



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Personhood in Maya Art : a theoretical perspective

Osorio, L.A.

Citation

Osorio, L. A. (2015, March 31). *Personhood in Maya Art : a theoretical perspective*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/32623>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/32623>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/32623> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Osorio, Laura Ann

Title: Personhood in Maya Art : a theoretical perspective

Issue Date: 2015-03-31

Personhood in Maya Art: A theoretical perspective

Proefschrift
ter verkrijging van
de graad van Doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden,
op gezag van Rector Magnificus prof. mr. C.J.J.M. Stolker,
volgens besluit van het College voor Promoties
te verdedigen op dinsdag 31 maart, 2015
klokke 12:30 uur
door

Laura A. Osorio

geboren te Northamptonshire, England
in 1983

Promotiecommissie

Promotor:

Prof. Dr. M.E.R.G.N. Jansen

Co-promotores:

Dr. G. Hernández Sánchez

Dr. M. May Castillo

Overige leden:

Prof. Dr. W.F.H Adelaar

Prof. Dr. N Grube (Universität Bonn)

Prof. Dr. C Hofman

Prof. Dr. J.C.A Kolen

Acknowledgements:

I owe the inception, development and completion of this thesis, as well as my enjoyment throughout, to my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Maarten Jansen, for his profound intellectual vision and care, his patience, kindness and generosity. In this regard, I also thank Dr. Gilda Hernández Sánchez, whose academic and personal support has been invaluable to this research. Thanks also to Dr. Manuel May Castillo, for his thoughtful and astute comments.

The core of this investigation lies in the deeply creative and philosophical dialogues that were led by the residents of Santa Elena, Yucatán. I am particularly grateful to Mayra Gutiérrez Chuc for her intelligence and courage.

This research could not have been conducted without the financial support of the CONACYT, Mexico. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Ellen McBreen and Inge Laino for professional flexibility in the later stages of thesis development and Bob van der Meer for the Dutch translation.

Many thanks also to Loretta Sunnucks and Juan Osorio for their creative, editing and personal support.

And to Sindbad Iksel, the reasons for which he is aware.

Contents:

Preface.....	3-6
Chapter 1: The Evaluation of Theories that are Applicable to the Study of Art in the Maya Area.....	7
1.1 Understanding stylistic devices.....	7-21
1.2 The Relationship Between Being and Material Culture.....	21-34
1.3 Being in the Natural and Worked Environment and the Construction of Identity....	34-47
1.4 Ritual and Religion in the Mediation of Historical Dialectics.....	48-57
Chapter 2: Fieldwork: Narrowing the Focus; Philosophies of Being and Materiality in Santa Elena, Yucatán.....	58-59
2.1 Introduction to Ethnography in the Maya Area.....	59-60
2.2 Preliminary description of the Fieldwork Location.....	61-63
2.3 Personhood in the Maya Area.....	64-72
2.4 External Animated Forces and Action in Response.....	72-83
2.5 Statues and Personalised Material Culture.....	84-94
2.6 Time and Space.....	94-100
2.7 Religious Pluralism and the Popularity of Sects.....	100-108

Chapter 3: Five Artistic Programmes from the Maya Area.....	109-110
3.1 The Late Classic Wall Paintings of Bonampak, Chiapas.....	110-123
3.2 Wall Painting at The Convent of San Antonio de Padua, Izamal, Yucatán.....	124-136
3.3 Sculpture in the Maya Area; the Cross Group Reliefs at Palenque, Chiapas....	136-147
3.4 Lintel Reliefs 24, 25 and 26 at Yaxchilán, Chiapas.....	147-158
3.5 Retablos at the San Francisco de Asís Church, Yaxcaba, Yucatán.....	159-166
Conclusion.....	167-174
Images.....	175-234
Bibliography.....	235-265
List of Figures.....	266-274
Thesis Summary.....	i
Nederlandse samenvatting van het proefschrift Persoonlijke Identiteit in de Maya Kunst: een theoretisch perspectief.....	iv
Propositions.....	vii
Curriculum Vitae.....	viii

Preface

The aim of this thesis is to sketch a culturally appropriate theory with which to discuss creative material culture (art) in the Maya area. It assesses the applicability of a theory that will be assembled using various interdisciplinary sources but, in particular, will look to philosophies and theories extracted from interviews with members of the Maya community of Santa Elena, in Yucatán, Mexico.

The documentation of thought and practices among contemporary communities in the Maya area has largely been used, in conjunction with other archaeological and ethnohistoric data, to shed light on the “lost” pre-Colombian Maya civilisation that is said to have reached its peak 1200 years ago and later been swept away by colonial administration in the 16th century (Sharer and Morley 1994, 7). The validity of connecting ethnographic data to archaeological questions has been illustrated in works such as *Maya Cosmos* (Freidel, Schele and Parker 1995), and other examples include Taube (1998), Fitzsimmons (2009), (Houston 2014) and McAnany and Plank (2001). More recent works have associated the historical development of the pre-conquest Maya civilisation with the ongoing political and cultural struggles of “re-emerging” Maya (Demarest 2005). The aim of this thesis is correlative, in the sense of making this study of the past relevant to the present, specifically to people in the Maya area. European and Maya theories will be used together to re-position the philosophies behind the investigation of what archaeologists and art historians call Maya “art”. In this way, this past will belong to the people whose identity has been formed within the natural and material environments of the Maya area, and through the effects of cultural interactions and differences (such as the Spanish Conquest and modernity) alongside certain continuities.

European and North American art history has generated a complex and cumulative scheme with which to conceptualise the fundamentals of visual and theoretical analysis. These discussions are rich in philosophical questions that bridge the role and reception of what traditional art historians call “art” to ideas of aesthetic, religion, historical and existential development, and heritage/identity building. Chapter 1.1 introduces some stylistic devices that are central to the European art historical discussion and that are also identified in non-European ancient art, with the intention of explaining how these devices produce existential, emotional and intellectual responses (Damisch 1972 and Van Alphen 2005). Themes pulled from this art history are useful owing to the depth of an ongoing philosophical conversation that stretches back to Plato and Aristotle.

Following the discussion of the existential agency of creative material culture, and given that this thesis tackles identity and Being in the Maya area, the following part of the theoretical outline (in Chapter 1.2) explores the possibility of alternative (fluid or partible) conceptions of personhood through anthropological and philosophical literature (such as Hodder 1991, Butler 1990, DeMarrais et al 2005, Tilley et al 2008). Chapter 1.3 expands on this, to tackle the question diachronically, and looks at some of the 20th century works that deal with the effect of what Sartre terms the dialectic of “worked matter” (1960) on personhood, that is, the impact of material environment and space on the way that people deal with tangible things, commodity fetishism (Marx), or scarcity (Sartre), for example, and so the impact on social and individual identity. This chapter also highlights contemporary conceptual immersive installation artists, whose work elicits an experience of space within natural and man-made environments. These works move away from the distanced appraisal required by pre-modern art and, to some extent, de-subjectify the viewer. The later chapters that are dedicated to artistic programmes in the Maya area will draw on the interpretation of some of these devices.

Owing to an emphasis, both in ethnographic literature from the Maya area and in interviews at Santa Elena, on religion and ritual in daily life, Chapter 1.4 examines theories of religion. Specifically, the chapter will touch on “religious” community activities (rituals) that contribute to the process of both personal and public reflexivity (Durkheim 1912, Horton 1960, Ammerman 2010, Berger, Davie and Fokas 2008, 12-14). These rituals may have a social function, but they mediate the banal activities of daily life with an imaginative and individual response to the unknowable.

In this way, Chapters 1.1-1.4 unpack various aspects of European philosophy that may be relevant to Maya artistic rationality, and the existential underpinnings that are involved in the reception and use of creative material culture. While the depth of European discussion on these points provides various alternatives, it is the aim of this thesis to create a more culturally appropriate (Maya) lens. Chapter 2, therefore, divides interviews with the experts on Maya philosophy (inhabitants of Santa Elena) into theoretical themes. Certain of the interviewees are considered experts within the community (for example, interviewee E and F), while others are not. Nevertheless, in the context of this investigation, they are all experts (theorists). They will be referred to by letters, given that I have not been authorised to publish these interviews using their full names. These interviews touch on conceptions of personhood and materiality, and the implications of this for personal and community history, identity and well-being.

Chapter 2.1 is a preliminary discussion of the ethnographic literature on subjects of Being and materials throughout the Maya area (for example, Kray 2005, Lopez Austin 1996, Martínez González 2007 and Hatala 2013). This is followed by a more specific focus, and introduces Santa Elena, historically and geographically (Chapter 2.2). This sets the location for the interviews, which are divided thematically into five sub-chapters, the first of which (Chapter 2.3) centres on Being, both in ethnographic literature about the Maya (for example, Rosales Mendoza 2008, Barrera-Bassols and Toledo 2005 and Rodríguez Balam 2005) and from interviews at Santa Elena. These interviews and previous investigations point towards the potential dangers to personhood, and the fluidity of personhood, that can later inhabit non-animate (non-bodily) materials. Chapter 2.4, therefore, is dedicated to an examination of external animate forces, some of which are personalised (*aluxes* and *X'Tabay*) and others which are not (*aires/vientos malos*). This chapter will attempt to explain and interpret the nature of the forces as they are described by the people of Santa Elena, and the following chapter (2.5) links these theories to the reception, appreciation and use of personalised material culture (specifically the rituals surrounding images of Santa Elena's patron saint, San Mateo). As these chapters show, narratives from Santa Elena frequently identify positive and negative effects on personhood and materials with specific locations and actions that occurred in the past. Chapter 2.6 explores these associations, in order to reach a deeper understanding of Maya personhood and also to identify how this discourse relates to cultural heritage management. Another theme that runs through many of the theories put forward by the interviewees is that of the insurgence of para-Protestant sects within the community. Similarly, this has been the subject of much ethnographic documentation and discussion (for example, Giménez 1988, Serrano, Embriz y Fernández 2002, Joseph 2010, Ruz 2005). This is particularly interesting precisely because adherence to these new religions has, in some cases and to some extent, altered philosophical thought regarding, for example, external animate forces. Not only is this relevant to identity building in Santa Elena, but it provides a more contemporary lens through which to evaluate some of the effects of the Spanish conquest (although the means of religious conversion certainly takes different forms). Chapter 2.7 discusses these new religious sects, in particular the Jehovah's Witnesses, and how religious choice in Santa Elena has an impact on local history and theory, and generates plural personal and community identities.

Through this lens of an ongoing differentiation and plurality, which govern cultural continuity, Chapter 3 re-interprets the possible iconographic and existential rationality of Maya art. In talking about identity, and its philosophical tenets over time, it follows to focus

not only on pre-conquest artistic programmes, but on the reception of visual culture after the major break in style and content that was brought on by the conquest. In considering the importance of movement, accentuated agency and action in the reception of these programmes, Chapter 3 will be divided into two parts, the first of which will be dedicated to wall painting, on the basis that flat images painted onto architecture require particular kinetic and bodily participation. Chapter 3.1 looks at wall paintings from the three rooms at the Late Classic Structure 1, Bonampak, Chiapas. This text includes interpretations by Mayanists such as Miller (1998, 2000, 2013), Brittenham (Miller and Brittenham 2013), Houston (1997) Freidel, Schele and Parker (1993) and Cossio (2014), and weaves these discussions around the philosophies communicated by experts from Santa Elena (particularly by interviewees C and D). These wall paintings are then included in the subsequent discussion (Chapter 3.2), which centres on the wall paintings at the San Antonio de Padua convent at Izamal, Yucatán. The reception of these late 16th century murals will be analysed within their specific religio-historical context, using perspective drawn from the possible reception of the Bonampak murals, and from Chapter 2.

Chapters 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5 are dedicated to an appraisal of pre- and post-conquest Maya sculptural programmes. Chapter 3.3 re-interprets the tripartite Cross Group reliefs from the three rooms of the Cross Group complex at Palenque, Chiapas through the existing literature (for example, Stuart 2012, Garza Camino 2007, Martin and Grube 2008) and, again, using combined theories from Chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 3.4 shifts the focus to another tripartite relief scheme, Lintels 24, 25 and 26 from the doorways at Structure 23 at Yaxhilán, Chiapas. Both of these sculptural contexts provide three separate engagements with one image, and so movement between each image. These chapters will, therefore, prioritise the position of the participant in this material environment. Chapter 3.5 shows how, by using the same material rationality and thoughts on the effects of fluid personhood, we might interpret the reception and use of mid-18th century *retablos* from the church of San Francisco de Asís at Yaxcaba.