, at the beginning of the colonial period, represented a numerically important group, disappeared and gradually became part of the “mestizos” and the Yucatecan Mayans. Nevertheless, some Yucatecan rituals, especially the *k'ex*, were influenced by the “black” culture. Black people remain as a relevant group in the state of Belize, one of the political entities of the Yucatecan peninsula. Recent investigations conducted by Mathews Restall⁽¹⁰⁾ allow us to document better the Africans' place between the Spanish and the indigenous peoples.

An example of the aforesaid is *El libro del judío*,^(11,12) attributed to a *dzul* doctor of Valladolid, Giovanni Francesco Mayoli, who signed with the pseudonym Ricardo Ossado. On the other side, the Mayan *ah k'inob* appropriated the new medicines and the new “spiritual technologies,” like the spiritism imported from France, which consisted in adding, as don Juan explains, a spirit that speaks by our mouth. In that regard, Juan cites the case of a spiritualist who does not speak Spanish but adds a spirit that speaks this language. Thus, *dzules* masters occupy a place next to the Mayan masters: Allan Kardec, who lived in Lyon (France) in the 19th century, is invoked in the songs of Juan and Máximo Cen, an ancient *h-men* of Cuch Holoch, a small community at the border of Yucatán and Campeche, between Halachó and Nunkini.

Hippolyte Rivail, who signed with the pseudonym Allan Kardec, was born in Lyon in 1804. In a magnetism session, a medium revealed that Hippolyte Rivail was druid with the name Allan Kardec in a previous life, and from that moment, Rivail used such pseudonym. In 1857, Kardec published *El libro de los espíritus* (*Le livre des Esprits*) compiling copybooks of word transcriptions written by mediums. This work became the fundamental book about worldwide spiritism.⁽¹³⁾

Currently, at the beginning of the 21st century, we witness a mutation of the same type: the typical *h-men* tends to disappear gradually and gives rise to a different kind of specialist who adopts the name

of “traditional doctor,” while new types of “new age” shamans and a shamanic tourism appear, a phenomenon also taking place in other parts of the world. However, spiritualists, who emerged probably at the end of the 19th century and partly merged with the *h-men* – Juan refers to *h-men* as the spiritualists in Yaxcabá – have not only persisted but also flourished mainly in the cities.

The name “traditional doctor” is no longer Mayan and follows in the footsteps of the spiritualists who imported their name from Europe. And, while it changes its name, we observe a change in its function:

- Traditional doctors – we have some of them in Tabi, but there is no *h-men* any longer – also cure people with plants, but they do not sing, pray, or do rituals anymore.
- Traditional doctors are, in part, a creation of the Mexican institutions and carry the weight of the implicit ambiguity in the concept of “tradition”.
- On the other hand, traditional doctors are an indigenous creation as well, the way Mayan peasants found to resist and adapt to modernity and globalization.

It is necessary to explain that the predecessor of the traditional doctors, the *h-men*, already prayed, and still prays, in the Spanish spoken by the priests and that the *cha'chak*, the main contemporary and agricultural ceremony performed in the state of Yucatán, is also a corn ceremony and may be concurrent with the “creation” of the *h-men* in the 19th century because the most ancient references to this ceremony date from the middle of that century.

Juan José Hernández, a political man native to Valladolid, mentions in an article in 1845⁽¹⁴⁾: “the *kuch*, the *tich*, the *cha'chak* and the *pochob*.” The *pochob* or *pocho'o*, according to Lázaro Suárez of Nunkini, is the Mayan name for the carnival. For more information and references about the *cha'chak* and the Mayan rituals, read Volume 8, “Chak y sus caballos: mitología de la lluvia y de la fertilidad,”⁽¹⁵⁾ and Volume 15, “Herramientas de investigación: Vocabulario, bibliografía y glosario”⁽³⁾ of *Los laberintos sonoros*:

Enciclopedia de la mitología maya yucateca, and the book *Saints, chamanes et pasteurs: La religion populaire des Mayas (II)*.⁽⁴⁾

The suhuy art of Juan Cob, h-men of Yaxcabá

In spite of the changes, *h-menes* have not disappeared yet since, though they are decreasing in number, they coexist with traditional doctors. In addition, it is important to clarify that their existence also depends on the following regions:

- In Nunkini, near Cuch Holoch, there are still five *h-menes*, of which one is 40 years old and is a librarian in a secondary school of the community.
- The *h-men* resists better in the east than in central Yucatán.

Nevertheless, even in central Yucatán where the *h-men* is in danger, there exists in Yaxcabá an *h-men* who resists and, while the others disappear one by one, confirms with humor and joy, with wisdom and madness, the persistence of his trade as *ah men*. This is my friend Juan Cob Balam of Yaxcabá, who is 73 years old but looks to be ten years younger, and who could live and work 30 years more just like the most popular of his ancestors.

Why did Juan resist? His secret lies in his impressive capacity for adaptation and his talent, I would say his genius, to incorporate all the new forms into his practice, in one word, into his modernity. As detailed below, I describe some aspects of his practice.

Tradition and improvisation

Juan's granddaughter, Leidy, who is currently his assistant, decided to design a website about her grandfather's work, which is a Facebook page in fact called Jardín botánico Medicina Herbolaria Yaxcabá. In this page, Leidy offers some new services: facial treatment, aromatherapy, and general aesthetic medicine, among others. Nowadays, the

Internet and the new media have become inevitable so as to have customers, since without them, the *h-men* cannot survive. It is not only necessary to respect tradition, but also to adjust to the “law of supply and demand”.

In Yaxcabá, Juan has a notable ancestor in terms of adaptation: the famous doctor Nacho, who has recently died, had gained the trust of all of the peasants. And, who was doctor Nacho’s father? An *H-men* who, with the aim of transmitting his knowledge, made a doctor out of his son. Hence traditional medicine and allopathic medicine share the same past in Yaxcabá. Such a situation is not typical of the municipality of Yaxcabá. Eduardo Menéndez proves that, in Yucatán, unlike other Mexican states, allopathic medicine was developed many ancient times ago.⁽¹⁶⁾

And, why don’t we perform and film a ceremony for that website, then? It could be, besides, the first page in introducing the site so that people would enter with this ritual. Therefore, Juan and I decided that this ceremony would take place at the end of that month (January 2012). Juan would offer the necessary birds in sacrifice, and I would contribute some money. Some weeks later, Juan and I met at the altar. Juan sang, and I filmed.⁽¹⁷⁾

A ceremony filmed for a website was an unprecedented event until then; we were consequently creating together a new ceremony modality. We review that an offering is given in two parts: to go up (*ensik*) and down (*emik*), and between these parts, the ancestors take the offerings which are then distributed among the people attending the ceremony. When the offerings were down, Juan, who had already drunk a bit of alcohol, distributed in the heat of the moment and immediately the *balche’* to whom were near the table. I remarked to him that this was not very orthodox since we first must thank the ancestors with a prayer and then distribute the ritual beverage. Juan cited then to me that improvised word by don Jas, a distinguished *h-men* of Yaxcabá, who has recently died: “What you are going to do is like this! You are going to do it in your way, with your belief, do it and it is like this!”

Every transgression becomes a new rule, and it is better if inspired by an original, new, pure, *suhuy* spirit...What characterizes the speech of an *h-men* which reached the maturity of its art is the capacity of the *suhuy t’an*, that is, the “new word,” the “improvised word”. If we consider the meaning of *suhuy* as “new,” as “the one that never saw the sunlight,” then the ritual must allow such change, such improvisation. Like a jazz musician, *h-men* know music and, therefore, can suggest new tunes and adapt them to their traditional songs.

Decks of cards and diagnosis

For Juan, to use a deck of cards represents the examination of the patient’s body by an allopathic doctor: “I do not understand without fundamentals, but I look for them to comprehend, I examine the body...,” says Juan. In the same way doctors examine their patients and see if they have an ache in any part of their body, Juan does not touch his patient but sees or “reads” the aches in the cards. However, not all diseases require card-reading. Juan only does it when the action of the wind, an *ik’*, that is, an ancestral vital force is involved. When the disease is not serious, the treatment is carried out by talking to the patient.

The cards follow simple but polysemic rules, which give way to different interpretations. For instance, “the seven of swords card means an alteration in the nerves, a muscular pain in the brain, a pain that spreads all over the body...”. The patient chooses one deck of two to represent him, and then its cards are read around the chosen deck. In case the patient is a man or an old woman, they choose from a horse of gold card and a horse of cups card, and if the patient is a young woman, she chooses from a knave of gold card and a knave of cups card. Clubs and swords cards cannot represent the patient because they are negative cards, or “bad” cards. If a seven of swords card is next to the deck representing the patients, then Juan questions them to know if the meaning of the card is related to a physical issue. The seven of gold card

means badly spent money. Juan not only examines the body but also the mind: he treats physical affections, money and sentimental problems...

When Juan sees a patient for the first time, during the first seconds, in the first minute, he receives a large but disordered amount of information which gradually gets organized with the card deck reading. Sometimes, the patient's question is clear, and the answer is obvious: diarrhea, evil eye, muscular pain... Juan then insists on finding the cause: it may be a natural cause or a spell, and, in the case the cause is natural, he tries to know if it comes from an *ik'*, translated into Yucatecan Spanish as "wind," or from another cause... The work of Jeanne Favret Saada⁽¹⁸⁾ allows us to compare Juan's technique with a French healer's: there are not only differences but similarities as well, for example, there exists the capacity of relating a small number of categories to a certain universe and setting meaningful relations for the patient between those categories and that universe⁽¹⁸⁾.

The concepts of *wind/ik'*, spell/pulyah, and evil eye – I do not know a Mayan equivalent for this last concept – are categories such as infection, gastritis, and conjunctivitis... We find ordinary treatments like a bath with a mix of *sipche'* (different species of *Bunchosia* and *Malpighia glabra*), *tankasche'* (*Zanthoxylum fagara*), *sinanche'* (*Zanthoxylum caribaeum*, name that may also refer to *tankasche'*), and *balche'* (distinct species of *Lonchocarpus*) to treat the wind.^(19,20) On the other hand, there are complex cases which require complementary treatments: *santiguación* – a dialectal form of the Spanish spoken in the community – or *santiguada*, a *k'ex* or a *loh lu'um*, which also implies the healing of the patient's place if the attack is more serious...

The *k'ex*, meaning "change," is one of the main healing ceremonies of the Yucatecan Mayans, it is rather the *k'ex kuxtal* in which a life – in general, a chicken, rooster or hen's – is given in "exchange" for the patient's life. This ritual has elements in common with the "*passer poule*," a voodoo ritual originated in western Africa and performed in the isle of Haiti since the colonial period.

Loh is a category of rituals: we know the *loh lu'um* as "the liberation of the land," the *loh kah* as "the liberation of the people," and the *loh coral* as "the liberation of the corral". The *loh lu'um*, meaning "the liberation or purification of the land," is a ceremony which allows "healing" a place that cannot be occupied by humans because it is inhabited by the "*vientepasados*," the *ik'oob*, mythical ancestors who have the wind as a fundamental essence. In Yucatecan Spanish, those ancestors are called "winds". In some cases, Juan is unable to carry out the treatment by himself, thus a spiritual operation is required, and he needs to seek help from a spiritualist.

The term *ik'*, in addition to "wind," also means "mythical ancestor". For that reason, I proposed to translate it as "*vencêtre*," the French neologism, and into Spanish as "*vientepasado*"^(3,21). Some recent works have tried to understand the concept of wind and its action related to diseases.^(22,23) The *ik'* is, according to my friends and informants, a cosmic energy able to enter many kinds of "beings" – I use the concept of "being" although it does not exactly exist in Yucatecan Mayan language – which may be not only human beings but also animals, trees, and stones... When those "beings" are destroyed or "killed" – in Yucatecan language, *pa' ik'* is used to mean "to destroy the cosmic energy or wind" – such energy is liberated into the cosmos and is available for new incarnations.⁽³⁾

In order to read the cards, in other words, to make a diagnosis by means of the decks of cards, we enter a hall, a large, light, and pleasant room. Frequently, a whole family comes for a consultation, and since both fates (patient and family) are connected, the mother or father's disease affects their son or daughter's..

As not all the patients know the ritual, in such a case, Juan indicates the proceedings: first, take a deck of two; then, divide the remaining deck into three, and in that order, Juan will read the cards on the table. This is the way patients determine – as, in shamanic logic, there is no coincidence because everything is already determined – their destiny

while the *h-men* is only in charge of interpreting the cards.

In effect, when a misfortune immediately reaches the patient, a card reading by the *h-men* is performed. The reading starts, and the diagnosis improves with the attempts and mistakes along the successive card reading. Three (*ox*) cards are spread face up and allow the *h-men* to confirm, in some cases to inform, and to specify the first diagnosis. Ox is a key number in Mayan mythology, which is related to women and is also one of the names given by the cosmic mother to denote the *ramón* (*Brosimum alicastrum*). At a cross-cultural level, it is the archetype to overcome duality.

In addition, the treatment progresses according to the decks of cards and allows the *h-men* to correct mistakes. The analogical reading – which contains many answers for the same information – is carried out by talking to the patient. Juan starts, in general, with affirmations that may be or may not be confirmed: “¿Masimá, do you occasionally have a headache?” though the orthodox form commonly used is “It is true that...”. Juan expresses it that way when he speaks in Spanish but here, he uses the word “*masimá*” that is Creole. Very infrequently he asks questions such as, “Do you sleep well at night?” and, regarding the answers, he makes a change in his reading. Cards may also be read for a person who is not present, usually, without knowing about the reading, in which case the consultant wants to interfere in the other person’s destiny or change their relationship.

Just like when a patient sees an allopathic doctor, the patient here knows that the diagnosis is based on “objective” information, reflected on the cards, but this information is complex and has to be interpreted. Sometimes, the patient recognizes some symbols, but generally, cannot follow the logic of the reading. Then, the patient listens to the reading as an oracle, and may or may not believe in it. From this point of view, the analogy with an allopathic doctor works like this: the patient does not know on what his diagnosis is based, but, sometimes, can provide the doctor with new information, and the patient

may even make the doctor change the stated diagnosis. Hence, the patient listens to a “story” that is also an explanation of his own story: reading the cards, the *h-men* completes the clinical manifestation and the story of the disease, of the “misfortune,” and simultaneously, the *h-men* proposes a treatment based on medicinal plants, prayers, and rituals. Besides, this treatment may be applied on the patient’s land or house if the *h-men* considers that the disease is caused by an environmental disease.

Furthermore, the patient is given an explanation, and then he can make his own analysis: the story of the treatment works or not. For this reason, it is necessary that the patient believes in the effectiveness of the treatment. If they do not believe in it, it will not work. The relation of trust, that is to say, if we use the technical language of psychoanalysis, the transference relation or countertransference relation, is essential. The countertransference refers to the transference between a psychoanalyst and his patient, as an answer to normal transference. If there is no trust, and transference does not work, then neither the treatment. It is also said about medicinal plants that, “If you do not trust in their power, they do not cure you.” On the contrary, in the case of allopathic medicine, a drug may be theoretically efficient, regardless of the trust a patient has, and then, it may work, setting aside the quality of the human relation. The drug quality is more important than the quality of the relation, healing becomes a product, and the sale of a drug impacts the pain directly, and for the patient, the disease. However, obviously, to eliminate the pain does not mean to eliminate the disease.

In everyday language, that relation of trust is expressed just like this: “If there is no belief, the treatment does not work”. The belief in the treatment effectiveness, and in more spiritual terms, the belief in the plant effectiveness, is essential for the treatment to work, even if it is known that certain plants are, anyway, effective. Every family knows a varying number of medicinal plants, and they use them frequently, but even that efficiency depends on their belief. Such belief may be

completely relevant in the case of certain treatments in which a plant is chosen without knowing it and even without looking at it: thus, for the treatment of a snake bite, if there is no medicine within reach, the first plant near is taken and spread in the wound, without having looked at it. Two different persons, one in Cancún, born in Sotuta, and the other one in Tabi, told me that “secret”.

The hypothesis by which reducing stress is essential may be proposed in this case. Another case is the one in which the spirit owner of the forest shows the plant placed in the forest to a sleeping person, and he or she only has to look for it when waking up. This is stated by Fulgencio Alborno in *Sueños de lluvia*:

While I was sleeping, there was my *pixan*, my “spirit”. I went to the forest, looking for medicines, when something came. Heey! That thing spoke:

- Where are you going?
- I am going to look for medicines but I do not find anyone.
- There are medicines there. I am going there. When I need medicines, I find them in that land.
- Okey.
- Where are you from?
- I am from Tabi.
- Fine.

We had not gone further and it said:

- Here is the medicine, go to the land! It was there...

However, belief is always relative because health is a complex and random process. The existence itself of diverse “doctors” and “*h-menes*” involves a choice subject to trials and mistakes every time a disruption in the health state appears. Both an *h-men* and a doctor only know a part of a patient’s disease or disease’s story. One of the aspects of this story, which cannot be isolated from the disease, is the economy of the disease, the role of money in health.

Money and sacrifice

The exchange of money, which is today an important part of what the *h-men* receives for the treatment, is also an element of a “sacrifice” that traditionally is part of such treatment.

Animal sacrifice that still exists in some rituals like the *k'ex* or the *loh* was also accompanied in “the ancient times” – and those “ancient times” may trace back a long time ago, before the Spanish conquest – of “money”, in other words, it is a general equivalent to all goods which today are the master of our destiny.

I will finish this study with an analysis of money, more specifically, the devil’s money, because all money is today his money. The ancient *kakaw* (cocoa) money – *theobroma*, drink of gods – was not still devil’s money even if there was a destructive element in its own substance. In the case of cocoa, its value in use was an edible seed with which a drink for sacrifice was made. It was a perfect money to do the transition from a traditional sacrifice of food/drink offering to gods to a money offering: in this case, gods drank the essence of cocoa, and men drank cocoa atole (typical Mexican drink based on corn) complying with the money destruction, without placing them in human hands, like in modern cases. Moreover, *kakaw* was still marginally used as money in the beginning of the twentieth century (spoken data in Tabi).

Today, *saka* with *kakaw* is always offered in the Campeche’s ponent, but in the state of Yucatán, *saka* is shared with sugar and honey. *Saka*, meaning “white water,” is a corn drink prepared with corn and water, without lime. It is the main drink offered to “*vientepasados*” or *ik'oob* in the ceremonies.

Money for the healing and devil’s money

Money is an essential element of the treatment, both in traditional medicine and in allopathic medicine. Traditionally – and the

term “traditional” must be understood differently from the one of “ancient,” “remote,” or “distant from changes” – money, as previously explained, belongs to the devil, and this is not only a metaphor. If someone needs money, if money is what someone really needs and wants to get it urgently, then, they only have to call the devil, and he will immediately come, with his nice face, his elegance, his horse, his good words... and his horns looming under his hat. Then, he will ask the person: “How much?,” and he will give it to him.

However, after seven years, the person will have to give it back, giving his soul to him, as the priests affirm, but here, in the Mayab’s land, the payment is more concrete: the person will have to go to work to his ranch. But, where is placed the devil’s ranch? Today, the devil’s ranch is “the whole world”. Currently, there is no place that is not located in the devil’s ranch. Thus, when a man needs money, what does he do? He works in the devil’s ranch. Today, the devil spread his ranch to the cities of Mérida (Yucatán) and Cancún (Quintana Roo) where he builds incessantly new houses made with simple and interchangeable materials: the famous concrete brick which can be bought for MXN\$ 7.50 (price in March 2016), similar to the Lego bricks from my childhood.

The devil’s money is also the one that the patient gives to the doctor or the *h-men*. And when the more ill the patient is, the more money he has to pay, and his family is more exhausted from getting that money and putting it in a bottomless pit, which also belongs to the devil. Likewise, every “healing,” every attempt to recover health, is involved in the path of that diabolic money, which became diabolic because it was disconnected from its value in use, which is not anymore food or drink to share, but paper money that today has all the colors of the rainbow.

Coming back to Juan’s practice and analyzing the role of money, Juan has two types of fees: a) a fixed fee of MXN\$ 50 which is the price of medicinal weeds, unpacking, or an ointment, as well as a card reading and b) a varying fee that is for a more complex

treatment which may be characterized as a “ritual”.

The main ones are the *k’ex*⁽²⁴⁾, the *loh lu’um*, the *hets lu’um*, “holding soil” – the two latter cure the ground, because not only people can be ill. In my movie *Jardins mayas/Milpas y huertos mayas 1986-2016*⁽²⁵⁾, I show an example of *loh lu’um*, performed by don Jas, a famous *h-men* from Canacón, who is already dead.

Unlike the *loh lu’um*, the *hets lu’um* is generally made when ground is going to be used for the first time. Another way of *hets* is the *hets mek* “holding a hug,” a Mayan “baptism” that is made for girls who are three months old and for boys who are four months old. There are also rituals to make a lover or a husband come back, and they may be very expensive, because love belongs to a dark field of instincts, the devil’s domain.

However, not all *h-men* have a balanced relation with money. Some of them work directly with the “master,” and they are also recognizable for their treatment efficiency – if people believe in it – and for their incredible fees, which may be superior to MXN\$ 10,000, that is to say, almost a three month salary.

If we consider the case of an allopathic doctor, there are also, to summarize, two ways of relating to money: a) “free” medicine in the village clinics or in the famous public hospital of Mérida, the O’Horán, and its quality is very varying and may be poor, as well as it is very difficult to get a quick consultation, and b) “paid” medicine that is private and which people use in most of the serious cases. But, that medicine, with some exceptions, is expensive and takes all available money, and many times peasants result indebted: thus, they have to borrow the devil’s money and work in his ranch to give it back!

Not only peasants are indebted, but also the members of the middle class may be in that situation in the case of a serious disease. If someone is poor and has already spent his money and his chances of taking a loan, then they only have one chance: to die.

Disease in Yucatán is – but not only in Yucatán – what ends up using up periodically

all the money patiently saved. Stories of people who lost their whole fortune to cure a father, a son, or a wife are infinite. And the lack of real social insurance helps the devil succeed in Yucatán. When social security replaces family sacrifice, another logic appears that does not belong to Mayan history.

If someone wants to escape from the devil, there is a solution: to become a devil, in other words, a politician, a financier, or even better, a drug trafficker, who participates in both activities. Perhaps, I moved myself somewhat away from the study of traditional medicine in this analysis of the devil's money, but a medicine analysis that forgets about the money matters would walk away from a key point of what we have seen today in this, always unfulfilled, search for health.

What about *x-menes*?

I consider it difficult to write an article about Juan's art without mentioning the women who have provided him with their art and to whom he also continues providing them with his. The presence of these healers in Juan's training and in his work team is in contrast with their absence in most of anthropologists' descriptions and other social science studies about Yucatán. Recently, I had to insist so that a section about the *x-menes* importance was not deleted.⁽²⁶⁾

Women are not as visible as men because, generally, they do not celebrate agricultural ceremonies; however, some descriptions mention the presence of women in that type of ritual^(27,28), but that presence is not new. The psychologist Jacob Grinberg-Zylberbaum, in a large study about shamans in Mexico, has already interviewed several *x-menes* who used the same devices as men in their ceremonies. For instance, doña María explains the use of *sastunes* (fortune-teller stones) and *x-tunes* (skatefish's sting) in her ceremonies.^(29,30) I also interviewed several *x-menes* who celebrated agricultural ceremonies and, in the center, don Jas de Canacon's daughter had continued part of his work. In Calkiní village,

where 15,000 inhabitants live in the north of Campeche, I interviewed doña Candita, as she was affectionately called. Doña Candy is, like don Juan, a great improviser. She has almost every day sessions with her "bosses" (*aluxes*, *sastunes*...). She also has several students who are her "godchildren." Some of them live in Cancún and another one in the USA. "It is really nice to know the power of the air," doña Candy says. She translates *ik* as "air" and not as "wind." Air is a force, a spiritual being with whom it is possible to exchange things: "You give something to the air, and the air gives something to you. The air gives you more than you gave to it" (conversation of November 26, 2012).

Doña Candy explained to me how she received the possibility of directing the work of other *h-menes* in a very important ceremony in the pre-Hispanic place of X-pujil. An old man justified that possibility, "a Balam woman (*Balam kolel*) is stronger than a man." I could watch a video of that ritual, while doña Candy made comments on that.⁽³¹⁾

Patricia Balam and her colleagues⁽²⁸⁾ described a *matan k'ol*, a *k'ol* offering, which is a typical Yucatecan ceremony food similar to French "bechamel" sauce, with chicken broth, corn dough, and annatto paste. This ceremony is headed by a *rezadora* (prayer). This mourner was called "shaman" by students of the center of Mexico, and then she became named like this. It is observed that "new age" culture incorporated the Mayan culture, to which Mayan healers have to adapt. Doña Candy, for her part, rejects the term shaman because they are from Mexico: "You do not say you are a shaman, because shamans are sorcerers, and you are just a healer." In the case of the *matan k'ol* of Muna, the "shaman" is a *rezadora*. *Rezadoras* are very ancient and known specialists in Yucatecan ceremonies, and sometimes, they can act in preliminary parts of agricultural rituals, as I have observed, for instance, in Tabi, in rogations before the *cha'chack*. In her prayers' description, a prevalence for the Spanish language with Catholic prayers is notorious, which is typical of *rezadoras*, but it is not typical of *x-menes*. She also prays a little

in Mayan language but, unfortunately, there is no transcription of her *payalchi'* or prayer. New research studies should allow people to understand better the role of *x-menes* in the popular Yucatecan religion.

Jointly with anthropologists' blindness, several factors of the underestimation of *x-menes* presence may be listed:

- a. The first one, and the most ancient one, is the elimination of female shamans by the Spanish Inquisition after the killing of European "witches" since the 14th century. Bernardo Caamal Itza, a Yucatecan agronomist and journalist, mentioned in a private conversation (April 2016) that his grandmother made comments about those killings of female shamans in Yucatán. Written sources talk more about men, even in repression, than about women⁽⁹⁾.
- b. *X-menes*, with only a few exceptions, are generally absent from agricultural ceremonies, like the *cha' chak* (rain ceremony), the *hanlikol* (cornfield food), or the *matan k'ol* (offering of *k'ol* or red sauce.).
- c. The rather strict division between men and women makes it so that men, generally, do not have access to female rituals, and that *x-menes* may be suspicious of a male investigator. Thus, twenty years ago, an *x-men* of Yaxcabá, Juan's village, did not want to be interviewed by me. .

A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON TRADITION

Tradition in Yucatán is a dynamic element, which may change and sometimes induces such changes. As Eric Hobsbawm writes, "Traditions that seem or claim to be ancient are generally rather recent in its origins and, often, invented."⁽³²⁾ Recognizing the main function

of improvisation, as one of the most relevant Mayan beliefs, provides new perspectives not only for the study of Mayan beliefs, but also for the study of traditional beliefs in general.

The Yucatecan example seems to indicate that the creation of tradition would not be just a recent way that characterizes modern societies, but also an essential way of the relation between change and continuity in social processes. It may be asked if, more than traditional practices, the sociologists' and anthropologists' prejudices were the ones which contributed to provide an un-moving perspective of tradition-fixed traditional perspective.

In every culture, there are conservative and innovative people, and Juan, like the late don Jas, is certainly innovative. If that definition is combined with the one of *xa'ak* "mixture/mixing"⁽²⁶⁾ and the one of way "metamorphosis," "becoming beings," key philosophy definitions may be deeply studied, as the definition of "being" or "origin." If a transcultural comprehension is looked for, we must avoid using West definitions as keys and work them in the light of definitions from other cultures and languages.

Finally, taking the Mayan belief as a starting point, I would like to propose a different term from the one of "tradition" to refer to those practices, both ancient and new – we will remember that "new" is one of the meanings of *suhuy* – which are part of the don Juan's art. Focusing on *xa'ak* and *suhuy* definitions, I propose to define tradition as the place of an "original miscegenation" that is opposed to and also completes the idea of purity, which is also one of the meanings of *suhuy*. When a new element is introduced to his practice, don Juan takes this original mixing as a basis in order to, in an improvised way, propose a new practice that may "immediately" become tradition.

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