

# ACTA MESOAMERICANA



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Christian Isendahl and Bodil Liljefors Persson (editors)

# **Ecology, Power, and Religion in Maya Landscapes**

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# The Guardians of Space and History: Understanding Ecological and Historical Relationships of the Contemporary Yucatec Maya to their Landscape

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## Abstract

Previous works on Yucatec Maya ritual beliefs and practices have revealed how the guardian-spirits (the *yúuntsilo'ob*) are attached to cosmological and mythological spatio-temporal coordinates. This paper shows that these entities are also intimately tied to the local geography and history. Being grounded to specific places in relation to acts of settlement, use, protection, and control of land, the *yúuntsilo'ob* help delimit, organize, qualify, and constrain the multifaceted nature of spaces. Manifestations of *yúuntsilo'ob* appear as indices of ecological, practical, economical, political, and historical attributes of spatial categories. The evidence is drawn from linguistic and ethnographic analysis of everyday interactions and rituals of the Yucatec Maya of Quintana Roo.

## Resumen

Precedentes trabajos sobre los Mayas Yucatecos revelan que en esa cultura los espíritus-guardianes (*yúuntsilo'ob*) están vinculados a coordenadas espacio-temporales de los macro niveles cosmológicos y mitológicos. El presente artículo muestra que estas entidades están también íntimamente ligadas a la geografía e historia locales. Por su anclaje en lugares específicos en relación con actos de instalación, uso, protección y control de la tierra, los *yúuntsilo'ob* contribuyen a delimitar, organizar y calificar la naturaleza múltiple de los espacios, imponiendo al mismo tiempo restricciones sobre su uso. Las manifestaciones de los *yúuntsilo'ob* son interpretadas en tanto índices de atributos ecológicos, prácticos, económicos, políticos e históricos de las categorías espaciales. La argumentación se basa en un análisis lingüístico y etnográfico de un amplio conjunto de interacciones cotidianas y rituales de los mayas yucatecos de Quintana Roo.

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For the Yucatec Mayas, as for many cultures of the world, the relationship between man and his environment involves a large body of supernatural entities that ensure different kinds of mediations. An important group of Maya supernatural entities, the *yùuntsilo'ob*, something akin to guardian-spirits, are constantly, though most often evasively, evoked when people speak about land and forest use, protection of human and animals, and agricultural activities. The relationship between humans and the *yùuntsilo'ob* takes the form of an exchange, engaging reciprocal obligations. The *yùuntsilo'ob* offer their

protection and their land as well as helping people in their agricultural activities, but the farmers must literally “pay” (*bo'ol*) for this help and the *yùuntsilo'ob*’s “work” (*meyaj*) with specific offerings.

Previous descriptions of the Yucatec guardian-spirits reveal how these entities are attached to cosmological and mythological spatio-temporal coordinates, through a series of homologies between spaces (cf. Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962[1934]; Villa Rojas 1945; Sosa 1985; Hanks 1984, 1993, 2000; among others). However, another fundamental property of the relations between man and his environment in the villages of Quintana

	Maya example	English translation	Relation type
(1)	<i>lɪnyùum</i>	my father	kinship
(2)	<i>j/x-ma'-yùum</i>	orphan, fatherless (j masculine/ x feminine)	kinship
(3)	<i>Dyòos yùumbil</i> , <i>Dyòos mejenbil</i> , <i>Dyòos 'espiritu sàanto</i>	God the father, God the son, God the holy ghost	kinship, creation control
(4)	<i>Yun k'iin</i>	Lord sun	control, mastership
(5)	<i>Yun kimil</i>	Lord death (Maya figure of the Death)	control, mastership
(6)	<i>uyùumil le' kòolo'</i>	the owner/ the user of the fiel	property, usufruct
(7)	<i>uyùumil kàaj</i>	the inhabitants of the village	spatial relation and usufruct, belonging
(8)	<i>uyùumil naj</i>	the owner / the inhabitant(s) of the house	spatial relation, property, use
(9)	<i>uyùumil kax</i>	the owner / the one who takes care of the chickens	nurturer
(10)	<i>sáam ints'o'ks uyòok le' bata', chen ba'axe' mix tàak uyùumil'</i>	I have finished the handle of this axe, but its buyer has not come yet	future possessor, recipient of an action
(11)	<i>Intelebiisylene', mix utslaj', ma' tàak uyùumil'</i>	My TV, it hasn't been repaired, the repairman/engineer hasn't come yet	competence
(12)	<i>le' úuchben testamyento Chan Kàaj Veracruz, mix máak upa'tal uxokej,</i>	The old Testimony of Chancha Veracruz, no one can read it,	competence, gift
	<i>yàan uyùumil pero 'èespesyal,</i>	there is one person who can, it is because of a special gift,	
	<i>chen uyùumil ubeyt uxokej</i>	only its master [the gifted person] can read it	
(13)	<i>uyùumil 'iiglesya, San Jwàan</i>	the patron of the church is San Juan	patron saint
(14)	<i>uyùumil 'iiglesya le' patrono', don Tino</i>	the responsible of the church, is the "patron," Don Tino	religious responsible, guarantor of authority

Table 1. Examples of use of the root Yùum.

Roo where we have lived and worked is the close bond of the guardian-spirits to local geography and history. By local geography, we mean the geography of the lived and proximate space of everyday interactions as well as the communitarian territory (the *ejido*). By local history, we mean the link of these entities not only to the macro-time of Mayan cyclic history, but also to the group's local micro-history (memories of the former occupation of some land, settlement or abandon of a village, epidemics, special encounters with some supernatural entity, etc.) made out of collective and individual experiences. In Mayan experience, the presence and demands of the guardian-spirits represent tangible traces of the continuing exploitation and socialization of the forest by man, and, as such, the *yùuntsilo'ob* also form part of the Maya landscape. Our aim is to demonstrate that, being grounded and attached to specific places in relation to acts of settlement, use, protection, and control of land, the *yùuntsilo'ob* help delimit, organize, qualify, and constrain the multifaceted nature of spaces. We will show that manifestations of *yùuntsilo'ob* appear as indexes of ecological, practical, economical, political, and historical attributes of spatial categories.

This wide theme will be modestly addressed here based on a selection of ethnographic evidence drawn from many years of fieldwork in a group of villages situated in Quintana Roo, south of Felipe Carrillo

Puerto. These villages include Kopchen, San Andrés, Noh Cah, and Chancha de Repente which according to oral history were settled and inhabited by the descendants of Mayan migrants from the Caste War less than a century ago.<sup>1</sup>

We will first analyse the semantic properties and associations of the names used to refer to the guardian-spirits. Then we will focus on the process by which these entities give their protection and care to persons and spaces, from the close sphere of the corporeal field to the vast domain of the forest. This will allow us to understand the determining attachment of the *yùuntsilo'ob* to spaces and places. Special attention to some agricultural rituals and prayers will offer richer insights into the places forest *yùuntsilo'ob* are attached to. The analysis of their ritual invocation will also show the multidimensional geography the *yùuntsilo'ob* are involved in, as well as the role they play in processes of encompassing, integrating, and dominating the territory. Finally, the link between the guardian-spirits and the world of the predecessors, as well as their ambivalent nature of protector and ruler, will be further explored. This will be addressed through an analysis of the beliefs related to the places considered as the "houses" of the guardian-spirits, and to the excessive figure of the *arux*.<sup>2</sup>



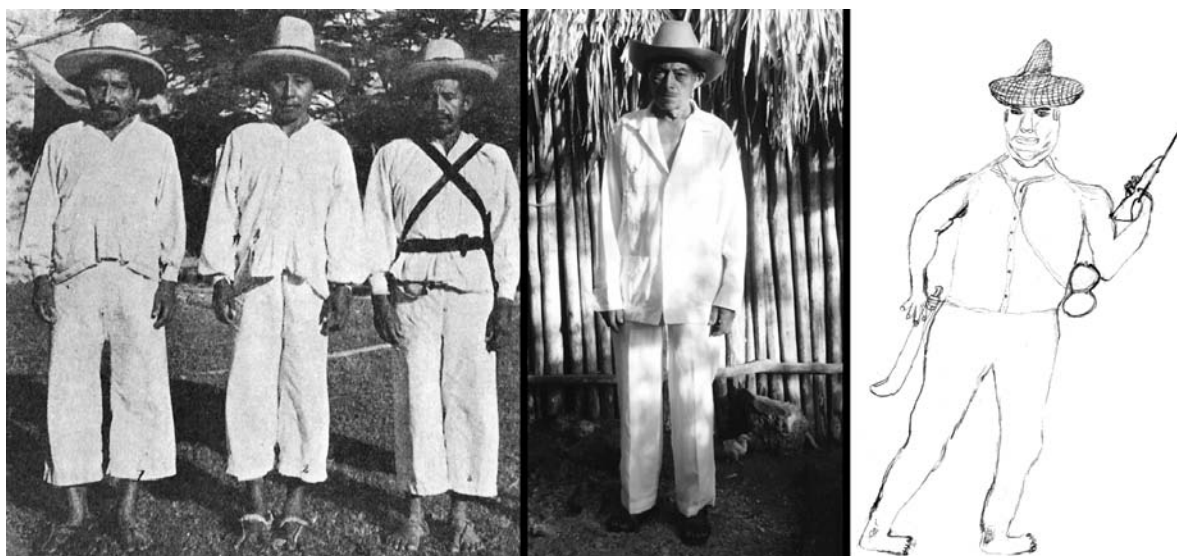


Figure 1. Ancient and contemporary Maya dignitaries and drawing of a guardian-spirit by a Maya. Photo to the left from Villa-Rojas (1945) and to the right by Valentina Vapnarsky.

### What Lies Behind Names that Avoid Naming?

One interesting feature of the *yùuntsilo'ob* lies in the expressions, always vague and generic, which are used to refer to them in everyday life. This mode of reference is linked to some special performative properties of the proper names of the *yùuntsilo'ob*, to which we will come back later. Despite their genericity, these terms reveal a number of semantic associations which are relevant for understanding the nature of the *yùuntsilo'ob*, as well as their relationships with humans.

One of the most common generic terms is the one we have used until now, namely *yùuntsilo'ob*. Its root is *yùum*, which is fundamentally relational and usually translated as father, master, or lord.<sup>3</sup> However, the variety of uses of *yùum* evokes a much larger semantic and pragmatic field. Grammatically, kinship appears as the basic relation since, as seen in the first example of Table 1 and contrary to the other meanings, it is expressed without the possessive suffix *-il* which signals a more distant kind of relation (Lois and Vapnarsky 2006: 97–100). The other meanings, also in common use, include power, control, property, competence, responsibility, caretakerhood, nurture, use, and action in the long term (see Table 1).<sup>4</sup>

All these notions can be subsumed under the general idea of comprehension, in both its meanings: inclusion and understanding, and they always imply an inequality between two entities. The root *yùum* requires the suffix *-tsil* for the absolute (unpossessed/unrelated) use. We find this suffix in the form *yùuntsilo'ob* used to refer generically to the guardian-spirits. The use of the suffix *-tsil* may also convey def-

erence. The quasi-systematic use of the plural *-o'ob* shows that the *yùuntsilo'ob*, the guardian-spirits, are primarily conceived as a collective.<sup>5</sup>

Another common designation is *nukuch-máako'ob* (literally “big men,” plural form of *nojoch máak*, “big man”). Again, this is a generic, collective, and polysemic term. *Nukuch-máako'ob* can refer to different classes of beings tightly linked together by the qualities of predecessorship and authority:

1. The predecessors
  - a. The (contemporary) elders
  - b. People from previous generations (in the same historical cycle)
  - c. People from previous humanities (from another historical cycle, e.g., *P'ùuso'ob*)
2. The authorities (past or present)
3. The guardian-spirits<sup>6</sup>

Even if this form is not grammatically relational, its meaning expresses a link of precedence which is essentially temporal but which can also be, as a corollary, a link of authority. It cannot be used in its singular form when referring to guardian-spirits.

The same kind of relation is conveyed by a third expression, *nukuch-p'òoko'ob* “big hats,” although this expression operates more like an euphemism based on metonymy. The element which grounds the metonymy, the big hat, is characteristic of the *nukuch-máako'ob* attributes, and directly associated with predecessorship and authority, as we can see in the photos of Maya dignitaries that can be compared with the representation of a guardian-spirit of the forest, a drawing recently made by a man from Kopchen (Figure 1).

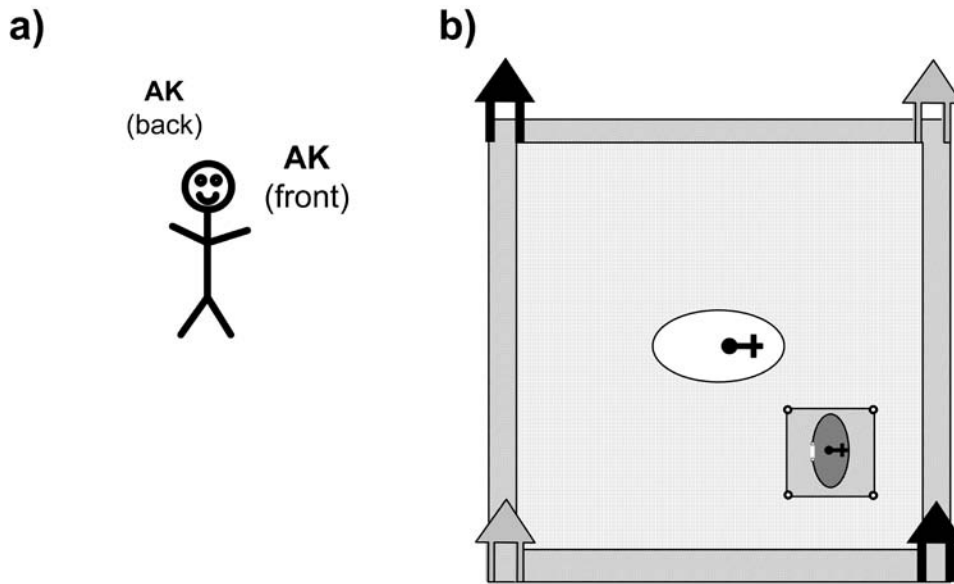
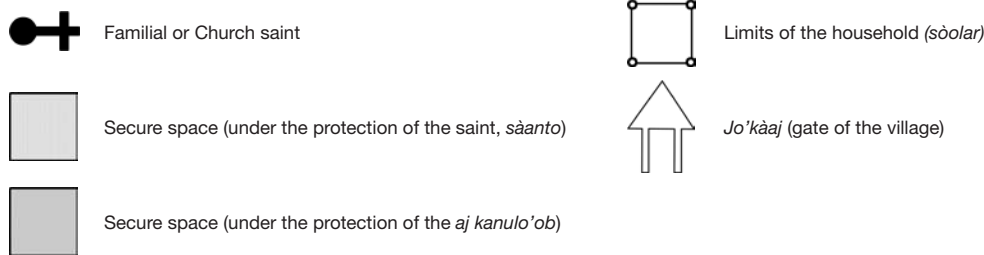


Figure 2. Symbolic protection of (a) human and (b) socialized spaces. Legend:



Lastly, the *yùuntsilo'ob* are regarded as *ìik'ò'ob* “winds,” a term which applies not only to the atmospheric winds (*lak'in ìik'* “wind of the East,” *xaman ìik'* “wind of the North,” etc.), but also to a large and heterogeneous body of entities, sometimes intentional, often malevolent, that abound in the Maya Yucatec terrestrial space (*k'ak'as ìik'ò'ob* “evil winds,” *k'ak'as ba'alo'ob* “evil creatures” including *x Tab'ay*, etc.; see Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962[1934]: 121–122; Villa Rojas 1987[1945]: 298–300).<sup>7</sup> In the case of the *yùuntsilo'ob*, *ìik'* seems to act as a qualitative term referring to the invisibility and animacy of these entities (with a capacity for moving rapidly, just like “real” winds).

All these terms evoke a constellation of features which are essential to the definition of the nature and functions of the *yùuntsilo'ob*, well beyond the simple assignation of “master:” paternity, predecessorship, authority, control, protection, intentionality, invisibility, animacy, energy, movement, plurality, and collectivity. They imply a set of relations which are fundamentally asymmetrical, not reversible, with a strong interdependency between the terms.<sup>8</sup>

## Guardians of Spaces

We will now briefly distinguish some of the various entities that these terms cover. Our aim is not to propose a typology of these entities, but rather to show that they are conceived essentially in relation to spaces, from the corporeal space of the person, to the geographical space, at terrestrial and cosmic levels. As mentioned earlier, we will focus on the domain of the proximate and for this we will follow a Yucatec person in the different spaces they can occupy or frequent. Traditionally, Yucatec Maya live a very routine life in a geographically quite restricted area. In this sense, most of their knowledge and their relation to the environment are literally embodied in their way of life and habits (Hanks 1990).

### *Guardians and Protectors: Securing the Borders*

For the Yucatec Maya, each individual is protected by his or her *aj kanul*, literally “the protector/guardian” (from the root *kan* “protect, guard”), sometimes called *angel de la guardia* (in Maya *àanjel de la*

*gwàardya*) (see Figure 2a). These *aj kanulo'ob* are also considered as being *uyùumil máak*, the *yùum* of the person. They are in a direct and exclusive relationship with the human they “protect,” as a component of the Maya self. Their protective function is particularly salient when the person goes “outside,” that is to say outside the house and especially outside the village. Although variations exist concerning the exact number of *aj kanulo'ob* people have, it is commonly said that each person has two *aj kanulo'ob*, one in front and one behind, a position which evokes the image of walking along a path in the forest, in single file. More importantly, the *aj kanulo'ob* can be understood as delimiting the Maya *iknal*, the “corporeal field” of the person (Hanks 1991), and forming a thick external border, operating as a dense filter of protection. We will find this representation pattern at all levels of construction of spaces.

When used in its more literal way, *aj kanul* designates a function which can be fulfilled by guardian-spirits attached to other spatial perimeters. The space of the house is under the protection of a familiar *sàanto*, generally a wooden cross dressed with an *ipil*, the traditional woman's dress (see Figure 2b). Whereas the *sàanto* is located at the heart, in the inner space of the house, in the garden that always surrounds the house (the *solar*) other *aj kanulo'ob* are also present. These *aj kanulo'ob* offer a protective encircling border of the residential space. They are located at the four corners of the garden, materialized by boundary markers (the *xu'uk*), but some *aj kanulo'ob* are also inside the *solar*, located at those places where the earth opens to the underworld, such as wells and *sajkab* caves. Whereas the offerings dedicated to the *sàanto* are placed on an altar in the main house, those dedicated to the *aj kanul* of the *solar*, large gourds of maize gruel (*saka'*) are hung near the door, or on the edge of the hen or turkey house, or on the pig sty, but always on the outer side.<sup>9</sup> The *aj kanul* of the *solar* ensure the protection of the people and domestic animals living there against malevolent entities and diseases. These are embodied by winds (*k'ak'áas iik'*) coming from outside and against which one must defend oneself, by the creation of one or more protective zones: limits of the house, limits of the *solar*, limits of the village.

We find a similar model on the scale of the village space (see Figure 2b): the patron saint is located at the centre of the village, inside the church, whereas the *aj kanulo'ob*, protectors of the community, called *báalam-kàajo'ob* (literally “jaguars of the village”), have the role of keeping the village secure at its borders.<sup>10</sup> This is where they live, at the limits of the

socialized space, in small structures with leaf roofs, the *jo'kàaj* (literally “gates of the village;” Figure 3).<sup>11</sup> The *jo'kàaj* can easily be assimilated to the *xu'uk*, the boundary markers that delimit the residential space but also the cultivated space.



Figure 3. A *jo'kàaj* (gate of the village). Photo by Olivier Le Guen.

### The “Houses” of the Forest Guardian-Spirits

When someone leaves the socialized space of the village to go into the forest or go to the field—since the field (*kòol*) is considered to be part of the forest (*k'dax*)—she or he enters an unsafe territory under the aegis of the *nukuch-báalamo'ob*, “great jaguars” (see Figure 4). Whereas the *aj kanul* of the person are attached to the corporeal space (its *iknal*) and move with the individual, the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* are associated with a geographical space, just as the *aj kanulo'ob* of the *solar* and those of the village.

In the case of the *nukuch-báalamo'ob*, their spatial domain of reference is conceived from specific places, which share some spatial and temporal characteristics, mainly an opening to the underworld, but also a connection to the world of the predecessors. The *nukuch-báalamo'ob* are located in caves and quarries (*aktun* and *sajkab*), natural water holes (especially cenotes, *t'ono'ot*), and hills. Some of these hills are natural (*bu'tun* “small hills”) but most are manmade (or conceived as being so), such as the *múulo'ob* (ancient prehispanic constructions). They can also be found in abandoned dwellings (*x lá' kàaj*).



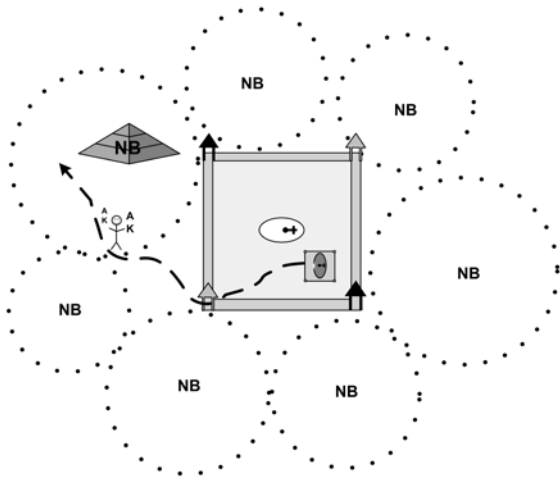
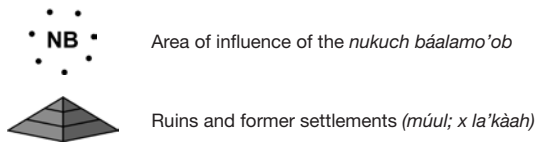


Figure 4. Symbolic division of the socialized and forest spaces. Legend:



The *múulo'ob*, said to be *unajil nukuch-báalamo'ob* “the houses of the *nukuch-báalamo'ob*,” are certainly the places most intimately linked to these entities. They are generally small ruins covered by vegetation, considered as being the work of previous humanities, either of the first men (some people say these houses were made to cover the holes of the unfinished earth) or of later humanities such as that of the *p'ũuso'ob* (hunchbacks), who remained petrified in them (see also Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962[1934]: 12; Villa Rojas 1987[1945]: 438ff). Nowadays, the *múul* are the homes of the *nukuch-báalamo'ob*, who live there a life similar to the life humans live in their houses, just as people say the *nukuch-báalam*'s daily activity in the field resembles men's work (Figure 5). Although variations exist on this matter—in fact rarely discussed by the Mayas—many people also



Figure 5. A *múul*. Photo by Olivier Le Guen.

infer that they have wives and even children.<sup>12</sup> The main difference with people concerning domestic life is that *nukuch-báalamo'ob* only eat *xtuti wàaj* (sacred breads) and other products offered in first fruit rituals (*jo'olbesaj-nalo'ob*) dedicated to them. Furthermore, *nukuch-báalamo'ob* are immortal. The *múulo'ob* are also the places where the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* bring people they have abducted—most often children or teenagers—in order to teach them medicinal plants and the esoteric knowledge at the foundation of the ritual specialist's work. Evidence concerning the existence and way of life of the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* is usually extracted from tales narrating the experiences of children captured by the *nukuch-báalamo'ob*. The child is deceived by a guardian-spirit who appears as a close member of the child's family, often an uncle. Then the child is brought to the *nukuch-báalamo'ob*'s house and works for them in their home taking care of the domestic animals while the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* go and work “in their *milpas*.” This is an ambiguous expression sometimes understood as a field where the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* have their own crops, other times as the field belonging to the farmer whom they protect and help. *Nukuch-báalamo'ob* protect farmers from dangers such as snakes bites, trees falling, and they help them by growing the crops, especially by “watering” them (creating the rain) and keeping off harmful animals and pests. But talking about one's experience among the *yũuntsilo'ob* has fatal consequences for the captured person, a few days later they will be “taken away” again by the guardians, this time definitively (examples of such narratives are analysed in Vapnarsky 1999 and Le Guen 2006).

One can think of the houses or other places of settlement and gathering of *nukuch-báalamo'ob* as representing the centre of their sphere of influence. As we will see later, a number of precautions surround them, people avoid going there for no purpose, and even if they can be exploited for farming or hunting, this always requires special rituals for the “masters” of the place. However, from the viewpoint of the common agricultural space, the energies in those sacred places mainly operate from the outside, again through the creation of a border zone of protection and of potent action. This is apparent in a number of features of agricultural practices and rituals whose main recipients are the *nukuch-báalamo'ob*, as we will see in the next section. One important point here is that the perspective on frontiers will progressively change, from borders conceived as closing and securing limits—a conception which may be partly linked to colonial history, see for example Oko-

shi Harada (2010)—to a view where frontiers are places of integration and domination of the world, meaning here the territory.

*The Guardian's Anchoring  
in the Agricultural Space*

The first necessary act in the exploitation of the forest, either for agricultural purposes or for the creation of a living place, is the measurement (*p'is*) of the chosen space and the establishment of *xu'uk'* boundary markers. The *xu'uk'* define an external as well as an internal delimitation; at the same time, they attribute a base, an anchorage to the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* who will be in charge of working in and taking care of this space. Maya men explicitly say that one member of the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* collectivity is located at each *xu'uk'* established in the field (a *xu'uk'* is erected at each *k'àan*, *mecate* in Spanish, i.e. 20 m or a square of 20 by 20 m), and that this localization is realized during the measurement, *p'is* activity and ritual, at the very moment men erect the boundary markers. One understands from this and other descriptions or narratives that the *yùuntsilo'ob* leave their houses, and

An extract of a prayer held by a *j mèn*, the ritual specialist, for the first-fruits (*jo'olbesaj-nal*) of the field of one of his co-villagers is given in Table 2 (the *j mèn* uses the same cyclic structure to call the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* attached to the different places marked on the map, Figure 7).

Jats'aknáàak topoknáak	Hats'aknáàak topoknáak
kubin int'ään	my words go
tunoj uk'a	to the right hand
jum-p'e ktàata	of one father
aj kanan-xúuk'óo'	guardians of the boundary markers
aj kanan-èera	guardians of the field
aj kanan-mùuluch	guardians of the ruins
jum-p'e ktàata	one father
yúun jóoya'-cháakóo'	masters thunder irrigators
jóoya'-balambo'	jaguars/guardians irrigators
yumèen.	my god(s).
Jats'aknáàak topoknáak	Hats'aknáàak topoknáak
kubin int'ään	my words go
tunoj uk'a bin	to the right hand
u 'aj kanan-káakbilóo'	of the guardians of the earth
aj kanan-montàanya'ilóo'	guardians of the high forest
bèej Sajka-ch'éene'	towards Sahkach'éen
yumèen.	my god(s)
Jats'aknáak topoknak	Hats'aknáàak topoknáak
kubin int'ään	my words go
tunoj uk'a bin	to the right hand
u 'aj kanan-káakbilóo'	of the guardians of the earth
bèej Yo'ts'ono'ote'	towards Yo'ts'ono'ot
yumèèen.	my god(s).
Jats'aknáàak topoknáak	Hats'aknáàak topoknáak
kubin int'ään bin	my words go
tu noj uk'a bin	to the right hand
u 'aj kanan-káakbilóo'	of the guardians of the earth
aj kanan-montàanya'ilóo'	guardians of the high forest
ti' bin u 'aj balam-k'áaxilóo'	to the jaguars/guardians of the forest
ti' bin u 'aj tepallílo'	to the rulers
bèej Ts'uts'enbàake'	towards Ts'uts'enbàake'
yumèèen.	my god.

Table 2. An extract of a prayer held by a *j mèn*, the ritual specialist, for the first-fruits (*jo'olbesaj-nal*) of the field of one of his co-villagers.

the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* are part of, since they are said to be under the authority of God and the major saints.<sup>13</sup>

Firstly, Figure 6 shows that the invocation proceeds from the celestial (*Glòria*) to the terrestrial spheres, through the intermediate domain of the *cháako'ob*, who pour rain on the fields from the lower sky strata. This order also represents the hierarchical relations

prayer is organized cyclically. Each cycle convokes a group of entities corresponding to a specific location, referred to by a toponym, which the *j mèn*'s voice visits to invite the *yùuntsilò'ob* to the ritual feast.<sup>15</sup> The toponyms associated to each group of entities invoked are not simply spatial references, they make explicit a main distinctive feature of the *yùuntsilò'ob*. As Hanks writes, in Yucatecan conception of life and nature "all animates, including spirits and directional

True, the map shows a (kind of) concentric movement, departing from San José and ending at Yo'ak'al, passing through fourteen places in the *ejido*. The movement created by the *j mèn*'s invocation is an idealization that he, as a ritual specialist, adapts to the local geography, by selecting relevant sites and spatial connections among the rich array of places to which *nukuch-báalamo'ob* could be attached. This selection depends on a combination of different kinds of relationships linking the *j mèn* and the men to the spaces that they use, inhabit, interact with, and which hold part of their identity.

It is common knowledge among the Mayas that the *j mèn* calls the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* from places surrounding the field for which the ritual is performed, "all around it" (*tubáá'pàach*). The field is conceived to be in the centre. As a consequence, a different set of *nukuch-báalamo'ob* should be invoked for each field situated in a distinct location, and a farmer cultivating two or three different areas of the *ejido*—common among Maya farmers—needs to perform a ritual for each field. However, from a strictly topographical perspective, the centrality of the location of the celebrated field at San José in relation to the other places mentioned in the prayer appears to be very relative (Figure 7). Rather, San José seems cornered at the edge of the *ejido* (whose limits are shown by dotted lines in Figure 7), being a place of confluence, but also part of some external limits. What explains this configuration?

First, it is easy to notice that the places where the *j mèn*'s voice travels cover most of the cultivated sector of the communitarian territory, the *ejido*. The selection of the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* invoked indexes the agricultural use of land. It stresses an economic and ecological partition of the communitarian land, distinguishing the cultivated area from that area left to high forest, where other activities unfold such as hunting and gathering of forestry products. *Nukuch-báalamo'ob* also inhabit this space but these are involved in other kinds of rituals, in particular those that hunters perform to ask for permission to hunt in a given location. The year the recorded *jo'olbesaj* was held, all the places mentioned in the prayer were used as fields or ranchos by villagers. Maya make their *milpas* from generation to generation in one main area of the *ejido* space (Figure 7). This is arguably not only due to the quality of the land, but also to the presence of "tamed" *nukuch báalamo'ob*. Long time exploitation of the land means an equally long relationship between the ritual specialists and the *nukuch báalamo'ob* of this space, who become more accus-

tomed to human presence (*siuka'ano'ob*) than other *nukuch báalamo'ob* who reside in the deep forest.

The invocation of the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* also indexes the agricultural activity in a more intimate way, as part of the everyday practice of this space. The order of mention of the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* appears in the prayer to depend partly on this habitus, since the invocation route is inflected by the real paths farmers take to go to their fields. This can be seen, for example, in the way San Antonio (place 4) is included in the first part of the invocation circuit and not in the last and northern one. To go to San Antonio, men take the main road and then a small path departing from it, just as they do with ix Pàanja (2) and Jàal-Tiinta (3), which are similarly connected to the main road. All three places are cognitively and ritually conceived together with San Antonio, but separated from the northern locations, such as Ts'utsenbàak (13) and San Fernàando (14), which are reached by different paths in the forest, departing from a different location in the village. Also Tsuk Ha'as (7) is connected by a path which cuts through Sak Xa'an (5) and Xyatil (6), probably explaining why those places are named in that order and not Tsuk Ha'as immediately following x Pàanja for example. Thus, the invocation circuit mirrors a cognitive cartography of moving about in the landscape.

Two other qualities are crucial to the understanding of the *nukuch-báalamo'ob*'s circuit and the multifaceted space composed by the prayer. We have noticed that none of the named places lie across the border of the *ejido* on the east side of San José. The map also clearly shows that many of the other defining places of the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* invoked in the prayer follow the borderline of the *ejido* (on the cultivated sector side, not in the southeast corner, see Figure 7). From our data, and despite the explicit rule stating that the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* addressed are those encircling the celebrated field, those borderline places are named in all prayers for fields exploited by the men of the *ejido*, whatever their location. It seems that with his prayer, the *j mèn* asserts a limit which defines the community territory as well as his privileged domain of influence. This is a political limit but also one of ritual control over the territory through the intimate relationship the *j mèn* maintains with the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* that reside there.

Last but not least, the identifying places of *nukuch-báalamo'ob* invoked in the prayer all represent recently abandoned residential sites. Some, like Pach Múul and Sahk'abch'e'en, have *múul* mounds—old buildings made by ancient humanities. The others are *x la'kàaj* or *úuchben kàaj*, abandoned villages or hamlets. This is the



case of San Antonio and Sahl'abch'e'en for example, where one can still make out the ruins of the wells, the low walls (*kòot*) around the house gardens (*solar*), and the church. Many people have grandparents or great-grandparents who lived in these villages and who have told them how they had to leave their homes because of an epidemic of *chu'chum*, a divine punishment. God or the patron saint of the village had ordered the *báalam-kàaj'ob*, the guardians of the village gates, to let the disease enter the village.<sup>17</sup> Tsuk Ja'as is said to have been an ancient village captured by the Mexican army during the Caste War. Mexican soldiers built a trench there, but were defeated in what is considered by the Mayas of this area as an important victory of their ancestors. Other places, such as Sak xa'an, Yo'tsono'ot, or Tsutsenbàak, were hamlets or ranchos, farmhouses for a household unit.<sup>18</sup>

Wells (*ch'e'en*), cenotes (*ts'ono'ot*), and mounds (*míul*) all represent openings to the underworld—as well as salient landmarks in the homogeneously flat topography of the region.<sup>19</sup> But for the Maya, the presence of a well, especially a manmade one, is most of all an important indication of former residential locations and of the presence of *nukuch-báalamo'ob* that were regularly invoked and worshiped as guardian-spirits by the former inhabitants of the place. The identification of all the mentioned places with known abandoned residential sites and their association to memorable past events is another evidence of the special link that exists between *nukuch-báalamo'ob* and previous use of the land as well as the world of the predecessors and history.

## Guardians of the Past

### *Enlivened Lands*

We will further explore the link between the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* and the past by recounting a narrative of Don Pako, an elderly man whose family had to move out from San Ignacio, a further distant village also abandoned following a calamity. We will give here a brief account of his very long story.

Don Pako told us how, as a young adult, he had to look for some land to cultivate and where he could settle. He obtained the rights to a large plot of land in a fertile part of the forest. He built a small house, moved in, and transferred his livestock. However, soon his poultry and pigs began to fall ill and die because they were constantly bitten by the numerous bats infesting the area. Don Pako went to consult two *j m'een*, one close by, one far away, and both of them

gave him the same explanation. Unknown to him, Don Pako had settled a plot which was the dwelling place of *nukuch-báalamo'ob* (indeed, there was a *míul* in the plot) and of which they were "*uyiumilo'ob*" (guardians, tenders, and perhaps owners of the land).<sup>20</sup> Because of their presence, the place was said to be *kuxa'an*, "alive."

The losses suffered by Don Pako were messages from the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* announcing their displeasure with him because he had settled their land without permission. To win back the *nukuch-báalamo'ob*'s favour, Don Pako had first to erect simple *jo'kàaj* (doors of the village) made of small piles of stones (*míultun*) with a cross at the entrance of each side of the plot. Second, he had to perform a ritual named *jets' lu'um* ("calm, seat, or secure the earth"), in which special offerings are dedicated to the *nukuch-báalamo'ob*. From then on, and if Don Pako kept doing regular rituals to the *nukuch-báalamo'ob*, they would ensure him prosperity on this land. And this is what happened.

This story tells us several things. First, it insists on the continuing presence of *nukuch-báalamo'ob* in a site, a presence which confers to them some rights with regard to its exploitation (one may recall the meanings of the word *yuum* as "inhabitant," "person with rights of usufruct on an object or land," or "exerting continued or repeated action on a place in the long term"). This presence also confers to the land a special vitality. The place is said to be *kuxa'an* "alive," it is a place of abundance for farmers who will benefit from the very fertile soil and have generous harvests, and for hunters who will find there inexhaustible game. Besides the punishments sent by angry *nukuch-báalamo'ob*, other signs frequently evoked of the "living nature" of the place and of the presence of a *nukuch-báalamo'ob* residence are the noises one would hear nearby if passing there by night: the cock crows and pig squeals of the *nukuch-báalamo'ob*'s domestic animals, or the specific whistles from the *yíuntsilo'ob* themselves. Hunters often say that they see exceptionally big, but always unreachable deer there. These places are looked for and feared at the same time, since—despite their beneficial qualities—living, cultivating, or hunting there means committing oneself to a delicate exchange with the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* that reside there. It is noteworthy that one of the only persons who reportedly dared to set up his ranch very close to one of the biggest *míul* in the region and cultivate its land was a reputed *j m'een*. The houses of the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* appear as places of high concentrations of energy or power: they hold many *nukuch-báalamo'ob* which carry dangerous winds, they are highly masculine (an impor-

tant point that we will not be addressed further), and strongly linked to the past. These energies make the “houses” and the land that surrounds them places with extreme properties (abundance and prosperity or shortage and death) and dangerous qualities, strongly constraining behaviour adopted when one approaches or uses them. As we have seen, such “vitality” seems to be clearly linked to the fact that these houses are located on abandoned human settlements.

The ritual that Don Pako had to perform in order to “secure the earth” and win the acceptance and favour of the *nukuch-báalamo’ob* includes two fundamental acts that turn the relation with the *nukuch-báalamo’ob* into a positive one. First, the delimitation of the space by establishing boundary markers. Second, the giving of offerings, explicitly considered as payments (*bo’ol*) in exchange for the use of the land and the service of the *nukuch-báalamo’ob*. The relation of exchange that starts from then on between the peasant and the *nukuch-báalamo’ob* launches a process of habituation of the *nukuch-báalamo’ob* to the type of retribution they will receive, a process which often leads to specific demands. Indeed, even if the terms of the exchange are based on socially shared ritual rules, these rules can be subject to different kinds of inter- and intra-individual variations. Variations in ritual practices appear in the course of a person’s life as a response to the many signs sent by the *nukuch-báalamo’ob* (disease, droughts, shortages, encounters in dreams, etc.) and which will incite or urge him to modify the offerings. By the specific or idiosyncratic form it takes, each ritual reactivates the story of the relations between the farmer who plans it and the *nukuch-báalamo’ob* to which it is dedicated.

### Guardians and Rulers: Insights from the Excessive Arux

The relation of exchange between humans and the *nukuch-báalamo’ob*, as well as the ambivalent nature of the guardian and ruler *nukuch-báalamo’ob*, is expressed in a paroxystic way by the figure of the *arux*. The *arux*, also called *uyüumil k’áax* (“*yüum* of the forest”) is conceived as an artificial guardian that man makes for himself by modelling a small human figure from clay and rigging him out with a big hat, a rifle, and a gourd (*chuj*). He is brought to life by prayers as well as bloodletting offered by its human creator. It is said that *j m’èen* are the only persons able to create them. To exist and live, the *arux* must also be “planted,” *pak’bil*. As all beings, he must have a proper place. This is made in a small cave or near a small structure with a palm roof which is considered as be-

ing “his house” (just as with the *míul* of the *nukuch-báalamo’ob*). This act of planting is essential because it defines not only the *arux*’s domain of action (to protect his master’s crops), but also the centre of his region of influence (the field or ranch of its master).<sup>21</sup>

The *arux* shares various properties with the *nukuch-báalamo’ob*. Both categories of guardians are connected with prehispanic times (cf. Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962[1934]: 119–121; Terán Contreras and Rasmussen 2005: 171–172) and ontologically linked to masculinity and the forest (*k’áax*) space. They cannot be guardians of a village and are incompatible with feminine energy. However, the *arux* differs from the *nukuch-báalamo’ob* by his extreme behaviour. He never enters the village and, exposed to a naked woman, he simply explodes. Under the impulse of his tyrannous temperament, the *arux* sometimes chases away the *nukuch-báalamo’ob* and takes over their role and function. The *arux* can even fulfil the duties of the celestial and powerful *cháako’ob* by robbing their little *chúuj*, the inexhaustible gourd, and using it to irrigate his master’s field. Whereas the relations people establish with *nukuch-báalamo’ob* are based on fair payment of accomplished labour, organized from above by the celestial saints and gods, the relationship people have with the *arux* is contractual and similar to the one with the devil, *kisin*. People make a deal, asking for positive or negative outcomes, whose consequences always take the form of some magical or unnatural process (incredible harvest, implausible quantity of chicle<sup>22</sup> collected in one day, etc.) and involve sacrifice on the human side.<sup>23</sup>

Among the Mayas of Quintana Roo, the *arux* appears as a kind of *nukuch-báalamo’ob* that people create for their own personal use. But this creation is a sacrilegious and ambivalent act which can have terrible consequences. The artificial guardian often eludes the control of its human creator and becomes an excessive and over-demanding figure. From being a “responsible” *yüum*, he becomes a real “master” *yüum*; from being a “guardian,” he becomes a “king,” the ruler of the field as he is then qualified. The term used then is the word borrowed from Spanish “rey” (*ur’èey le k’òolo’*, “the king of the *milpa*”), whereas, as seen before, the less impetuous and more controllable *nukuch-báalamo’ob* are qualified with the old Mayan term for ruler or king, *aj tepal*. Notwithstanding what this may tell us about the diverse type of domination associated with the Spanish as opposed to the Mayan world, the contrasting use of the two languages reinforces once again the link that *nukuch-báalamo’ob* entertain with history.

Whereas *nukuch-báalamo'ob* are immortal, man has the power of life and death over the *arux*. Some secret trap may ultimately be used to kill him and put an end to its immoderate demands. A flat stone would be hung from a *k'anjol* tree bark during the day.<sup>24</sup> At night, when the *arux* goes out, the stone would fall and crush him. Another method would require persuading a woman to undress in front of him...

## Conclusion

The analysis of the various manifestations of *yùuntsilo'ob* guardian-spirits and of the behaviour adopted by the Maya in their different spaces of interaction, as well as the study of rituals addressed to these entities, confirms the different qualities and functions attributed to the *yùuntsilo'ob*. These properties were originally revealed by the polysemic and generic names used to designate them in everyday speech: protectors, guardians, masters, rulers.

Contrasting with guardian-spirits in other Amerindian cultures (Monod Becquelin and Vapnarsky 2010), the *yùuntsilo'ob* are mostly attached to places and not to specific categories of living entities, such as animal or plant species. Even the *aj kanul máak*, guardians of the person, are best understood as protectors of the corporeal field.

*Yùuntsilo'ob* have their specific places, only named in ritual contexts, their mention being a crucial aspect of the performativity of the *j mèn's* ritual words. The presence of the *yùuntsilo'ob* ensures a certain protection but also strongly constrains behaviour one can adopt in different places (frequenting times, prohibitions, or restrictions concerning women and children, certain actions—e.g. sexual intercourse—and discourse genres, etc.), a theme that could not be dealt in depth with here.

Different kinds of *yùuntsilo'ob* are distinguished according to the type of area they exert their influence on and play a significant role in the determination and qualification of the limits and nature of spatial categories, from the person's *iknal*, the house and the village, to the diverse sectors of the forest (*k'áax*) and the *milpa*. The *yùuntsilo'ob* are usually localized at places that constitute the thick border of their sphere of influence. Even if the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* are attached to symbolically central “houses” and internal field demarcations in the forest and agricultural spaces, the analysis of agricultural rituals (especially of the prayers addressed to the *nukuch-báalamo'ob*), reveals that the *nukuch-báalamo'ob's* action is also crucially

configured by a centripetal movement, from the exterior to the forest sector or field which is the object of protection and help.

The ritual words used to invoke the *nukuch-báalamo'ob* also index a much richer set of perspectives on the space Maya people and ritual specialists interact with. In the invocation, the selection and order of the places *nukuch-báalamo'ob* are attached to reveal a multidimensional geography of the proximate regional space, figuring political limits, contrastive ecological properties, and uses of land, forest paths, former places of residence, and memorable events in local history. At a broader level of analysis, the representations of the guardian-spirits are part of a complex cognitive map with strong implications for the acquisition, memory and transmission of information and conceptions on space and time.

*Nukuch-báalamo'ob* are anchored in a large cosmological world but also in the local geography. They are related to ancient humanities, through the *míulo'ob*, and to recent history, through the *x la' kàaj* (former villages or ranches abandoned only a few generations ago). Their presence on former sites of residence ensures continuity between predecessors linked to different historical cycles. It is also important in the construction of the memory and the recalling of recent collective events such as settlements, epidemics, conflicts and battles, etc. And in a way, it extends the socialized space well beyond the frontiers of the village.

One question, which remains latent in this analysis, is the possible influence of the history of the Maya of our region of study—and especially their installation in a new territory—on the main focus given ritually to the local vs. the macro space-time. Contrary to what is known from rituals described in other works (e.g., Barrera Vásquez 1970; Terán et al. 1988, 2005; Villa Rojas 1987), in the prayers we studied the macro-cosmic locations are left rather unspecified. There are very few or no references to the four cardinal directions (*kantits lu'um*) as associated to the *cháako'ob* and organizing the quadrilateral cosmic space, nor to specific entities linked to the cardinal directions such as the *Pawajtun*. In a special section of a prayer pronounced after planting and reproduced in Terán et al. (1988: 242–257), a *j mèn* from Xocén addresses a series of ten *x la' kàaj*.<sup>25</sup> But, although the *la' kàaj* are attributed similar powers, in our data they are prevalent in all references to terrestrial *yùuntsilo'ob* and in most of the prayers, whereas in Xocén, the *x la' kàaj* only represent a small part of the ritual invocations. The appropriation of a new space experienced by the Maya who immigrated to



- spirits (*báalam-kàaj*, *nukuch-báalam*). However, *báalam* is commonly used as an adjective meaning “spotted” (and as a name for spotted dogs). Also, contrary to the Lacandons, Yucatec Mayas do not consider that the *báalam-kàaj* or the *nukuch-báalam* (see below) can appear as jaguars; rather, when they make themselves visible to a person, they take the appearance of men. Some people say that they are *búuktsóots*, covered with black hair, like howler monkeys (*bàats*). We find a similar description in the beliefs of Mayas from Xocén (“*Balam significa jaguar, pero en Xocén, son imaginados como hombrecillos de piernas peludas y barbas largas*,” Terán and Rasmussen 2005: 170).
- <sup>11</sup> Schema 1b is an idealized representation. Nowadays, there are often only two *jókàaj*, one at each side of the main road which cuts across the villages.
  - <sup>12</sup> One person, son of a deceased *j-mèen*, told us that there are three female *nukuch-x báalam*: Rosalia Balam, Teresa Balam, and Sokoro Balam. These names were perhaps those that he heard mentioned in his father’s prayers, when, as a teenager, he accompanied him as a ritual assistant.
  - <sup>13</sup> The figure of *kunk’u-báalam*, which appears at an intermediate cosmic and discursive place between god(s) and the saints and the terrestrial *nukuch-báalamo’ob*, seems to be considered as the main *báalam*, though its exact status is still unclear to us.
  - <sup>14</sup> Hanks (2010) details the uses of *ah tepal* in colonial times: “[...] *ah tepal* ‘ruler’ could be used for various kinds of ruler in Maya, but it happened to be the preferred translation for ‘majesty’ in *Rey de su Magestad* ‘King His Majesty.’ Consequently, *ah tepal* came to be used almost exclusively in reference to the Spanish king” (2010: 259). *Ah tepal* was also used as an epithet applied to God in the early confessional context (2010: 497). However, in later petitions to the Crown, and to its New World representatives as well as regional government, *ah tepal* was abandoned. Instead, we find *ahau* “ruler” and *yum* (2010: 520).
- Interestingly, *ahau*, which is common to many other Mayan languages, is no longer used in modern Yucatec. *Ah tepal* is nowadays restricted to the reference of supernatural entities in ritual discourse; another example of this use is found in the transcription by Villarojas of an Okotbatam prayer from Tusik, a village located in the northern part of the Macehual territory (Villarojas, 1987[1945]: 455).
- <sup>15</sup> This is grammatically expressed by the relational form: set A [nukuch-baalamo’ob] + suffix -il [place name].
  - <sup>16</sup> Not only the *nukuch-báalamo’ob* but all the other entities invoked (divinities and saints, *kunk’u chàako’*, *kunk’u balamo’ob*) are systematically attached to a specific place. This anchoring is also present in the prayers of the non-specialists though, in this case, it is usually realised by just mentioning the basic opposition between *yóok’òl kab* “the earth” and *ka’an* “the sky” or *Sàanto Glòoria* “the heaven.”
  - <sup>17</sup> *Chu’chum* is a disease causing swellings on the body, distinct from the other epidemic commonly remembered, the smallpox (*noj k’áak’* lit. “big fire”).
  - <sup>18</sup> San Mejerildo is the only hamlet that still has inhabitants (about 25 people live there, from an extended family divided among 4 houses).
  - <sup>19</sup> In this same spirit, some people say that the *miul* were made by god “to patch the earth holes.”
  - <sup>20</sup> One *j mèen* was a man from his own village, the other, was a *j mèen* from the city of Tepich in the far-away Yucatán, who, as is common, was considered as wiser and more powerful. The greater efficiency attributed to distant *j mèen* is another element of the complex relationship between ritual specialist, power, and territoriality.
  - <sup>21</sup> The *arux*, or *alux*, is a common figure of Lowland Mayan beliefs. From Yucatan to Belize and Petén (especially among the Itza’ of San José), however, variations are observed concerning its origin, nature, and behaviour. For example, for the Itza’, the *arux* is a small facetious being who loves playing tricks on people, such as hiding their tools. Often conceived as hermaphrodite, he falls in love with girls or boys who he likes to chase and torment. Although he fulfils a function of protector of the forest and animals, he has no special ties with the agricultural space and can enter the village during the day or at night. Some say that he was a man (some say an angel) that fell in love with a woman and was rejected by her and died from drunkenness. He now wanders in the forest as a soul (*pixan*) or wind (*ìik*).
  - <sup>22</sup> *Manilkara achras*.
  - <sup>23</sup> Contrary to Xocén’s practices (Yucatan, cf. Terán Contreras and Rasmussen 2005), we found no mention of the *arux* in agricultural rituals.
  - <sup>24</sup> K’anjol: *Hampea trilobata*, *Hampea integerrima*.
  - <sup>25</sup> “*Desde beoritas bakan bin xan ula’ kaajil xk’olom, ula’ kaajil kusamil, ula’ kaajil San José, u la’ kaaji’ x weech, u la’ kaaji’ xkiawi, u la’ kaaji’ tsoila, u*



*la' kaaji akan tun, u la' kaaji x kayil, u la' kaaji yòts'ono'ot, desde beoritasa' in yum ka' woytéex bakan bin xan tulakle la' kajo'ob yante'elo ka yanak u ts'aaba kuenta tiob bakan j'en bix unajmail ma' u manba'alkuntko'ob bakan bin xan le santo grasia ka' yanak u kalantik yaalak'o'ob bakan xan tu'ux bakan bin xan ts'aab le' santo semiya te' tu jomche', te' tu jomlu'um bakan bin iche santo kool.*

Que llegue este aviso desde ahora al la' kaaj de xk'olom, la' kaaj de kusam, la' kaaj de San José, la' kaaj de xweech, la' kaaj de xkiau, la' kaaj de ts'oila, la' kaaj de akan tun, la' kaaj de xkayil, la' kaaj de yòts'ono'ot que sepan todos que se les esta informando como es debido, que tienen que cuidar la santa gracia, de sus animales, allí donde hubo la santa gracia, allá donde desmontaron, allá donde limitaron la tierra para hacer la santa milpa." (Terán et al. 1988: 249 (section 15M). We respect the original writing conventions and translation.

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