

7-1-2019

The Rabbit and the Goat: A Trickster's Tale of Transnational Migration of Mayas to the United States of America (El Norte)

Victor D. Montejo
University of California, Davis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/mayaamerica>



Part of the [Indigenous Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Montejo, Victor D. (2019) "The Rabbit and the Goat: A Trickster's Tale of Transnational Migration of Mayas to the United States of America (El Norte)," *Maya America: Journal of Essays, Commentary, and Analysis*: Vol. 1 : No. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/mayaamerica/vol1/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Maya America: Journal of Essays, Commentary, and Analysis by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

The Rabbit And The Goat: A Trickster's Tale of Transnational Migration of Mayas to the United States of America (El Norte)

Victor D. Montejo

Professor Emeritus, Native American Studies

University of California, Davis

[Editor's note: Victor Montejo wrote this essay in 2009 for an edited book project then planned by Sandy Davis and others. Victor has graciously allowed us to publish his essay in the inaugural issue of Maya America. Much has happened since 2009, but the "The Rabbit and the Goat" establishes a strong marker in time and allows the reader deep insights into the present.]

Abstract: I analyze and interpret this tale as a way of explaining current transnational migration and dislocation in Maya communities. For the storytellers, this may be just a story about the rabbit as a trickster and that is it. However, if we recognize the intricacies and ordeals that Maya migrants suffer until they cross the U.S. border, this story serves as a social criticism of modern global capitalism and transnational migration. Unfortunately, storytelling is diminishing in importance among indigenous people due to television and the internet.

Introduction

As we come to the end of the present Maya millennium, Oxhlan Baktun, we recognize that massive migration and dislocation of entire communities is occurring all over the world because of armed conflicts, ethnic discrimination, poverty, and landlessness. This, in part, is a response to the failure of the nation-states for imposing by force their hegemonic and nationalist ideologies on minority populations (Worsley 1984). In Latin America, transnational migration of indigenous people has increased as a result of political violence that has affected these countries for centuries. This is the case of the Q'anjob'al, Jakalteq, K'iche, and Mam Mayas of Guatemala who have been migrating to the United States since the early 1980s. The United States has been the most desired country for migration, especially the states of California and Florida because of the favorable weather, the language (Spanish), and the agricultural production (Burns 1993). During the 1980s and 1990s, as refugees and migrant workers arrived, many of them applied for political

asylum, some have received their residency or citizenship, and have rebuilt their lives in the United States. Others, such as the Q'anjobal Maya in Florida, have decided to live in communities that resemble their homeland in Guatemala and have revived their cultural traditions, becoming Maya-Americans in their "imagined communities" in the United States (Anderson 1990).

This essay focuses on the literary aspects of migration and transnationalism as a way of showing that folktales still have an important role in Maya communities. First, folktales serve as a form of amusement among Mayas who still joke over the great pains and sufferings that they endured in reaching *El Dorado*, or "*el Norte*." Second, they serve as lessons in history that tell younger generations about the dangers of abandoning one's own place or homeland and wandering in distant places for adventures. From an anthropological perspective, I analyze a Maya folktale, "The Rabbit and the Goat," as a metaphor or as a "trickster's tale" of transnational migration in which many Mayas are currently engaged. In this folktale, the rabbit is the trickster and he convinces the goat to travel to a distant and unknown place in search of a better life. The unknown place is called *porisal*—a subtle metaphor for the current transnational migration occurring in Maya communities today (Montejo 1999a). My hypothesis is that, in this story, the rabbit symbolizes the Ladino (non-Maya) who tricks the goat who represents the indigenous person into venturing away from home, placing the goat in danger along the way. In other words, this story is a literary reflection of the ethnic conflict in Guatemala that occurs in the current process of transnationalization and the globalization of the world economy.

My aim in this project is to describe the mechanism of displacement of Maya from their homeland in Guatemala as they are convinced by human smugglers or "coyotes" to be led to the Promised Land, *el Norte*. Among the Maya, the rabbit is considered a trickster and a manipulator, which could represent the Ladinos who constantly trick and deceive the illiterate and uneducated Maya. My research focuses on the process of how massive migration out of Western Guatemala ruptures the moral codes of community life. In other words, my research focuses on the issues of labor migration, identity, and transnationalism as a modern expression of the capitalist world system. Emphasis is placed on the difficulties of the journey, which suggests that this journey is comparable to the pilgrimage process described by Victor Turner (1987) as a rite of passage. As an anthropologist and writer, I am interested in understanding the changes and transformations that have occurred in the worldviews of the Maya who are now U.S. residents or citizens. Mainly, how the human smuggler "trickster" or "coyote", affected and transformed their lives and that of their families by taking them across the border.

Similarly, I suggest in this essay that indigenous communities have their own

traditional ways of resisting the invasion and destruction of their community's solidarity. Unfortunately, this solidarity is being destroyed by the current waves of transnational migration passing through the land of the Maya, crossing into Mexico and onward. The significance of this research project is that it focuses on the way the Maya use trickster stories as a subtle way to both avoid and accept foreign ideas that rupture their worldviews while they also assimilate. In this case, folktales reflect traditional values and offer resistance to the current tides of transnational migration. I also study the effects of migration on the lives of those Maya who are already established in communities in the United States. A good example is the community of Indiantown, Florida, where some tens of thousands Maya (Q'anjob'al, Mam, K'iche, and Jakaltek) live, maintaining their languages and celebrating traditional festivals. This transcultural experience is expressed in the poetry, songs and folktales being written by Maya exiles in California and Florida (Penalosa 1996), as well as back home on Guatemalan soil. My aim is, then, to analyze Maya transnational migration, particularly those migrating toward the United States, from a literary perspective, a subject that is not yet well researched among indigenous people. The data that inform this study was collected from the Jakaltek Maya in Western Guatemala as well as from the Q'anjob'al in Florida and in Los Angeles, California. I conducted interviews with elders (men and women) and collected folktales related to migration, such as the story used as the literary framework for this research study.

Transnational Migration and Global Capitalism

Transnational migration has become a major expression of the globalization of the world economy. The industrialized and powerful First World countries, such as the United States, are magnetic forces that pull the flow of migration around the world. The U.S. economy and the power of the dollar have become the symbol of desirable economic power, so migrants from all over the world venture to the United States, despite the dangers of crossing international borders. In this process, more and more indigenous people of the Americas are travelling north in search of the land of opportunities. In the past, only those who were economically capable of making such a transition considered migration to the United States. At this time, the immigrants in the news are not those who have the money or those intellectuals who are expelled from their countries and come to the United States to protect their lives. Now, the massive migration to the United States is composed of landless peasants, poor *campesinos*, and indigenous people who abandon their traditional ways to travel in search of a better life. Most of these migrants are not looking to stay permanently in the United States, since they still maintain a strong link

with their communities back in Guatemala. Such is the case of Maya exiles and refugees in the United States who have established diasporic communities in California, Georgia, Florida, and elsewhere. They have maintained their contact with their remembered homeland in Guatemala. According to James Clifford, this modern diaspora has “to do with decolonization, increased immigration, global communications, and transport, dwelling, and traveling within and across nations” (Clifford 1997:249). Migrant workers who every month wire money to their accounts back home are using the banking facilities offered by capitalism. Many also use Western Union or private courier services like King Express that deliver money orders directly to the families of the immigrants even in the most remote communities in Guatemala and Mexico. In the 1980s and 1990s, the telephone became the ideal instrument of connection. Relatives at home make expensive collect calls to their family members in the United States and maintain communication about the daily life and politics of their hometowns. Distance is not a big problem, given the marvels of communication technology, particularly now with the popularity of the cell phone. The time and space to be traveled has been narrowed and contact with relatives and friends back home is just a phone call away. When cell phones became available in the year 2000 in rural Guatemala, immigrants in the United States began asking their relatives back home to buy one so that they could maintain contact. James Clifford (1997) exemplifies this situation of “close contact” by describing the relationship developed between Mexicans of Aguililla, Michoacán, and their migrant community in Redwood City, California:

Today, Aguilillans find that their most important kin and friends are as likely to be living hundreds or thousands of miles away as immediately around them. More significantly, they are often able to maintain these spatially extended relationships as actively and effectively as the ties that link them to their neighbors. In this regard, growing access to the telephone has been particularly significant, allowing people not just to keep in touch periodically but to contribute to decision-making and participate in familial events from a considerable distance (Rouse, in Clifford 1997:246).

This is true, since immigrants send money home to build houses, buy land or start small businesses. Those who do not send money home and do not call their families are suspected to be involved in extramarital affairs. This problem has been generalized since among the Maya, it is usually the men who migrate alone in search of work. Therefore, after four or six years in the U.S., many Guatemalan migrants share their lives in the diasporic community with immigrant women from other parts of the world, mostly from

Mexico and Central America.

The issue of borders and frontiers as contact zones where cultures dynamically interact and clash (Pratt 1992) are important concepts here in theorizing the global migration of indigenous people, as a modern or post-modern phenomenon. Since the major desire of immigrants is to come to the United States, the border at Tijuana, for example, becomes a waiting room for the opportunity to cross into the U.S. Here at the border, Maya immigrants rid themselves of any visible sign that could give them away as Central Americans. They buy shirts with Mexican or U.S. labels, rid themselves of their identities as Maya, and start to speak with a Mexican accent. If captured on the U.S. side, they are then deported to Mexico and start their struggle to cross again. The border is a concrete reality that immigrants must conquer, some crossing or drowning in the Río Grande, some managing to cross the deserts, while a few fall dead on the way, as they journey to the land of the dollar. The border is a barrier that is not fluid, flexible, or accessible. Some immigrants refer to the ordeal of the journey as passing through the door of hell. The door of capitalism is closed to the poor and unwelcome immigrants who are seen as a danger to the white-Anglo society in the United States. In addition, as stated by Renato Rosaldo, “They become anonymous brown hordes about to engulf Los Angeles and a number of other North American metropolitan centers. In official versions, the brown invaders come bearing not culture but poverty, drugs, illiteracy, and crime” (Rosaldo 1993:214). It is then important to understand the complexity of the border situation in order to understand the rabbit tale that illustrates this story of transnational migration.

The Transformation of the Rabbit as a Trickster

The rabbit is a figure that often appears in pre-Columbian Maya art and in Maya literature such as the *Popol Vuh*. During the classic Maya period, it seems that Maya writers used the rabbit as the patron of the writer and poet. The rabbit appears holding a brush as he paints a group of codices, or ancient Maya books, as represented on Classic Maya vases.

As shown in these figures, the rabbit represents the arts of creative writing as well as the documentation of history. Why was the rabbit the symbol of the writer in classic Maya times? We do not know exactly, but we can argue that the rabbit was an image of creative power and cleverness who could find ways to solve (or cause) problems, as writers can create and provide ideas (good or bad) to the public. Even in the *Popol Vuh*, the sacred book of the Maya, the rabbit appears prominently in the creation stories as well as in the ball game. When the twins, Hunajpu and Ixbalamke, began clearing the forest

to plant corn, the animals were disappointed at the destruction of their habitat. So, when the hero twins returned to the field the next day, “they found that all the trees and vines were standing again and that the brambles and thistles have become entangled again. ‘Who played this trick on us?’ they said.’ No doubt all the small and large animals did it, the puma, the jaguar, the deer, the rabbit, [the fox], the coyote, the wild boar, the coati, the small birds, the large birds did it in a single night” (Recinos 1950:132). The twins returned and tried to capture the animals. They almost caught the deer and the rabbit, but their tails broke in their hands, “and for this reason the deer and the rabbit have short tails” (Recinos 1950:133).

Similarly, in the *Popol Vuh*, the rabbit is said to have taken part in the ball game between the hero twins and the Lords of Xibalba, or the underworld. When the hero twins were almost defeated by the Lords of the underworld, they ordered the rabbit to be ready to help them when needed. They told the rabbit to wait in the oak trees for the ball to come. Rabbit was told to run immediately with the ball toward the bushes and hide. When the ball went bouncing toward the oak grove: “Instantly the rabbit ran out and went hopping; and the Lords of Xibalba ran after it. They went, making noise and shouting after the rabbit” (Recinos 1950:153). This gave the twins enough time to change balls and rescue one of them from death, thereby winning the game. The rabbit is, then, a major figure in the oral tradition of the Maya since pre-Hispanic times, as shown in the codices and the *Popol Vuh*. The *Popol Vuh*, reportedly written after the Spanish invasion, was copied from an ancient document, perhaps written in hieroglyphs and later passed down through oral tradition. In the case of the rabbit stories from pre-Hispanic times, they have persisted with appropriate changes and transformations to be functional in modern Maya oral tradition (Montejo 1991).

The Rabbit as a Trickster

The rabbit becomes the trickster after he himself was tricked by the deer. According to Maya tradition, the rabbit used to have antlers but he lost them to the deer. Here is a fragment of the story of how the rabbit lost his antlers:

“I have come to complain, oh Shaper, of the trickery of the deer. He has cheated me out of my beautiful antlers.” “What did the deer do to rob you of your antlers?” “I placed them on his head myself because he said he would only borrow them for a moment. That moment passed and now he has not returned, the big liar. He has robbed me shamefully.” “Ah, careless rabbit.

What's done is done. Besides I cannot punish the deer for something you did with your own hands. Didn't you know the deer would do anything to have antlers?" "Now I know I was weak and foolish to let myself be tricked. For that, I beg and plead that you give me other antlers, oh, Shaper, owner of parakeets and monkeys, of foxes and raccoons and rabbits and deer, please give me more..." The incessant begging of the rabbit led the Shaper to reconsider his decision. "Very well, you demanding rabbit. The only thing I can do for you is to draw out your ears and make them long so everyone can see that you are a great animal." Without saying more the rabbit let the Shaper and Creator stretch his ears upward, and since that time rabbits have had long ears, and learned to be wise and cautious (Montejo 1991:37-38).

Since this incident, the rabbit has represented the role of the deceived person who learns that he has the power to harm and play tricks on his neighbors. I would say that the story of how the rabbit lost his antlers is the turning point where rabbit becomes alert and turns into (begins to represent) a human trickster. The rabbit as a trickster continued in the Maya oral tradition throughout the centuries. During the colonial period, the ethnic relationship between the Maya and the *Ladino/Mestizo* population became tense as the Maya became subjugated to the developing colonial elite. The Maya still remember how much they suffered at the hands of Spanish landlords and their subsequent generations of Mestizo or Ladino authorities. Because the indigenous population was constantly tricked by the *Ladinos*, the rabbit came to represent the *Ladino* dominator and deceiver. In other words, the rabbit in the oral tradition shifted its identity from being Maya and became a *Mestizo* or *Ladino* figure. And, to be a Ladino among some Maya ethnic communities is to engage in unacceptable behaviors, such as kissing a woman in public. In other words, there are certain attitudes or behavior of Ladinos that are considered immoral, that's why Maya men do not touch or kiss women in public places. For this reason, women do not stand along isolated roads or in hidden places to talk to men; they must protect their honor and personality. The behavior of rabbit, being a trickster and a deceiver, is that of a shameless Ladino. The role of rabbit is comparable to that of the coyote or raven among Native Americans in the United States and Canada. However, the rabbit is mostly a trickster and does not do good deeds for humanity as his Native North American counterpart very often does. Historically, the Ladino population has exploited the indigenous people and this unequal social relationship has been expressed in the oral tradition. The Ladino's role is that of the trickster in Maya communities.

On the other hand, we could also argue that *txitx* or *konejo*, the rabbit is sometimes Maya. The rabbit is a small animal who knows the land well, and can do tricks at the expense of a bigger animal. For example, the coyote (the animal, not the current-day smuggler) in Maya oral literature is big and dumb, so rabbit easily deceives him. The Tz'utujil Maya say, "That because he is small, the rabbit calls the coyote uncle" (Sexton 1992:24), but plays tricks on him all the time. That is why, in Jakalteq and Q'anjob'al communities, if someone plays tricks and deceives all the time, people would say to that person, "*kaw konejo bach*" ("you are a rabbit").

In this story about a rabbit and a goat, we propose that the rabbit, as trickster and manipulator, could represent the Ladinos who trick and deceive the Maya into the Promised Land, el Norte; although lately Maya people have adopted the behavior of the rabbit and are involved in smuggling immigrants. The smuggler (in real life) is not called a "rabbit" but instead those who smuggle humans across borders are referred to as "coyotes" or guides. The smuggler describes the United States as a paradise, where life is easy and money is abundant. For his work of smuggling, the guide or "coyote" collects money from those who follow him through the ordeals of travel, until they cross the U.S.-Mexico border. To illustrate what I have been describing here and to show the dangers of traveling to unknown places with "rabbit" guides, I recount the following tale:

The Rabbit and the Goat (short version)

Tired of living a poor and miserable life, one day a rabbit decided to abandon his homeland and venture to a distant and unknown place. After walking a great distance, the rabbit stopped under the shade of a bush. He was about to lie down and rest when he heard a noise on the ground not too far away. It was a horse that was grazing quietly on the prairie and kicking the ground in an effort to repel the flies on his back. The rabbit approached the horse slowly and said, "How come, as big as you are, you allow yourself to be tied there to that post without the freedom to roam wherever you please? Learn from me. Despite being very small, I am free to seek adventure. If you want to follow me, I can untie you right now."

After meditating for a while, the horse replied, "It is a good proposal, Mister Adventurer, but I have a master and I must stay here where he left me. I am used to this place, so I cannot follow you, Mister Rabbit."

The rabbit continued on his way and soon he arrived at a place where an ox was tied to a post. The rabbit approached the animal and invited the

ox to travel in search of a better place to live. "Hey, Mister Ox, how come you, being so big, are there tied to a post without freedom to travel? Join me. I am going to a rich and beautiful country where life is easy."

The ox replied, "No, Mister Rabbit, this is the place where I have lived and I don't want to abandon it. Go on your way, because my master will appear with his dogs and then you will be in trouble." The rabbit continued his adventure alone.

Day after day, he walked under the heat of the sun, until he got very tired. He then decided to rest under some green bushes. Once again, he was about to rest when he heard the bleating of sheep and goats not far from there. The rabbit approached the fence where the animals were congregated and said, "Hello, my friends. I am so saddened to see you in this prison. I can only offer myself to free you if you want to follow me to the *porisal*." The sheep asked what the *porisal* was, and the rabbit explained, "The *porisal* is a marvelous place where there is money and life is easy. I don't even know where this place is, but I am eager to travel to find it and enjoy it. People say that it is truly a paradise where very few people have traveled."

All the sheep and goats were about to be convinced, but the oldest of the rams said, "Stop, Mister. Don't try to deceive us; we are tired of being deceived with lies and tricks."

The rabbit continued describing the wonderful place he was searching for, and finally one of the animals agreed to accompany him. This was a young goat who said, "Me sir, I would like to follow you if it is true that there is a better place than this one where I am living." The rabbit wasted no time in helping the goat escape from the fence.

They walked and walked for a long time until the rabbit started to limp. Then, finding a little clearing in the forest, the rabbit lay down on the ground and started to cry out as if he were very sick. The goat, worried about his companion, asked, "What's wrong, dear friend Rabbit?"

The rabbit responded in a tremulous voice, "Oh dear friend, I am dying, I am dying."

"What can I do for you? How can I help you get well?" asked the goat worriedly.

Hearing the compassionate voice of his companion, the rabbit said, "I may get better if you carry me on your back and we continue the trip. Now, I cannot move and I may die right here if you don't help me." The goat

agreed to carry the supposedly sick rabbit on his back.

The goat walked for many days, carrying the rabbit on his back. When the goat could not run faster, the rabbit started to whip him with a twig, as if he were a cowboy. "Hurry up, you're going too slowly," said the rabbit, hitting the goat once again. Then the goat realized he was being used by the rabbit and stopped suddenly.

"It seems you are already healthy since you can now hit me with all your strength. I ask you to get off my back right now," commanded the goat.

The rabbit tried his tricks once again. "Oh, Friend Goat, my bones are still hurting and I cannot walk."

"Your bones will hurt even more if you don't get down off my back right now," commanded the goat. The rabbit was stubborn, so the goat began jumping and kicking around like a wild stallion, until the poor rabbit flew off his back and landed on the gravel.

The rabbit cried out "Ouch!" when he hit his head on the hard ground. "This is what you deserve, you liar. And stop deceiving and tricking the poor inhabitants of the forest." After this fight, both of them realized that it was too late to continue walking, so they decided to find a place to rest and spend the night.

Somehow, they realized they were close to their final destination. They looked around and found a cave where three jaguar cubs were playing. "I'm scared," said the goat, retreating, ready to run for his life.

The rabbit stopped him and said, "Don't worry my friend, they are only little kittens. Besides, we have to have courage to cross this land since we have already suffered a lot to get to this point." Then the rabbit asked the playful cubs, "Eh, children, where is your mother?"

The little cubs answered without paying attention to the intruders. "She went to find food for us, and she will be back soon." The goat began to feel fear again.

Then the rabbit told the cubs, "We will spend the night here, near you. Since we don't want to bother you, we will hide high up in the crevices of the cave. Don't tell your mother that we are staying at the borders of her domain."

"She has a good nose and she will soon find you," said the mischievous cubs.

The rabbit did not care, so he and the goat moved to another hidden

section of the cave, up above the ground. The goat got scared hearing the noises down below. They truly were at the edge of a well-protected and dangerous territory. "Don't worry. Venturing into a new land always has its good and bad sides," said the rabbit.

It was already dark when they heard the roaring of the mother jaguar and others who came to sleep in the cave. "Owiyyuuuu, grrrr....!" The mother jaguar stopped abruptly when she smelled the ground where the visitors had stood. "Did anybody come to the cave when I was away?" asked the jaguar.

The cubs responded by showing their mother the crevice where the two travelers had hidden, hoping to pass through the land patrolled by the jaguars. The cubs said, "Two travelers passed by. One was big and the other small. They invaded our house while you were away."

Trembling with fear in the crevice high above and at the edge of a big hold in the cave, the goat began to cry. "My friend rabbit, I'm in big trouble, I gotta go, real bad!"

The rabbit scolded the goat, "You cannot do that right now, the jaguars will discover our hiding place and capture us."

"I cannot resist, Friend Rabbit. I need to pee immediately, or I'm going to explode," insisted the goat.

"Okay, lie down on the rock, but on your back, so you can urinate through your fur without making any noise."

The goat obeyed the rabbit and lay down on his back. The jaguar growled and the poor goat tried to stand up, but he slid across the wet rock and fell into the big hole in the cave. The rabbit and the jaguar heard the noise of the goat's body hitting the rocks as he fell into the hole. The rabbit began to shout at the unfortunate goat, "Hold on, hold on!" The rabbit tried to create confusion so the jaguar would think there were other bigger animals up there.

The mother jaguar started to flee the cave with her cubs, but then she decided to stay. "Why should I run away? This is my territory and I have to defend it. I won't let other animals pass by, since I don't want strangers to share this territory with me and those of my kind." The jaguar went inside the cave and began searching for the one that was shouting noisily, "Hold on, hold on!"

The rabbit managed to hide himself and waited until the jaguar went

down into the hold to see whom the unfortunate one was who had fallen. At the bottom of the hold was the poor goat, dead. The jaguar brought it up to her cubs and the other jaguars and they ate it ravenously.

Meanwhile, the rabbit managed to cross the borderland of the jaguars and continued his adventure in search of the *porisal*, or the place of opportunity, the paradise where there were riches and life is easy and food plentiful.

(Montejo, from my field notes)

This story was told to me by my father as well as by other elders in my community. It is told whenever Jakaltek Maya travel to distant places. They are considered culture brokers who have abandoned their communities and ventured to unknown places, the *porisal*. When someone is absent and nobody knows his whereabouts, people would say he went to the *porisal*. Before the 1960s, very few Maya traveled outside their communities or to distant cities such as Guatemala or Mexico City, but this was the starting point of migration and adventuring to distant places by some men and has continued to increase to the present day.

I analyze and interpret this tale as a way of explaining current transnational migration and dislocation in Maya communities. For the storytellers, this may be just a story about the rabbit as a trickster and that is it. However, if we recognize the intricacies and ordeals that Maya migrants suffer until they cross the U.S. border, this story serves as a social criticism of modern global capitalism and transnational migration. Unfortunately, storytelling is diminishing in importance among indigenous people due to television and the Internet. Nevertheless, some stories are being reworked and adapted by the modern Maya and other indigenous people to reflect their new experiences. The Maya are part of the globalizing world and they have their own stories to explain the forced changes that are taking place among the youth in their communities. The oral tradition is not being discarded as obsolete; rather, it is being used as a method of teaching and passing on moral values and concerns of the community. Most importantly, stories are being used to teach the dangers of abandoning one's homeland in search of an imagined world of riches and utopian paradise.

Interpretation and Textual Analysis

I want to explain, from my Maya point of view, what is being expressed in this tale. The story itself is intelligible and does not need interpretation as a tale—not even a Maya

storyteller would be interested in giving a symbolic interpretation to this story. To them, it is just a story told for entertainment and for teaching moral values. Or as Fernando Penalosa, a collector of Q'anjobal Maya folktales, said to me while I was writing this paper: "I once asked don Pedro Say what was the meaning of one of his stories and he said, "tal vez no tengan sentido, tal vez son sólo puras babosadas." ("Maybe they don't have a meaning, maybe they are just a bunch of nonsense.") But, for literary critics and academics, stories are always impregnated with multiple meanings. Therefore, for the sake of academic exercise, I want to elucidate the multiple meanings of this story. I believe that it could be used as a sociocultural, political and economic critique of the modern Maya way of life and of global capitalism. In Maya culture, the rabbit must be followed very closely, because it is a figure who knows how to adopt different forms of human behaviors. In this case, his excessive desire for adventure and to know the unknown, brings us to the edges of the modern world of capitalism. The rabbit is a visionary, a traveler who opens new paths to the place of pleasure, riches, and wealth, although he may find the opposite. My daughter read this rabbit story and exclaimed, "What a mean rabbit!" This is one of the roles of the rabbit—to be mean. He can be a trickster and a deceiver. He might do anything to achieve his goals, even if the process may lead his friends to danger and death.

In the story, the rabbit is tired of having a poor and miserable life and decides to abandon his homeland in search of adventure. The fact that the rabbit does not know exactly where to go and just travels toward an unknown land reflects the characteristic of what Maya people call "*xtob naj porisal*" (*irse al carajo* or to vanish). First, the term *porisal* exists only in Jakaltek Maya and it means "unknown place"—a place of danger and adventure. To go to the *porisal* is to abandon one's community and never be seen again. It is a metaphor for the process of uprooting and venturing to the distant places that indigenous people are exposing themselves to now. In other words, the metaphor clearly describes the uprootedness, mobilization, and cultural hybridization that characterize modern transnational migration.

In the case of Guatemala, where ethnic conflict has characterized relationships between Maya and Ladinos, we may be inclined to think that the rabbit represents only the Ladino who tricks and deceives the indigenous people (goats). But, as a result of transnational migration, Maya are already established in the United States and some who have suffered through this long journey have learned the ways of the "coyotes." Now, some of them, like the Salvadoran and Mexican "coyotes," have taken up smuggling people across borders. In other words, these Maya, who supposedly are more tied to the land than the Ladinos whose roots and identity are more liminal, have already been involved in

leading transnational migration. The Maya are part of the global capitalist economy and can travel easily, aided by modern communications technology and transportation. The U.S., once thought to be at the edge of the world, is now figuratively closer to the Maya villages of Guatemala.

In the story, the rabbit comes to see the horse and tries to convince him to abandon his place and follow the rabbit for the adventure. But, the horse thinks twice about the consequences, and rejects the rabbit's proposal. Even though the rabbit paints the unknown *porisal* so eloquently, the horse is not interested. The horse was already established in a place and accustomed to the routine of his life. The horse seemed to be more tranquil and did not need to migrate or abandon his place. The same thing happens with the ox, which also appears to be more traditional. The rabbit tries to awaken him to his situation of servitude, and convince him to break ties with his master. The rabbit offers a world to be explored, "a beautiful country where life is easy." Yet the ox replies that he is used to his home and does not want to venture to unknown places. Once again, the ox represents individuals who have deep roots in the ground, in contrast to the rabbit, who is only loosely attached to a place, since he is, by nature, a wanderer. We may also think about culture and nature or domestication and wildlife. The rabbit belongs to the forest and for this reason he is free to wander and do as he pleases, while the horse and ox are domesticated animals, trained to do specific tasks and be rewarded when the job is done.

Then the rabbit meets the sheep and goats. Here the rabbit remembers his previous failures and prepares a political discourse to win some followers. "Hello my friends, I am saddened to see you in this prison. I can only offer myself to free you, if you want to follow me to the *porisal*." The sheep and goats ask what the *porisal* is, and the rabbit explains, "The *porisal* is a marvelous place where there is money and life is easy. I don't even know where this place is, but I am eager to travel to find and enjoy it." Here, the rabbit offers the assembled animals an opportunity to travel to the unknown world, a site of magical wealth and pleasure. As usual, the old and wise individual (the ram) dissuades the members of the community from falling into a trap. The fact that the young goat believes the rabbit's promises and follows him shows us that in human communities there are gullible people who believe the flashy words and promises of politicians and "coyotes." This is true in Maya communities; the young and the inexperienced are usually the ones easily convinced by "coyotes" to travel to *El Norte* in search of better opportunities. Like the young goat, they are convinced to trade a known present for an imagined future. "Me, sir, I would like to follow you if it is true that there is a better place than this one where I am living," the goat says. Here, we are shown that the sheep and goats are congregated in one place, which is already narrow. We can think of a place that is small and where resources are

scarce, because of the numerous inhabitants making use of them. But, despite the very few resources, not all of them decide to abandon their place. There is still the word of advice from the elders, who remind the young to be faithful to their communities. In the story, the old ram confronts the trickster and says, “Stop, Mister. Don’t try to deceive us; we are tired of being deceived with lies and tricks.”

The story continues. On the road the goat is at the mercy of the rabbit who begins to trick him. The rabbit fakes a sudden illness and the goat asks what he can do for his guide. The rabbit convinces the naive goat: “I may get better if you carry me on your back and continue the trip. Now, I cannot move and I may die right here if you don’t help me.” The rabbit mounts the goat and they continue the journey. When the goat realizes he is being tricked, he tries to get rid of the rabbit. The goat manages to throw him to the ground but then finds himself without the guidance of the rabbit. In real life, poor migrants are taken advantage of in this way. Their money is stolen and they are practically mounted since they must do whatever the “coyotes” tell them to do. But because the migrant workers are not familiar with the places they are traveling through, they are unlikely to run away, they have to endure the pain of being treated like the goat in the story.

The climax of the story is reached when the rabbit and the goat approach their destination. They have to stop and prepare themselves to cross the border. They arrive at the cave of the jaguars during the day. The rabbit is already aware of the situation and he knows what to do, but the goat is just following him becomes fearful, which brings about his death. The jaguar cubs may play the role of other immigrants or workers already established in the land who denounce the presence of the newly arrived individuals. In real migration to the North, migrant workers stay for a while in border towns such as Tijuana, while they prepare to cross. They have to wait until the Border Patrol is not patrolling and then they try to cross. In the story, the rabbit tells the cubs, “Don’t tell your mother that we are staying at the border of her domains.” And the cubs respond, “She has a good nose and she will soon find you.” Indeed, the U.S. border patrol is well equipped and can easily find those who cross without much care or planning.

Then, the goat began to feel the need to urinate while in a most dangerous situation. They truly were at the edge of a well-protected and dangerous territory. The rabbit told the goat what to do, but he got scared. The rabbit remained calm while the goat got very nervous. “Don’t worry, venturing into a new land always has its good and bad sides.” And here, the poor goat was being placed on the bad side of the situation. When the jaguar roared, the goat got scared, and in the effort to stand up and defend himself, he fell into the hole inside the cave. The poor goat died, while the rabbit managed to escape and cross that dangerous land or border and continued with his adventure onward.

This part of the story is also relevant in terms of modern transnational migration. Crossing the Mexico-U.S. border involves great risks and danger. Immigrants who have crossed the desert tell of others who died along the way. When the bodies are discovered, they are sometimes buried by their companions on sites marked with XX. Here, the cave of the jaguars symbolizes the border itself. The border patrols are the fierce jaguars that patrol their territory. The border is patrolled day and night and has become very difficult to cross even with the guidance of a smuggler. The “coyotes” may have legal residency in the United States and may travel comfortably in buses, airplanes, or trains, while the migrants are conducted slowly toward the borders. So, when the immigrants are captured at the border, the “coyotes” have usually already crossed because they carry their legal papers. They do not care if the goats are captured because they have already received payment for bringing these immigrants to the border. Just like the rabbit in the story, the “coyotes” will continue their lives without worrying about those who have fallen into the hands of immigration authorities. What they will do is go back to the communities and try to convince others to travel in search of dollars in the land of opportunities.

In this time of massive migration and transnationalization of cultures, it is likely that some immigrants will act like rabbits more aware of the dangers and how to avoid them. Crossing the border implies a forceful encounter with danger, which has to be avoided or challenged. Most fall and are captured and deported as more patrols are put in place to protect the U.S. border. Of course, the rabbits always find ways, such as little openings in fences, to slip through into the forbidden land.

This type of story, told by storytellers in Maya communities, alerts the young to the dangers of traveling with a rabbit, even if it is a Maya or indigenous rabbit. The Maya all know that as soon as we leave the safety of the home, danger can lurk at any corner of the road. Even worse if one is accompanied by a trickster who knows and is paid for the work of crossing borders. At present, it costs an individual \$5,000 dollars to cross the Mexico-U.S. border. After learning the way, Maya who once were guided across borders by Ladino (Salvadoran or Mexican) coyotes, now know the tricks of the trade and have become “coyotes” themselves.

Not all those who travel to *El Norte* return home. Not all those that return bring money back home, either. Some have practically disappeared; for decades, their families have not received any news of their whereabouts. Others come to the U.S. and become involved in vices (drinking, prostitution). They spend their money unwisely and when they return home or are deported, they do not take any money back home to their family. Now, a common topic of conversation in Maya villages is about who is in the United States, who is planning to go, and who has just returned. It is as common as talking

about going to work at the coffee plantations on the Guatemalan Pacific coast. Indeed, Q'anjob'al Maya have stopped migrating each year to the coffee plantations in Guatemala, and now seek work in the garment factories of California, the orchards of Florida, or the slaughterhouses of Iowa or Nebraska.

Transnational Migration as a Form of Pilgrimage

The structure of travel to the United States by the Maya and other indigenous people of Mexico and Guatemala resembles a nonreligious pilgrimage to the most powerful country in the world. Applying the symbolic analysis proposed by Victor Turner (1987), to modern Maya migration and transnationalism, we can see that it is a form of pilgrimage because of the steps that it follows. Unfortunately, most migrations have been seen as political mobilization and studied in terms of political economy. However, migration as a form of pilgrimage itself has not been studied thoroughly by scholars. Referring to the lack of anthropological interest in religious pilgrimages, Turner said, "Here was a great extant popular process, demographically comparable to labor migration, involving millions of people the world over in many days and months of traveling, rich in symbolism and undoubtedly complex in organization, and yet very largely ignored by the often competing orthodoxies of social science and religion" (Turner 1987:187). The comparable process of labor migration referred to by Turner above is the focus of my following discussion.

Concerning the dangers on the road, new immigrants are now taking the trip to the U.S. as a form of pilgrimage to Uncle Sam's golden shrine. First, those who are planning to travel to the United States in search of work go to a diviner and ask when is the best time to travel and if they will be able to cross the border or not. If the diviner tells them that the border will be clear and they will pass without problems, they initiate the trip in groups. If the diviner tells them that there will be problems along the way and that the border seems to represent a real danger at the moment, then they will wait until the right moment comes to travel. There are obvious reasons why they have to be completely sure that they will cross. Some sell their little plots of land and use the money to pay the "coyote." If the migrants are captured and deported, they could lose all they have.

The Huichol pilgrims that travel to Wirikuta, the sacred land of the peyote, take images of objects that they want when they collect the sacred peyote. Similarly, the Maya travelers carry images of what they want in their minds before they leave the community. Some imagine returning with cars, pickup trucks, and money. Some dream of building big houses and opening small businesses when they return. Much like Christian pilgrims, they have their wishes and want them to be fulfilled when they return.

The journey then begins in a group and everyone in the group has the same hopes and dreams: To reach the land of the gringos, make a lot of money, and then return to buy back the land they sold and open a small business. As in the pilgrimage process, all migrant workers are at the same social and economic level. All are immigrants with only one goal, to reach the Promised Land, do the hard work to make money, and then return home.

As they travel further away from the community, the places along the way become more dangerous so they have to rely on each other, developing stronger friendships or what Victor Turner calls *communitas* (Turner 1987). Along the road, they encounter other immigrants like themselves and they communicate with each other, regardless of their religion, ethnic background, or nationality. The only one who is different or who acts as a guru is the “coyote,” whose job is not to be the boss, but the guide. He knows all the resting places on the journey as they advance slowly toward their destination. The role of the “coyote” is very important because he is the one who knows the route and guides his followers through dangerous places, avoiding immigration authorities and border patrols. The “coyote” is usually an older man who has made the trip many times. The journey is difficult and the travelers suffer hunger and thirst along the way. Therefore, we could say they fast, not voluntarily, but because of the lack of resources along the way. For this reason, they may share among themselves whatever they have. They may carry only what they need, usually one change of clothing and bottles of water and food.

This type of profane pilgrimage is different from the religious pilgrimage in that the migrants do not sanctify themselves before leaving their community. They may pray for a safe trip and ask to have good luck and return home soon. The traveling is done through various means. First, they have to walk through forests and cross through rivers in order to avoid Mexican immigration authorities. Then, whenever possible, but usually for short periods, they take a bus, a train, or a car, and move step by step toward the resting place established by the “coyote.” Much like the Papagos’ salt pilgrimage to the ocean described by Ruth Underhill (1992). “They must never think of home and their women, for this would delay their progress” (1992:46). This applies to the Maya migrants, as well; they must not think of home or their children during the journey because if they do, they would not be fully convinced of what they are doing, so it would be easy to make mistakes and fail. They must concentrate all their energy on thinking about their destination. Otherwise, there could be accidents and the journey might turn into a disaster. While on the journey, their wives and parents at home may be praying for the men to cross the borders safely. A common prayer for travelers is one I heard very often from women in Jakalteq Maya communities:

Lord, we ask that you protect them,
that you embrace them.
Do not let any danger
cross their paths
or obstruct their journey.
Do not allow danger
to lie in wait for them
on the left side of the road,
on the right side of the road.
Protect them in their journey.
Be in front of them,
walk behind them,
do not leave them alone
and let them come home
healthy and in peace.

The journey, then, is full of danger as the travelers move along, removing themselves farther and farther from home. In addition, throughout the journey, the migrant workers are united as a form of *communitas* (Turner 1987) and they remain so during their stay in their liminal situation. This is what Renato Rosaldo calls hybrid invisibility. “Immigrants and socially mobile individuals appeared culturally invisible because they were no longer what they once were and not yet what they could become” (Rosaldo 1993:209).

The pilgrimage process, according to Victor Turner implies the cleansing of thoughts, purification, and a process of inversion. This also occurs among Maya immigrants, especially in the changing of names at the border. Pilin Xhapi, a Maya traditional name, becomes Pedro Sebastián. The newly arrived Q’anjob’al woman is no longer Xhepel Peles, but Isabel Pérez. Some immigrants even change their names completely and are called by the name of their home communities. Thus, Pel Mekel Ana becomes Don Pedro Miguel Say. He took the name of his village, Say, as his surname. This change of name is for security reasons and some immigrants retain their new names even after they receive political asylum status. Also, many immigrants give up their ethnic distinctiveness and assimilate into the multiple cultures of the southern cities such as Los Angeles. Here the liminal world of immigrant workers increases. They find themselves to be powerless and are subjected to different forms of inequalities, mainly if they fall into the category of unskilled laborers, as almost all do. Soon they begin to borrow terms and ways of

life to assimilate into the global immigrant community. This powerlessness and ethnic transition is well described by Renato Rosaldo in his discussion of border crossings by different people from all over the world. According to Rosaldo, “All of us inhabit an interdependent late-twentieth-century world marked by borrowing and lending across porous national and cultural boundaries that are saturated with inequality, power, and domination” (Rosaldo 1993:217).

Conclusion

I have presented some of the ideas concerning ethnic conflict among the Maya and Ladinos in Guatemala, represented metaphorically in the tale presented above. I have also made a symbolic interpretation of this story, using Victor Turner’s discussion of pilgrimage as a social process. The trickster’s tale presented here provides us with elements that can be interpreted as a critique of modern transnational migration. In the rabbit’s deceitful behavior, we can recognize traces of the treatment and social relationships between Maya and Ladinos. Some Maya prefer to remain in their hometowns and are more traditional. They do not want to travel, as in the case of the horse and the ox in this story. But the goat accepts the invitation to travel to the unknown land and suffers the consequences. The rabbit continues his adventure and does not care about his companion who has suffered misfortune. This is the case of the “coyotes” who smuggle people across borders. I asked a Q’anjob’al man (a “coyote”) who was convincing people in my town to travel north, “Why do you take people to the North?”

“Because they want to go.”

“What do you offer them there?”

“Jobs, there are a lot of jobs.”

“Where do you send them particularly?”

“I send them to different places, even to Alaska.”

“Wow, Alaska is too cold, poor people.”

“Well, they have to survive and do the work if they want money.”

“Do you find them the job?”

“No, I just send them there; they will find a job.”

In this Maya story, the rabbit is an antihero, a deceiver or trickster. He follows his dream to search for an unknown place, but in doing so, he destroys others’ ways of life and places them in danger. The rabbit deals with different types of animals, thus representing

contact with cultural and ethnic diversity. The power of the rabbit, despite being a small animal, is his ability to convince. He imagines a distant and unknown world and he describes it so eloquently that he convinces others to follow him to that country of riches, a perfect paradise or *porisal*.

Also, I have tried to present here a symbolic analysis of this tale by comparing it to the modern transnational migration of Maya and other indigenous people of Latin America. I considered Maya migration as a form of pilgrimage to the shrine of Uncle Sam where most migrants want to arrive and collect the dollars for their hard work. Then, their hope is to return home, taking with them models of houses and ideas that they replicate in Guatemala. Not all migrant workers succeed or return home to fulfill their dreams. The young men who come to the U.S. unmarried are unlikely to return. However, those married men who have wives and children waiting at home hope to return after five to ten years of absence. Modern indigenous migration is, then, the result of the interconnectedness of the world and the effects of global capitalism on Third World countries. This pattern of migration will continue as long as the situation of landlessness and inequality persist in those countries exporting migrant workers and exiles. Definitively, migration has had a positive side, since immigrants continue to support the economies of their home countries by sending money back to their families.

At present (2009), migrant workers have sent enough money home so the towns in rural Guatemala have changed their appearance from traditional adobe houses to modern stucco mansions using models imported from the United States. Others engage in celebrating the Patron Saint festivities at home by paying for fireworks and marimba bands in such a way that their contribution is recognized by their communities. In this way, they give thanks to God or to the Patron Saint that has made the miracle for them to cross the border safely and make money to improve their family economy. This is a positive result of migration and some governments may hope that migration of young laborers continues indefinitely to contribute to solving the problem of poverty and the economic crises that are the major issues facing these Third World countries in Latin America.

References

- Anderson, Benedict. (1990). *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, London, New York.
- Burns, Allan. (1993). *Maya in Exile: Guatemalans in Florida*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia.
- Goldin, Liliana (editor). (1999). *Identities on the Move: Transnational Processes in the Americas*. Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, SUNY at Albany, Albany, NY.
- Gossen, Gary H. (1998). *Telling Maya Tales: Tzotzil Identities in Modern Mexico*. Routledge, London and New York.
- Kroeber, Karl (editor). (1981). *Traditional Literatures of the American Indian*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.
- Montejo, Victor D. (1991). *The Bird Who Cleans the World and Other Maya Fables*. Curbstone Press, Willimantic, CT.
- (1999). *Voices from Exile: Violence and Survival in Modern Maya History*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.
- (1999). “Tied to the Land: Maya Migration and Transnationalism.” In *Identities on the Move: Transnational Processes in the Americas*. Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, SUNY at Albany, Albany, NY.
- (2004). “Angering the Ancestors: Transnational and Economic Transformation of Maya Communities in Western Guatemala.” In *Pluralizing Ethnography: Comparison and Representation in Maya Cultures, Histories and Identities*. Editors: John Watanabe and Edward Fisher. Santa Fe, School of American Research Press.
- Penalosa, Fernando. (1996). *Tales and Legends of the Q’anjob’al Maya*. Yax Te’ Press, Rancho Palos Verdes, CA.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. (1992). *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Routledge, London. DOI: 10.4324/9780203163672
- Recinos, Adrian, Delia Goetz, and Sylvanus G. Morley. (1950). *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Quiché Maya of Guatemala*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.
- Rosaldo, Renato. (1993). *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Beacon Press, Boston, MA.
- Sexton, James D. (1992). *Maya Folktales: Folklore From Lake Atitlán*. Anchor Books, Doubleday, New York and London.
- Turner, Victor. (1987). *Dreams, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y.
- Underhill, Ruth (1992) “The Salt Pilgrimage.” In *Teachings from the American Earth: Indian*

Religion and Philosophy. Editors: Dennis Tedlock and Barbara Tedlock. Liveright, New York.

Wolf, Eric. (1982). *Europe and the People Without Histories*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press.

Worsley, Peter. (1984). *The Three Worlds: Culture and World Development*. University of Chicago Press.