

Maya Cosmovision

Exploring Formative Processes of *Q'eqchi'* Medical Aesthetics, Morality, and Healing Practice

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Abstract Throughout history, individuals and communities have developed complex cultural visions of the world around them shaped by local ecology, history, language, and interactions with neighboring peoples and their ways of life. To better understand, interpret, and appreciate the contemporary healing practices of *Q'eqchi'* Maya healers, this article describes two “formative processes” or “interpretive activities” of *Q'eqchi'* cosmovision: a relationship to the Mountains and Valleys; and a moral economy of permission. Each of these aspects influence the interpretive structures of *Q'eqchi'* medical reality and thereby shapes *Q'eqchi'* conceptions of illness and health and the medical “objects” to which traditional healers attend. Through a detailed case study drawn from over ten years of ethnographic fieldwork with *Q'eqchi'* Maya communities in Southern Belize, this paper outlines a contemporary worldview and ethos where aspects of medical reality are spread out beyond interactions between patients and healers to include vital relationships with the spirits and local ecologies, aesthetic moralities of social and spiritual significance. In this “cosmic-centered” therapeutic framework, we can appreciate more fully how *Q'eqchi'* Maya knowledge and aesthetic ways of being shape contemporary therapeutic encounters in ways that externalize and personify the source of affliction and suffering.

Keywords Indigenous knowledge, *Q'eqchi'* Maya, Morality, Healing, Ethnography

Introduction: Cosmovision as an Aesthetic Practice

Over ten years of ethnographic fieldwork among *Q'eqchi' iloneleb'* or healers¹ in Southern Belize has revealed a complex network of relationships that informs an aesthetic vision of reality in which cosmological and spiritual notions are often the key referent. “Cosmovision” is thus the term frequently used by local Maya community members and *iloneleb'* to describe the worldview and ethos engendered within contemporary *Q'eqchi'* communities: a vision underpinning psychological, ontological, epistemological, moral and aesthetic realities. Following SHARMAN'S (1997) “Anthropology of Aesthetics,” we view aesthetic perception as an attachment of values to experience, and that its expression or embodied performance is a re-creation of experience through which those values are socially reconstituted or transformed. *Q'eqchi'* cosmovision is therefore not only a medium of perception, it is a medium of experience, a

mode of embodied engagement with the world in which human and spiritual realities often deeply interrelate (CSORDAS 1990; HATALA & CAAL 2020).

For the *iloneleb'* in the *Maya Healers Association* of Belize we worked with, their worldview and ethos involve complex networks of relationships that include interpersonal, intrapersonal, environmental, cosmological, and spiritual facets. Following critical insights reflective of the “ontological turn” in anthropology (BESSIRE & BOND 2014), it could be said that *Q'eqchi'* ontology is the relationships or process of nurturing relationships engendered through their vision of and actions taken within the world. Indeed, as MOLESKY-POZ (2006) also described,

“Maya link cosmovision to spirituality, or say that their worldview is found within Maya religiosity. We can infer that the term Maya cosmovision

has an inevitable ontological or religious aspect, however implicit, that expresses the 'lived' experience of Mystery from a human perspective situated in historical experience, struggle, and gratitude" (*ibid.* 44f).

The locally informed notion of relationality lived and experienced among *Q'eqchi'* communities (*i.e.*, relations between individuals and a kind of "Mystery") can shape the assumed structures of reality (*i.e.*, the facts of the world) and guide or inform the approved values or aesthetic styles of life, offering a formative set of practices "through which Maya feel, think, analyze, understand, and move reciprocally in the cosmos" (MOLESKY-POZ 2006: 35).

Rather than "belief" as a cultural category, the focus here is on the "formative processes," "interpretive activities," or "ontological schemes of practice" of *Q'eqchi'* cosmivision through which aspects of reality—and especially medical reality, aesthetic knowledge, and healing practice—are "confronted, experienced, and elaborated" (cf. CASSIRER 1955; DESCOLA 2010; GOOD 1994: 69). In so doing, we draw attention toward an "aesthetics of everyday experience" (DESJARLAIS 1992) that infuses *Q'eqchi'* medical reality, and thus the ethnographic account that follows will build upon the ontological orientation of several literary critics, anthropologists, and philosophers who argue that there exists no grand distinction between aesthetic and ordinary experiences (cf. DESJARLAIS 1992; DEWEY 1980; GOOD 1994). We therefore examine the aesthetic principles of *Q'eqchi'* cosmivision which can shape and constrain how Maya healers approach their craft; the way healers kneel and pray, make sacrificial offerings, speak and pick medicines all reflect the aesthetic values of embodied *Q'eqchi'* cultural sensibilities. Indeed, As DESJARLAIS (1992) reminded us, "an aesthetics of experience does not tie solely into a system of beliefs, meaning or logical criteria" but rather, "refers to a schema of value" that are "embodied and so appear self-evident" insofar as "they go beyond the cognized sort common to intellectual reasoning" (*ibid.* 1108). As such, this study will enhance our understanding of everyday events, doings, sufferings, and healings which illumine *Q'eqchi'* Maya experience writ large, and particularly their medical worlds and healing practices.

Following this line of reasoning, key questions explored throughout this analysis involve: What are the interpretive and aesthetic activities that are at work or in tension among contemporary *Q'eqchi'* cosmivision, and particularly for *Q'eqchi' iloneleb'* in Southern Belize? How are the central aspects of *Q'eqchi'* medical reality, and thereby healer attention, constituted in their contemporary healing practice? And how do healers construct nosological medical systems as epistemological structures through such activities?

Although the topic of *Q'eqchi'* cosmivision, both historically and contemporaneously, is vast and deserving of more detailed descriptions than can be offered here, two vital and interrelated aspects emerged through our long-term ethnographic engagement with members of the Maya Healers Association that are discussed here from a *iloneleb'* perspective: (1) a relationship to the Mountains and Valleys; and (2) a moral economy of permission. Following this, we analyze and explore, through an ethnographic case study of a spirit "attack" and resultant healing encounter, how these aspects of cosmivision influence the interpretive structures of *Q'eqchi'* medical and aesthetic reality, and thereby shape the nosology or epistemological structures of *iloneleb'* medical knowledge and healing practice (HATALA *et al.* 2015; HATALA & WALDRAM 2016, 2017).

Research Context and Methodology

The analyses presented here are based on collaborative research with members of the Maya Healers' Association (MHA) of Southern Belize (formerly the *Q'eqchi' Healers' Association*) that has been ongoing since 2004. Maya peoples comprise some 31 distinct cultural groups inhabiting Mexico and several other countries in Central America. The *Q'eqchi'* represent nearly ten percent of the total population of Belize, living primarily in the Southern district of Toledo. The *Q'eqchi'* people maintain a rich "traditional" system of healing notwithstanding centuries of colonization and more recent intrusions by North American evangelical groups (BOURBONNAIS-SPEAR *et al.* 2005; WATANABE 1992).² Despite a strong presence of Maya healing practices in Belize, there are growing trends within *Q'eqchi'* communities away from the utilization of traditional healing services in fa-

vor of available biomedical services (WALDRAM *et al.* 2009; WALDRAM & HATALA 2015), a trend also observed over the last few decades among other Maya communities in Mexico and Central America (cf. AYORA-DIAZ 1998; KAHN 2006; PITARCH 2007; WATANABE 1992).

In response to these changes, several grassroots Indigenous groups have emerged as part of the ongoing “ethnic revitalization” of Maya culture (WILSON 1995). The MHA is one such group in Belize with as many as ten active *iloneleb'*, which formed more than a decade ago to promote their activities. As part of their growth, the Maya healers requested that research into their healing practices be undertaken with the goal of demonstrating their effectiveness to the health officials in the Belize government, medical practitioners in their region, and to their own people, especially those moving away from more traditional ways of living and cultural practices.

Our research began in 2004 and has involved ethnographic observations and documentation of over 150 healing encounters through video recording and over 200 detailed interviews with both *Q'eqchi'* healers and their patients (HATALA *et al.* 2015; HATALA & CAAL 2020; HATALA & WALDRAM 2016, 2017; WALDRAM & HATALA 2015; WALDRAM 2015, 2020). Interviews with healers and patients occurred in the *Q'eqchi'* language through a local translator and cultural expert who also served as a cultural broker and ethical advisor, which ensured respect for the traditions and patients' privacy and adherence to local ethical protocols was upheld. The standardized version of the *Q'eqchi'* language approved by the *Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala* (ALMG; Guatemalan Academy of Mayan Languages) is used throughout. Secondary translations of all recorded interviews by five additional *Q'eqchi'* language experts also occurred. The English-language passages shared in this article are these translations, and reflect varying levels of English-language expertise. We chose to modify these passages only for clarifying meaning. The research has received ethical approval from both the University of Saskatchewan Behavioral Research Ethics Board and the National Institute of Culture and History (NICH) of the Government of Belize. In representing this work to a wider audience, the *Q'eqchi'* healers involved in this research have requested their real names

be used to maintain integrity of their voice, knowledge, and experience.³

The Mountains and the Valleys in *Q'eqchi'* Cosmvision

Throughout history, individuals and communities have developed complex visions of the world around them shaped by local ecology, history, language, and interactions with neighboring peoples and their ways of life. These visions, views, and perspectives of the world function to provide cognitive, perceptual, and embodied patterns, norms, or acceptable models of and for engagement with their internal and external worlds. The more deeply perspectives of *Q'eqchi'* cosmvision are grasped, the more it is realized that, like HALLOWELL's (1960: 23) observations among Canadian *Ojibwa* communities, “social relations” between human beings and other-than-human “persons” are of central importance to *Q'eqchi'* visions of and experiences with the world. Foremost among these relations for *iloneleb'* of Southern Belize are the trinitarian connections between *Qaawa'* (creator God), the *Spirits of the Mountains and the Valleys*, and humanity. As one healer, Emilio, explained about the complex connections between *Qaawa'* and these spirits:

“*Qaawa'* is God with powers beyond this world. The spirits of the Mountains and Valleys are beings who take care of the animals, trees and the resources contained within the jungle and our natural environment. *Qaawa'* looks after the people as do the Mountain and Valley spirits. The two beings are *Kojaj* and *Itzam*. These two powers give us our life because that's what we depend on and that's where the animals live and natural resources are. They both have power which protect us, but *Qaawa'* gives us our life.”

Emilio later clarified that *Kojaj* and *Itzam* are the names given to the respective spirits of the Mountains and Valleys. “They are a couple,” he continued,

“The male is *Kojaj* and the female is *Itzam*. For our healing work, or when we plant our crops, we do *majejak* [ceremonies or rituals] to them for permission and we request that the animals or birds do not destroy the plants. They are the ones that guard the animals. That's why we offer them the

food, drink, *copal pom* and candle; to protect our plants and crops. That's the way it is. Everything is paired off, the sun, the moon. That's the way the Maya calendar and history is."

For the *Q'eqchi' iloneleb'*, *Qaawa'* generally signifies an overarching singular creator God "with powers beyond this world" who is responsible for all life on Earth, which includes other kinds of spirits like those of the Mountains and Valleys. The earth is a territory maintained by *Qaawa'*, who, in a sense, assumes stewardship of the land and everything above, on and below its surface. *Qaawa'* is thus responsible for the creation of reality, being exalted above or distinct from that reality, while maintaining a continual relationship with creation. In this perspective of *Q'eqchi'* cosmology, a sacred order exists in the world, a spiritual world permeates the human and natural order, and humans are subject to these sacred and natural laws. In this view, there have been and continue to be important communications and relationships occurring between humans and the realm of the spirits (cf. THOMPSON 1972; WATANABE 1992; WALDRAM 2020).

The *Spirits of the Mountains and the Valleys*, in a way, act as God's masculine and feminine representatives or stewards who take care of the natural resources within their purview. These spirit beings are conceptualized within a broad notion of *Q'eqchi'* other-than-human "persons" (cf. HALLOWELL 1960). Acting upon their own volition, they are considered living beings that form part of the community and environment, upholding relationships with individuals in the community who in turn act as they would engage in any other dealings with "persons" that understand and respond to their communications and offerings.

In the *Popul Vuh* (the Maya book of creation), the twin Creators, "Heart of Heaven" and "Heart of Earth" say to each other: "Let's make humans to be the providers and nurturers" (TEDLOCK 1996: 57). In this way, Maya mythology and narrative history naturalize humans as guardians of the Earth. Later in the Maya creation narrative the twin creators discuss the importance of making offerings to nurture and build a relationship between themselves, the earth, and the spirits. They describe how the first humans made aromatic offerings of *copal pom* (a local tree sap or resin) to honour the

first dawn, "crying sweetly as they shook [...] the precious *copal*" (*ibid.* 161).

Today, this aesthetic perception and style of life, where cultural values are linked to experience, continues among local *iloneleb'* and *Q'eqchi'* community members in various ways. As Emilio mentioned, "[W]e do *majejak* [ceremonies or rituals] to them [spirits of the Mountains and Valleys] [...] They are the ones that guard the animals—that's why we offer them the food, drink, *copal pom* and candle. That's the way it is." *Q'eqchi' majejak* or ceremony, from this perspective, is a contemporary "language of relationship," it is a "visible activity of the reciprocal relation in which persons maintain connection and harmony" (MOLESKY-POZ 2006: 44), and the way a relationship with other-than-humans is nurtured.

"With practicing and appreciating our place that is around us, our environment, forest, mountains, plants," another healer, Francisco, explained, "we have to ask blessings to all the spirits for us to move among them peacefully; that nothing should affect our lives." With these requests and offerings, Francisco continued, "that we make to the spirits of the Mountains and Valleys, to the Creator, and spirits of the different things, that is how we can avoid being affected negatively in our lives. This is how we have the ability to do work as healers."

In *majejak*, *iloneleb'* often shared that different elements come together through a process likened to an attunement, reducing the dissonance between separate objects or ideas (*i.e.*, material and spiritual facets of reality) and between people and the environment, thereby strengthening and fostering relationships. Such attunement, as in musical instruments, refers to forming an accord to create an aesthetic of harmony (MOLESKY-POZ 2006). Thus, through various offerings of prayer, the local *iloneleb'* honor the vital forces of the earth and sky, the sacred Mountains and the Valleys, and engender a process of attunement between disparate facets or elements of reality.

Taken together, the members of the MHA, embody a worldview and ethos that, to a great extent, centers on complex networks of "social" relationships among themselves, *Qaawa'*, and the spirits of the Mountains and Valleys in their social, spiritual, and ecological environments. These relationships enable *iloneleb'* to provide integral medical

and healing services to support their own personal and communal balance and well-being, as well as that of their patients (HATALA & WALDRAM 2016). The Q'eqchi' *iloneleb* involved in this study developed their various relationships to the spirits of the Mountains and Valleys, local sacred ecology, and *Qaawa'*, over the course of a lifetime of embodied practice, illustrating how worldview and ethos sharply orient toward the cosmos and spiritual world—forming their cosmovision.

A Moral Economy of Permission

The notion of relationality, around which revolves contemporary understandings of Q'eqchi' cosmovision, is a locally informed cultural vision of the world offering a form of practice and perception that “reveals itself through a deeply imagined social consensus” that has been “naturalized” and “formulated by an active history” (KAHN 2006: 66). For the Q'eqchi' healers we worked with, notions of relationality are often rooted in a moral rhetoric that contains guidelines for “appropriate” or “proper” interactions among members of their community, their local ecology, the spirits of the Mountains and the Valleys, a host of other spirits and saints, and *Qaawa'* the Creator. Thus, the “language of relationship” (CAJETE 2000: 178) expressed by the *iloneleb'* is deeply moral and infragments to this sacred moral order can lead to misfortune and illnesses of various sorts.

During ethnographic work with Q'eqchi' communities in Southern Belize, our research team has come to view morality as a historicized set of relational imperatives that socially bind groups of “people” together, embodied in distinctive symbolic forms and modes of human activity. In addition to human beings, “people” from this view encompasses a host of *other-than-human* beings that colour the landscapes of Q'eqchi' cosmovision (HALLOWELL 1960; MOLESKY-POZ 2006). Far from solely a “mentalistic” notion, abstracted from “embodied knowledge,” visceral affect, and social or historical forces, morality in this context implies tacit, aesthetic, and practical ways of being-in-the-world (cf. CSORDAS 1990; GOOD 1994: 51). It is an action-in-place, active adherence to a “socialized and moralized imaginary” (KAHN 2006: 67). In this way, embodied moral visions are built up over time and are in dialogue with other

social and political systems, ideologies, or ways of life. As KAHN observed during her work with Q'eqchi' communities in Livingston, Guatemala, “[r]eligious ideas about reciprocity, nature, and exchange with deities/outside, and economic interchanges that involve paying respect to land-owners and tribute to institutions, have merged into a field of morality with a broad scope” (*ibid.* 66). These ideas of “reciprocity,” “exchange,” or “economic interchanges” regarding payments and offerings required to maintain or establish “proper” or “appropriate” relations, pervade *iloneleb'* sentiments of morality and medical ontology, while shaping contemporary notions of relationality or an embodied sense of “relational complementarity” (MOLESKY-POZ 2006: 44).

Historically, the earliest Maya glyphs recognized were those of offerings such as fish, iguana, a turkey head, the bound haunch of a deer, ducks and various forms of vegetation. These were all pictorially recognized as payments or exchanges between humans and the *other-than-human* realm (cf. MOLESKY-POZ 2006; THOMPSON 1972). Indeed, burial remains at the ancient city of *Tikal*, stone carvings at *Xunantunich* and *Chich'en Itza*, lintels of *Cahal Pech*, and stela at *Nim Li Punit* and *Lubaantun*, commonly depict various forms of ceremonial offerings. As THOMPSON (1970) argued, “essentially, Maya religion is a matter of a contract between man and his gods. The gods help man in his work and provide him with his food; in return they expect payment” (*ibid.* 170). In this context, making offerings to the Mountain and Valley spirits is a matter of survival and well-being, and an essential and practical component of everyday life. *Mayejak* (*i.e.*, the making of offerings, or “feeding the fire” in contemporary ceremonial practice) continues to be a foundational moral and aesthetic activity engendered through Q'eqchi' cosmovision: “We ask on the Valleys and Mountains to help and offer a payment,” Emilio described, and “the incense is used for payment.” In a story regarding whether or not there are ways in which people can protect themselves against illness, another healer Manuel Choc suggested that “you'll have to ask for permission so that you won't get a sickness. It's like paying a certain fee, but it's not with money. It's with *copal* [a local tree sap or resin] incense and candles offered to the spirits.”

Similarly, when asked about certain prayers that help with healing, Francisco explained:

“Yes, there is a prayer said at a certain time. It is said to the spirit of the sickness saying that they’ve done enough to the ill person. Through *majejak*, the spirit of the illness is transferred to the sacrifices we make. It’s like an *Alcalde* [community leader], if you’ve done something wrong they will charge you and that money is to pay for the crimes that were committed. It is like paying a certain fee so the sickness comes out of the person. It’s called *toj* [payment].”

Exchanges between *iloneleb’* and the spirits of the Mountains and the Valleys, which resemble a kind of economic tribute, embody the essential cultural logics that underlie the *iloneleb’* notions of morality and thereby shape and inform their medical knowledge. When individuals do something wrong, as in Francisco’s analogy of transgressions against an *Alcalde* or community leader, *toj* is required to mend or repair the moral infringements.

Throughout conversations with the members of the *Maya Healers Association*, the illustrative idiom of “permission” surfaced repeatedly, a pivotal notion revealing locally grounded cultural frameworks and “formative processes” (cf. CASSIRER 1955). Permission is a concept expressing a moral fabric stitched together by local notions of relationality on the one hand, and economic “payment” or tribute on the other. As Manuel Choc outlined:

“Let’s say with fishing or hunting, we ask for permission to the Valleys and Mountains. The river is being created by God and we can find some food there. When we don’t ask for permission, bad things can happen like falling into the river or getting some sickness.”

These notions are in recognition of humans’ role in a larger fabric of reality, as one participant group, no more or less important than any other. However, unlike all other beings in the environment, humans, in Maya cosmivision, are seen as reliant on the highest number and most diverse range of other beings for their survival, when considering food, shelter, and clothing. As Manuel Choc later described:

“It’s the same with hunting: if you don’t ask permission, you might fall down and hurt yourself or cut yourself or get an illness. It’s like if you have some poultry, like chicken or turkey. If I go and get one without asking, a neighbor might get upset. It’s the same with the Valleys and Mountains, if you ask permission you can go freely.”

Manuel Choc further explained that in asking for permission you first address *Qaawa’* the Creator, and then the other spirits:

“It’s like a father who has a lot of things. He [*Qaawa’*] gave it to them so they look after them. The Valleys and Mountains are there over us and if you don’t ask permission it’s like you’re thieving from them. The spirits are given power by God. They wanted to be in the light and that’s why they are given power to feed and take care of animals. They become aggressive at times because they have power over us and that’s why we need to ask permission. Let’s say a rich person that has huge amount of cattle living in an area tells you to take care of them. If a person later enters into that field you have all the right to speak to that person in a good way if it’s the first time. If this is happening often, the rich person might authorize you to shoot the person. It’s the same thing with the Valleys and Mountains. If you’re not asking permission, it’s like they have to ask an animal to attack you. Once you ask for permission, you’re free to go anywhere. It’s like paying some fees, but only in *majejak*. In *majejak* you ask for permission.”

Within ancient Maya knowledge and contemporary *Q’eqchi’* cosmivision, humans are not “owners” of the earth and its resources. Rather, they are “nurturers” of their ecology and their spirits (MOLESKY-POZ 2006; TEDLOCK 1996). When fishing, hunting, walking through the valley forests, swimming in the mountain rivers, or climbing in a limestone cave, humans are obliged to request permission from *Qaawa’* and the spirits of the Mountains and Valleys who are the guardians of the earth and its resources. Manuel Choc’s metaphors of the landowner and a trespasser appropriately convey this sentiment. When a permit is not properly obtained, the “owner” (the spirits of the Mountains and Valleys) may “get angry” and can reprimand the moral infraction through snakes, other animals, and through illness. In this excerpt, Manuel Choc also implies that these impacts may not be immediate and a person may

not be reprimanded for a single infraction. However, after several infractions it is likely that some misfortune will befall the violator. In essence, the practices of making offerings, to the Mountain and Valley spirits in this case, is a preventative measure of maintaining a relational balance between one's self and the spiritual and ecological environments in which one lives. They are practices of humility that nurture protection from illness and misfortune.

The notions of "permission" and "payment" reveal a *Q'eqchi'* theory of morality linked to notions of misfortune, agency, responsibility, protection and risk. Properly obtaining permission through payment or *toj* during *mayejak* is a protection against a host of potential problems or "risks" that may negatively impact an individual while in the wilderness. In these perspectives of *Q'eqchi'* morality and cosmovision, one is aware that the transgressions of obligations will catch up with an individual sooner or later unless that person does something to reverse the situation. When someone has done something wrong, or failed to properly ask for permission, he runs the risk of being "scolded" by or getting a "lashing" from the spirits of the Mountains and the Valleys. The *Q'eqchi'* idiom of permission expresses the moral obligations of "social," or perhaps more aptly "cosmological" responsibility; it is a principle of personalistic reciprocity. According to the *Q'eqchi' iloneleb'* we worked with, therefore, morality, as the cultivation of rightful, responsible conduct, of purposeful action-in-place (cf. KAHN 2006), is an important route to protection and prevention of illness and other misfortune or suffering. Morality is thus imbued with ontological, epistemological, aesthetic, and axiological characteristics insofar as the explanation of generalized events or notions of misfortune in the everyday world are grounded in what could be called a "moral causal ontology" (SHWEDER 2003), where individual transgressions of obligation, omissions of duty or ethical failures are cultural imperatives underlying explanations of and causes for events related to misfortune, and especially illness.

Awacs and a Case of Spirit "Attack"

It was the peak of the harvest in Southern Belize and most families living in the *Jalacte* village, in Southern Belize near the Guatemala border, were out in their corn or bean fields for long hours each day in the unrelenting sun. One afternoon, while harvesting, Ronaldo suddenly felt weak and became momentarily unconscious, falling to the ground while shaking his limbs for several minutes. Ronaldo's father quickly attended to his son who soon regained consciousness and strength while he rested at their home the following day. A momentary bout of exhaustion or overheating was suspected. It was nearly two weeks later when, again out in the fields, a second incident occurred, this time more severe. Ronaldo had fallen to the ground, but this time did not regain consciousness and also appeared to be foaming at the mouth. His father, with the help of neighbours, brought Ronaldo back to the family home in *Jalacte*. Breathing softly but steadily, Ronaldo remained unconscious. The family was severely worried and decided to call on the help of local *iloneleb'* Emilio, who lived nearby, and his brother Francisco, who also happened to be visiting *Jalacte* from *Punta Gorda* nearly two hours away.

Once they arrived, Emilio right away began by placing his hands on Ronaldo's head and began uttering some healing prayers. While grasping Ronaldo's wrists and softly uttering his prayers, Emilio was pulsing, listening to the blood, "speaking" to the pulse and the spirit of Ronaldo to assess his condition (cf. HATALA & WALDRAM 2017). After grasping Ronaldo's wrists, Emilio then moved to feel the pulse at Ronaldo's forehead. With eyes closed, Emilio's hands remained on Ronaldo's head for a short time while he continued praying. Emilio then moved his hands over and across Ronaldo's head and body and down to his chest twice, performing the *jilok* or spiritual massage. Stopping on his chest, Emilio placed both hands upon the boy, bowed his head, and continued his prayers. Ronaldo was breathing heavily and remained motionless on the hammock inside the family home. Repeating the *jilok* motion several times, Emilio then took hold of Ronaldo's wrists and once again continued his prayers. "In the prayer, I'm talking to the power of God," Emilio later explained, "or the power of the Valleys and

Mountains. They have high power over the earth and I borrow them to put down the heat of the sickness.”

This process ended as Emilio bent down and picked up a water bottle full of green medicinal liquid prepared earlier that day. Ronaldo understood Emilio’s instructions and took the bottle and drank the medicine. Ronaldo finished about one-third of the liquid when Emilio said “*Bueno*” and then placed the bottle on the ground behind Ronaldo. As he lay on the hammock, Ronaldo smacked his lips together from the bitter taste of the medicine. At this point Emilio and Francisco were able to ask Ronaldo a few questions about his condition and experience.

“I was attacked and I feel like I don’t know,” Ronaldo explained. While in the middle of harvesting beans he remarked that his head suddenly felt as if it “was going up and down, going up and down.”

“Just in the middle of while you were harvesting?” Francisco questioned further. “Yes,” Ronaldo replied.

“And you don’t know why it happened?” Emilio probed again.

“No.”

“And then your parents brought you here?” Emilio continued.

“Yes,” he said while moving his left arm on his head, “but I don’t know when they brought me.”

“Well we’re glad you’re feeling better now,” Francisco gently responded, not trying to push the conversation too far.

“Thanks God yes,” Ronaldo replied while holding his chest.

Through the discussions that occurred between Emilio, Francisco and Ronaldo’s father they came to “emplot” and diagnose Ronaldo’s case as a general form of spirit “attack” condition, and more specifically as a form of *rilom tzuul* (cf. HATALA & WALDRAM, 2017).

“It just started off with *kaanil* (fright), and they [the patient and his family] let it go until it got serious,” Francisco explained during a later interview, “It got serious after a month and that time it turned to *eet yajel* [epilepsy] and later turned to the more serious one which is *rilom tzuul* [sickness caused by mountain spirit].” Ronaldo’s first illness symptoms, then, were attributed to a case of *kaanil*. It was thought Ronaldo was frightened

one day while working the fields or walking by a river and was never properly treated. This initial “fright” episode left him vulnerable, like a weakened immune system, to the later conditions of spirit “attack.” Francisco thus proceeded at his home to treat Ronaldo for his current case of *rilom tzuul*. Over the next three days, Francisco and Emilio continued to treat Ronaldo with a combination of *Q’eqchi’* healing practices—herbal medications, traditional healing prayers, and the *awas* (a form of ceremonial sacrifice) procedure.

Later that same evening around midnight Francisco planned to perform an *awas* ceremony for Ronaldo, to extract the spirit of the illness through the sacrificial offering of an animal, in this case a duck. Francisco arrived at Ronaldo’s home approximately thirty minutes before midnight and found his father seated in a green plastic lawn chair beside Ronaldo who lay in the same hammock as earlier that afternoon. In the dark of night, Francisco’s figure assumed a prayerful position, one hand on his forehead, slightly bent over, with his other hand over his knees gasping onto the top of a large white bag used for collecting corn or beans in the fields. Francisco remained in prayer for nearly two minutes with his brother Emilio looking on while Ronaldo, barely visible, remained in the hammock with legs sprawled out over the edges.

Francisco then opened the large white bag and put his hand inside. Immediately, loud screeching sounds pierced the quiet night. The bag began to move. Francisco kept a calm, stern face. After a few seconds, Francisco slowly pulled his hand from the bag while the screeching continued. In his grasp was a large, white duck flapping its wings hysterically as it hung upside-down while Francisco held its legs. Eventually the duck calmed and its wings stilled. Francisco continued his prayers while holding the duck in his left hand. Francisco later explained that “[t]hat’s the way it is, with *rilom tzuul*. That’s the way we know that, that’s what to give that sickness, the duck.”

After a minute or so, Francisco stood and moved a step closer to Ronaldo who remained calm in the hammock. Ronaldo’s parents watched on from several meters away. With his right hand holding the head and his left hand holding the feet, Francisco moved the duck, chest down, over and across Ronaldo’s body. He started at the head

and moved the duck across the body several times; at places he touched Ronaldo with the belly of the duck, at others he remained about an inch above Ronaldo's exposed skin and clothes. His prayers continued. "I was doing the *jilok*," Francisco later describes, "to tell the sickness that it has done enough and to stop disturbing the body and spirit." The *jilok* in this case was being done with the duck in hand, bringing the duck in close contact with Ronaldo and his spirit.

After four repetitions with the duck across Ronaldo's body, Francisco moved about ten steps away and slowly stretched the neck of the duck until it was dead. Ronaldo and his parents watched with little emotional expression or change in disposition. The duck's wings flapped for several minutes as the nervous system slowly shut down. Francisco then came back to Ronaldo, while the duck's wings flapped slowly, and continued the *jilok* movements over and across Ronaldo's body for several more minutes while he continued uttering his healing prayers.

Satisfied with this process, Francisco then placed the duck, wings still moving slowly, back into the white bag. He secured the bag and resumed his prayers. With the entire bag, Francisco stood once more and began moving the bag rhythmically over and across Ronaldo's body. After four movements of the large white bag, Francisco signalled that it was time to dispose of the bag and bird. We piled into the truck and headed off to properly offer the duck to the Mountains and Valleys.

This process of *awas* is central to the spirit "attack" conditions (cf. HATALA *et al.* 2015), and is observed in several different forms of contemporary *Q'eqchi'* medicine. "The *awas* works for a sickness that a person is suffering from," Francisco explained, "the *awas* is used to replace that person to the sickness so those evil spirits will see the replacement belongs to them. It's like a change or payment [to]."

It is difficult to translate the *Q'eqchi'* term *awas*. Often, the translators employed throughout this project used multiple terms or phrases in combination, the most common of which were: sacrifice, replacement, ransom, offering, exchange, and payment. Several phrases or idioms are also used to communicate this aspect of *Q'eqchi'* medicine, such as "taking out the days" of the sickness,

"taking out the scent" of the sickness, removing the "pain" of the condition, or to "lure away" the "evil spirit" of the illness. As Francisco further described regarding the offering of the duck during Ronaldo's *awas* ceremony,

"When I use it alive I'm telling the Mountains and Valleys that it is a replacement of the patient on what he has done and what is happening to them. We pray over it when it's still alive. We will give the duck as payment [to] to them, that's why we use it alive. When I kill it then I give it to the sickness. We'll tell them its enough of what they've done and they should leave."

The "attack" and subsequent "feeding" of the "spirits" here are serious and debilitating enough such that the *iloneleb'* and the patient's family must offer a *toj* (i.e., payment) for the spirit of the illness, a ransom or "replacement" to free the patient from the spirit of the illness. The illness then begins to "feed" on the offering or animal. In this way, the moral positioning of the patient is a central concern with these spirit "attack" conditions, since the spirits of the Mountains and Valleys have the responsibility to preserve the moral and social values of *Q'eqchi'* communities.

Yet the moral adjustment or healing does not occur at the level of the patient, but is directed at the spiritual or cosmological level between the patient and the relationships with the *Spirits of the Mountains and Valleys*.

At midnight, as the truck rolled along the dirt roads outside Punta Gorda, Francisco and Ronaldo's father exchanged few words. We drove for about ten minutes before arriving at a small, wooden bridge where Francisco signalled us to stop. Francisco then jumped out and moved over to the bridge and looked out to the small stream below. Francisco bent down over the edge of the bridge and began offering prayers with the now motionless white bag in hand. The area was pitch black and a cacophony of cricket and other insect noises filled our ears. Lightning also flashed several kilometres in the background. Francisco remained in this spot for nearly five minutes. When satisfied with his prayers, Francisco turned the bag over and dumped the duck into the water below.

During the following two days Ronaldo was closely watched and treated by Francisco and

Emilio at his home. Ronaldo remained weak and motionless, although generally seemed to be on the path to recovery. About a week later, much of Ronaldo's strength had returned as he was able to get up from the hammock and move himself into a chair for parts of the day. His parents were delighted to see this development and hopes remained high for a full recovery.

Cosmovision and the Moral Aesthetics of "Attacks"

As we explored elsewhere (HATALA *et al.* 2015), the *Q'eqchi' iloneleb'* we worked with conceptualize *rilom tzuul* as a kind of spirit "attack" illness that primarily involves an inciting incident of "contact" with an "evil" spirit. The *Q'eqchi'* healers suspect that Ronaldo had done something to offend the spiritual realm in some way and did not properly seek permission from the Spirits of the Mountains and Valleys. Ronaldo's symptoms frame the illness narrative as an "attack," of not following the normal social order. In addition to the herbal medications for symptoms, the healers offer a duck to the spirit of the illness that is "polluting" Ronaldo's body (*i.e.*, *awas*). In this respect, this case was simple and straightforward: the *Q'eqchi'* healers were sought for the expertise, a diagnosis or emplotment of the case was made and a treatment regimen commenced (cf. HATALA & WALDRAM 2017).

There are two concepts that are central within spirit "attack" conditions that underlie the logic of its diagnosis and treatment. The first involves a force or entity that is present with the individual that was neither there to begin with nor part of the natural state of being-in-the-world. This is typified in *iloneleb'* discourse regarding the intrusion of an "evil" spirit that has not only "attacked" the individual, but has remained within, continuing to cause harm and illness. In this way, the "evil" spirit is described as "feeding" on the patient which persists until a "payment" is properly made to the Valleys and Mountains, the keepers of the moral and social order. The second important notion is the link of this illness to morality, that the "attack" was provoked by some kind of moral infringement and is a punishment from *Qaawa'* and the Spirits of the Mountains and Valleys. As the *iloneleb'* explain, an individual who is "attacked" most likely did not properly request "permission" from the

spirits of the Valleys and Mountains, and thus did not follow the traditional moral and social code that abounds amidst *Q'eqchi'* communities. Thus, it is through a general notion of a *Q'eqchi'* moral economy of permission that the illness of *rilom tzuul* as a kind of spirit "attack" can be appropriately understood and interpreted.

Underlying discourses of spirit "attack" illnesses are expressions of cosmic and social order, about a moral and aesthetic way of being-in-the-world, and about respecting the forces that inhabit the world which are greater than and enveloping the human realm. The treatment of these cases, then, like we saw with Ronaldo, often involve a central notion of *awas*, a gift or payment [*toj*] to the spirit world that corrects and brings the moral infringement back to a normal state, to re-establish order. In this way, *iloneleb' mayejak* during healing activities performed in the pursuit of health and wellness can be recognized as a localized ecological language, a "language of relationship" embodied in the tone, gestures, sentiments, and epistemological and aesthetic structures of contemporary Maya cosmovision. As such, *iloneleb'* visions of the world engender an intimacy between the people and the environment, blurring the lines between the earth, its personalistic spirits, and the *Creator*. In nearly all that they do, the *Q'eqchi'* healers in the *Maya Healers Association* humbly asked permission from the *Spirits of the Mountains and Valleys* and from *Qaawa'* when doing their work.

As we have seen, however, the focus of therapeutic attention and *mayejak* is not at the individual patient, but rather at the level of the spirits beyond the individual. Thus, even though the cause is often attributed to the level of individual moral culpability, the patient is not held "responsible" for their condition and therefore is not the center of therapeutic engagement in any overt cognitive or conscious manner. It is a moral causal ontology that repairs bonds with the individual and the spiritual world through an engagement with the embodied and aesthetic lived aspect of the patient experience and cosmovision. For the *Q'eqchi'* healers, then, their *mayejak* and engagement with the spiritual forces involved and at the level of patient bodily practice cuts across the conscious awareness of the patient; that is, the patient need not fully "know" about the symbolic and metaphori-

cal power associated with *awas*, but rather when it occurs the patient is “persuaded” at the aesthetic level of bodily sensation that something powerful has taken affect (cf. HATALA & WALDRAM 2016). This process then more closely exemplifies “restorative healing,” in which the goal is to eliminate pathology and return the patient to a presickness state, and therefore a need for meaningful communication between healer and patient is often minimized (cf. WALDRAM 2013, 2015).

As others have also outlined, (cf. CRAPANZANO 1980; YOUNG 1976), malevolent spirits can be a way of speaking about illness states by “externalizing” them. The potential of *Q’eqchi’* understandings and experiences of spirit attack are, however, not limited to an increased sensitivity to local explanatory frameworks or cultural practices. Rather, there are potential benefits to “externalizing” medical discourses (YOUNG 1976), namely that attributing causation to spirits allows the sufferer to externalize the suffering, while personifying the moral cause of suffering that situates therapeutic attention outside and away from the person and toward an entity that can be influenced, taken control of, and overcome through specific medical techniques (cf. HATALA & WALDRAM 2016). As a result, the ill person is not permanently morally “damaged” or doomed to live in perpetual illness.

Curing and the Illness Narratives of Spirit “Attacks”

Throughout our work with the MHA and its members, we have posited that illness and disorders recognized by the *Q’eqchi’ iloneleb’* contain narratives with recognizable genres and variations unfolding over time (HATALA *et al.* 2015). As MONTGOMERY (2006) similarly observed with clinicians operating in Western biomedical contexts, *Q’eqchi’* healers work to simplify narratives of disease and disorder “with the hope of reducing them to the bare plot of readily made diagnosis and an obvious therapy. When they succeed, as they often do, the automaticity, the normality that clinicians value is restored” (*ibid.* 80). From this view, *Q’eqchi’ iloneleb’* and biomedical clinicians together operate through assumed structures of reality, their paradigm, worldview or, in this case, their cosmovision. When illness is “emplotted” or “domesticated” (HATALA & WALDRAM 2017) within assumed

structures and ontological perspectives, the “automaticity of expertise” (FLEMMING & MATTINGLY 2008) or “normality” of a particular therapeutic approach can seamlessly unfold. The cosmovision of the *Q’eqchi’* healers, their “language of relationship,” and their empirical knowledge together foster the “normal” or ordinary vision of *Q’eqchi’* nosology: it represents the “known” conditions that can impact or “attack” a person, the cumulative historical knowledge of ages past combined with years of empirical knowledge, embodied experience, and practice (cf. HATALA *et al.* 2015; WALDRAM & HATALA 2015; WALDRAM 2020). The *Q’eqchi’ iloneleb’* cosmovision, together with their nosology of illness and disorder, provide a paradigm for the interpretation and construction of meaning within a particular case of illness.

BYRON GOOD (1994) concluded his “Medicine, Rationality and Experience” by suggesting that illness be conceived as an aesthetic object. Just as with a painting or fictional narrative, GOOD argued that multiple perspectives and points of view are required to fully comprehend the illness experience. As with most theory underpinning the narrative accounts of illness experiences, GOOD’s reflections primarily originate from the patient’s perspective and move towards a “heteroglossia” of narrative constructions and a plurality of views regarding illness accounts of experience. “Any act of objectification,” GOOD (1994) contended,

“is a moment of synthesis, but the ‘multiple strata’ resist closure. For each actor involved, alternative representations and the complexity of the object challenge any particular formulation” (*ibid.* 170).

For the *Q’eqchi’ iloneleb’* we worked with and their illness perspectives, although multifarious and overlapping, do not inherently resist closure, nor do their narrative accounts of illness experience challenge a particular attempt at formulation. Their views of an illness condition are not typically fraught with anxiety and despair, confusion or ambiguity as differing interpretations of an illness episode are in competition. For *iloneleb’* there is in many ways a certitude, a surety built from their ability to diagnose and interpret the different signs and symptoms available amidst various unfolding medical dramas to which they attend (cf. WALDRAM 2020). This therapeutic process is infused with and shaped by their perspec-

tives and understandings of cosmovision and their “narrative genres” of diagnosable illness conditions (cf. HATALA *et al.* 2015; HATALA & WALDRAM 2017). From the perspective of *iloneleb'* or medical practitioners, then, is it reasonable to expect such an indeterminate heteroglossia as GOOD observed for patients' narratives and experiences? Why is there such a discrepancy in the determinacy of the medical object when shifting our gaze from the patient to the healer? From the view of Emilio, Francisco and the other members of the MHA, their job is to create closure, to cure (WALDRAM 2020). Their cultural work is distinguished by a confident resolution of the particular plot and case at hand. The *Q'eqchi'* healer's job, in a sense, is to create focus or a center around which the medical drama can unfold in order to resolve multiple points of view and discount alternatives. And even as we illustrate elsewhere in the face of a “new” illness conditions, *iloneleb'* operate on the basis of known therapeutic approaches and diagnostic categories infused with a moral economy of permission and relational complementarity inherent to their cosmovision (cf. WALDRAM & HATALA 2015).

Conclusions

To better understand, interpret, and appreciate the contemporary healing practices of *Q'eqchi'* Maya *iloneleb'*, this article described two “formative processes,” “interpretive activities” or “ontological schemes of practice” of *Q'eqchi'* cosmovision: a relationship to the Mountains and Valleys, and a moral economy of permission (cf. CASSIRER 1955; DESCOLA 2010; GOOD 1994). Each of these aspects influence the interpretive structures of *Q'eqchi'* medical reality and thereby shape *Q'eqchi'* conceptions of illness and health, wellness and balance (cf. HATALA *et al.* 2015; HATALA & WALDRAM 2017). From this perspective, *Q'eqchi'* cosmovision provides a provisional overarching aesthetic structure that characterizes the telling and interpreting of stories related to medical conditions and healing practices.

As GOOD (1994) observed, medical and psychological anthropologists have a vital role to “investigate how local medical worlds formulate and respond to illness, comprehend aspects of reality, produce distinctive forms of medical knowledge, and shape a crucial dimension of human experi-

ence” (*ibid.* 177). It is these perspectives of *Q'eqchi'* cosmovision that inform local medical worlds and produce distinctive forms of medical knowledge including narratives of illness and health. On the one hand, cosmovision can be explained by the healers through descriptions of the specific rationale behind each ceremonial offering and the ways that making payments to the spirits of the Mountains and Valleys are an essential part of their relational survival and vision. Their vision of reality, from this view is a conscious concern with the assumed structures of reality and cultural models that link their reality and provide templates for action. On the other hand, cosmovision is implicit and tacit; it is a moral and historicized way of being in the world that implies a kind of “everyday reasoning” or “everyday aesthetics” that “reveals itself through a deeply imagined social consensus” which has been “naturalized” and “formulated by an active history” (cf. Desjarlias 1992; KAHN 2006: 66). From this perspective, engagement with reality for the *Q'eqchi'* Maya is an unconscious and embodied aesthetic lifestyle conforming to and supported by the assumed structures of the world as a place where reciprocal, ceremonial behaviors engender well-being and security for those who participate.

To a great extent these aspects—the cognitive and embodied, the lived and imagined—come together and are reinforced by the two-fold function of *majejak*, or *Q'eqchi'* ceremony. *Majejak* can be performed in order to strengthen the relationships between individuals, their environments, and the *other-than-human* realm, which is ever-present (*i.e.*, attunement). Like we observed with the ethnographic example, *Q'eqchi'* ceremony also occurs as a local moralized *action-in-place* whereby “payments” are offered so “permission” (and in this case a kind of “forgiveness”) may be granted. The interpretive and symbolic contours of *Q'eqchi'* healing are evident in these interrelated functions of *majejak* and from them we see a vision of medical reality that is spread out beyond interactions between patients and healers—interactions that include relationships with the spirits and local ecologies, moralities of social and spiritual significance. In this “cosmic-centered” therapeutic framework, *iloneleb'* perform *majejak* in the cool darkness of a limestone cave, among the warmth of a family hearth, or on the peaks and dips of the

local mountains and valleys in order to discern and diagnose a medical condition, read their patients story, and placate the spirits required to assist in restoring balance to the cosmological and moral disruption illnesses can carry and represent (cf. HATALA & WALDRAM 2017). A *Q'eqchi'* moral economy of permission, then, depicts a central aspect of their cosmovision that shapes "crucial dimensions of human experience" and "distinctive forms of medical knowledge" (GOOD 1994: 177), helping us appreciate more fully how *Q'eqchi'* Maya knowledge and aesthetic ways of being construct contemporary therapeutic encounters in Southern Belize.

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Notes

1 The word *ilonel* (pl.: *iloneleb*) in *Q'eqchi'* means "seer," "to see," or the "one who sees," as involving the ability to prognosticate disease.

2 To avoid a presentation of culture that is static or bounded to a single place and time, we often place the word and concept of "traditional" in quotes when referring to the *Q'eqchi'* healing system to signify that this system, although drawing on a long history of empirical knowledge and practice, has shifted and changed over

the years in relation to or interactions with other systems of thought and medical practice.

3 All interviews and video data recorded were subjected to a thematic analysis (DENZIN *et al.* 2008). Initial themes were highlighted and analytic files were constructed on specific areas of interest (*i.e.*, *Q'eqchi'* cosmovision, diagnosis, etiology, and treatment approaches). This first stage of analysis ultimately transformed the entirety of the analytic files into a series of interrelated themes. A second phase of analysis examined the compiled list of emergent themes and analytic files to identify connections therein. Analytic and theoretical ordering of super- and subordinate themes then helped to make sense of the connections between and among the emerging illness conditions. After the initial analysis and coding process, the authors began to share the results with the MHA members and wider *Q'eqchi'* community and organizations supporting the research process. This allowed for the opportunity of the healers, collaborating organizations, and community stakeholders to respond to the findings and interpretations and support the development of recommendations emerging from the research. Following these community consultations, several joint meetings were held with the MHA members to further discuss and integrate feedback for the production of publications, presentations, and final reports. This iterative process ensured that the presentation of the findings in this article are, as much as possible, an accurate portrayal of the knowledge and experiences of the MHA healers.

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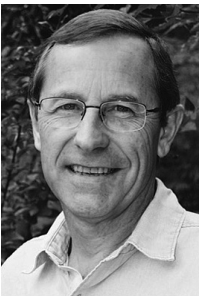
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