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In this paper I explore in Girardian terms an ethnographic view of a particular cultural formation, namely the ritual animators known as the *maxetik* among the Tsotsil speaking Maya Chamula of highland Chiapas, México.<sup>1</sup> The *maxetik* are “monkeys” or, in Spanish, *monos*. The tradition of the monkey character in traditional Chamula culture and ritual represents a variety of meanings, but above all – as I wish to argue here – a *max* (mash) is someone who performs the important role of “remembrance” for the traditional community. This remembrance, however, is not entirely explicit. It has many ambiguous aspects, including – paradoxically – a kind of forgetting (or absence of memory on details). This forgetting (what a Girardian interpretive perspective, perhaps, might call a *misrecognition*) is a curious phenomenon, and seems related to the fact that the role of these monkeys has evolved since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to convey a rich meaning of double importance:

a) They re-member or reconnect the Chamula people to their community’s older roots, especially when as a people they continue to survive the historical lesions and structural ramifications of foreign invasion and unremitting conquests by non-indigenous peoples.

b) They serve a trickster-like role of bearing a moral memory, representing lessons from meaningfully important past experiences. This moral remembrance comes about in an embodied or felt and performative fashion, i.e., they help to re-mind and re-connect their fellow Chamula community members to a fundamental truth about themselves, why they were created. Their performance conveys a felt sense about the folly and perversions of the “first” of some four creations – a terrible version of humanity that must not be repeated! In Chamula mythological imagination and wisdom tradition, the gods have managed at least four Creations.<sup>2</sup> The *maxetik* perform what would appear to be a highly animated series of actions that constitute a kind of morality play about both earlier and present times.

The *maxetik* who perform within the Chamula ethnic community of La Candelaria,<sup>3</sup> manifest a distinctive interpretation of what it means to be a *max*. Although clearly an imitation of what is “traditional” within the much larger ethnic municipality of neighboring San Juan Chamula, the *maxetik* of La Candelaria and other Chamula-related communities present an interpretation of the monkey character that differs significantly. This is interesting ethnographically, since the grandparents and great grandparents of the Chamula in La Candelaria originally migrated from different villages within San Juan Chamula. Ostensibly, they are culturally indistinct as ethnic Maya Tsotsil Chamula.

<sup>1</sup> Pronounced in Tsotsil as “**mash**” with the *ash* sounding similar to the phoneme in *Ashram*.

<sup>2</sup> For further nuance on this kind of thinking among the Chamula see Gary **Gossen** (2004) *Four creations: an epic story of the Chiapas Mayas* (University of Oklahoma Press).

<sup>3</sup> In Mexico, since the 1910 Revolution and subsequent land reform, an *ejido* represents a state-supported system of communal land holdings for 20 or more people. La Candelaria is a very large *ejido* of at least 2,783 hectares, and made up of some 493 families located within the rural sector of the ethnically mixed highland city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas.

My thesis is that the existence of *maxetik* – both in San Juan Chamula and in the ethnically similar community of La Candelaria -- suggests a particular kind of imitation or *mimesis*, one that is transformative of community memory regarding historical violence, violation, and victimization. Through imitation, appropriation, and creative re-presentations of key historical events, the Chamula *maxetik* enjoy playing with culturally significant tensions that have shaped and continue to forge their sense of ethnic identity. These tensions especially exist between sacred and secular expressions of Chamula ethnic identity. In my interviews with those who perform this role in La Candelaria, I found that at every major festival the monkey characters make their creative performance in order to pray and honor God their Father (*jTotik*), and to honor as well their patron Saint. It is a serious effort for those who offer themselves as a kind of living sacrifice of praise for this kind of play. But while serious, the *maxetik* also offer a service -- what seems to be a certain measure of teasing or irreverence, a healthy measure of disrespect for any “official” or authority, as well as for any orthodox notions of God and the Saints; and all the while moving and dancing in a joyful if sacrificial and long-suffering manner of endurance. It may be that the max has become a kind of institutional “scapegoat” – a kind of court jester in a different cultural context, one who shows the truth to the “authority” and whom the authority can easily “sacrifice” or dismiss as a “fool.” In this paper I hope to introduce some initial ideas about this complex material, based on aspects of recent field research in the highlands of Chiapas, México.

### **Becoming a monkey and monkey business**

In both Chamula communities of San Juan and La Candelaria, almost anyone can become a *max* if they so desire, once they obtain the proper outfit or ritual clothing.<sup>4</sup> Interest in becoming a monkey character is often an attraction that grows over time, and not infrequently will initiate with a profound dream (revealing a sense of call). One interesting difference, however, is that in the municipality of San Juan children are not allowed to be *maxes*, while in La Candelaria this is often encouraged – provided that the child, often as young as seven, has his proper costume (and, of course, is accompanied by a relative). The same seems to be true for outsiders. I myself have participated several times as a ritual monkey, joining a band of *maxetik* during the feast day of All Saints (November 1<sup>st</sup>). Not every foreigner or non-Indian is invited to be a *max*, and in my case I think it is due to the fact that not only do I live in La Candelaria and attempt to learn about customary life-ways, but I also serve this community as the available Catholic priest.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf: Gossen 1999: 123 for a similar finding in the 1960s.



photo: Fr. Miguel Rolland, OP - Ph.D. Cand.; School of Human Evolution and Social Change / Arizona State University

### The work of the *maxetik*

The primary task of the monkey characters – at least in La Candelaria -- is to act as a kind of “honor guard” to the dignity of God and God’s holy manifestations (or the “gods”, i.e., those marvelous syncretistic representations carefully guarded in the local Church, the figures who are the Saints and Virgins, the representations of powerful beings Chamula people know as *Los Santos*). When the monkey-men appear at festivals they come to pray to the gods in a continuous fashion and by doing so will feed the Saint’s continuous hunger for praise with nurturing spiritual foods. These largely consist of abundant incense, music and chant, and a simple vertical form of repetitive dance. Observing all of this, and even participating as a *max* myself on several occasions, I have come to believe it is not that hard to imagine how this present-day sense of “service to the gods” quite possibly reflects earlier forms of servitude owed to powerful beings – the “earth lords” of old, or the once and future “gods” – now perhaps transfigured in the modern period as “Santos”.

Girard would no doubt comment on this particular phenomenon to suggest, hypothetically at least, that such cultural formations ultimately derive from an original experience of terrific violence.<sup>5</sup> According to Girard’s formulation of mimetic theory, the “gods” we fashion to adore were once the objects of fearful disdain and persecution – what Girard has often referred to as the culture-generating feature of human interactions around the imitative aspects of reciprocal violence and revenge, only quelled by what he identifies generally as the “scapegoat mechanism” used by many cultures to establish a measure of peace and social order. Girard’s understanding of *mimesis* as a process of interaction (*interdividual* relations) is all the more interesting when we pause to consider how the

<sup>5</sup> For an in-depth review of these themes see the relevant works by **René Girard** such as (1977) *Violence and the Sacred* and (1987) *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*.

monkey-men of the Chamula may perhaps represent a significant measure of similarity and thus logical substitution of animals for men. Instead of sacrificing human beings, monkeys are similar enough to serve as an effective, i.e., meaningful substitution.<sup>6</sup> Something similar may be found in the Tsotsil-Tseltal use of the word “chicken”, a creature that arrived with the onslaught of Spanish invasion. The term “kaxlan” has a double meaning, referring to chickens generally, but also to Mestizos or non-Indian Mexicans (Ladinos). It is all the more curious to note how the sacrificial killing of black chickens in churches (before an image of a Saint) is a common practice for many *‘iloletik* (curandero/as; literally “seers” who serve as healers). They seem to perceive a life-giving power that comes from an ontological interaction of image, blood, and the “metaphysical desires” of the suffering patient(s). How images and cultural institutions among the Chamula have evolved over time is a question only a few anthropologists have ventured to speculate upon, an area of iconic mystery that remains open to further investigation.<sup>7</sup> The key point here, however, is that “substitution” is likely the basis of sacrificial activities among humans. As such it is not about violence for the sake of violence, but rather the *limited* use of violence (the creation of sacred or justified sacrificial victims) to establish some form of social order. Social order is often thought achievable through the evocative effects of religious experience, which would include rituals related to *sacrum facere (sacrificere)* - the “offering” and the “making holy” of things, a process that certainly includes the archaic practices of animal substitutions for human beings.

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<sup>6</sup> **Girard** writes (1977) “We have remarked that all victims, even the animal ones, bear a certain *resemblance* to the object they replace; otherwise the violent impulse would remain unsatisfied. But this resemblance must not be carried to the extreme of complete assimilation, or it would lead to disastrous confusion. In the case of animal victims the difference is always clear, and no such confusion is possible. Although they do their best to empathize with their cattle, the Nuer never quite manage to mistake a man for a cow – the proof being that they always sacrifice the latter, never the former. . . . In order for a species or category of living creature, human or animal, to appear suitable for sacrifice, it must bear resemblance to the human categories excluded from the ranks of the “sacrificeable,” while still maintaining a degree of difference that forbids all possible confusion. As I have said, no mistake is possible in the case of animal sacrifice. But it is quite another case with human victims. If we look at the extremely wide spectrum of human victims sacrificed by various societies, the list seems heterogeneous, to say the least. It includes prisoners of war, slaves, small children, unmarried adolescents, and the handicapped; it ranges from the very dregs of society, such as the Greek *pharmakos*, to the king himself. Is it possible to detect a unifying factor in this disparate group? We notice at first glance beings who are either outside or on the fringes of society . . . .” Quoted in **James G. Williams** (1996: 81) *The Girard Reader* (NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company), [cf.: **Girard** (1977: 1-18, 39-44) *Violence and the Sacred*].

<sup>7</sup> Interesting scholarly attempts to understand the historical contexts of violence for the indigenous peoples of Chiapas include Victoria Bricker’s impressive if disputable investigation about how mythic “structures” (stories, rites, dances) seem to carry the memory of meaningful historical events. See **Victoria Bricker** (1981), *The Indian Christ, the Indian King: The Historical Substrate of Maya Myth and Ritual* (Austin: University of Texas Press). See also **Gary Gossen** (1998), *Telling Maya Tales: Tzotzil Identities in Modern Mexico* (NY: Routledge). For a more historical-critical view of circumstances affecting Chamula social formations see **Jan Rus** (1983: 127-168) “Whose Caste War? Indians, Ladinos, and the “Caste War” in **Murdo J. MacLeod and Robert Wasserstrom** (eds), *Spaniards and Indians in southeastern Mesoamerica: essays on the history of ethnic relations* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press).



Figure 1 Chicken restaurant in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, México. Photo: Michael Rolland 2010

It is reasonable to speculate that the *maxetik* possibly represent a symbolic residual sense of service and tribute once owed to ancient overseers and “bosses” – powerful Lords who governed life and limb. Such “Lords” existed both before and even long after the conquest of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps reproduced more recently in the form of notorious Chamula political bosses and cultural gate-keepers.<sup>8</sup> Then as now, people of inordinate power seem to always suffer hunger, always with a ravenous appetite for “more”. And the people who feed the covetous and insatiable yearnings of such powerful beings seem to recognize only too well that it is often unwise to neglect this everyday duty, lest sudden disaster come upon the land and the community. Social order would seem to depend upon feeding the powerful.

Centuries later, we see how the monkey-men offer sacrifices of praise in conjunction with the many flowers and candles the people of the community bring before the images of the Saints. The *maxes* offer their gifts of praise to the god-like or power-related holy ones who always bestow many blessings upon those who serve, even as they play, pan and pillory the complex truths of their people’s difficult history.

### **Awakening remembrance: danger and humor**

The remembrance they perform helps people to sense, if not explicitly recall, the historical sojourn of all Chamula Maya. This seems to take place only in a vague experiential way -- something more felt than cognitive. The work of the *maxetik* is that of providing a visual enactment that points out

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<sup>8</sup> For a more in-dept understanding of how bossism or *caciquismo* has developed in Chamula society, see **Jan Rus** (1994) informative article “The ‘Comunidad Revolucionaria Institucional’ : The Subversion of Native Government in Chiapas, 1936-1968” in **Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent** (eds), *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), p. 265-300.

a fundamental moral direction. It provides a compass, as it were, a sense for the proper pathway (East to West) that leads to the right or proper way *to be human*. Through repeated ritual actions the *maxetik* help the community experience a two-fold remembrance that evokes feelings for the past and present condition of human being. It is a direction in life made known by connecting to the traditions of the ancestors; and while this kind of memory-recall-direction symbolization seems essential, the modern monkey character also, at the same time, (and surprisingly, whether he knows it or not) shows the importance of keeping an eye upon present-day affairs and what dangers exist for human beings everywhere. This “showing” or signaling is built-in to the manner and dress of every band of *maxetik*.

The work of remembrance also helps each Chamula to obviate for his or her self, a personal and profoundly painful fact: how is it possible that an oppressed Indian majority in Chiapas (as elsewhere in México) must still negotiate a tolerable co-existence with an overbearing Ladino (non-Indian) minority? My data indicate elements of a tentative answer for this difficult question. It is possible that indigenous people in Chiapas perceive (or rather *feel*) their minority status as due to some lapse of previous moral decision-making among their ancestors. There is some evidence that indicates how the Chamula sense the consequences of past actions as a moral matter related to their ancestors’ failure to obey God. At the very least, it is a variant rendering of an “original sin” motif. In La Candelaria, I have found many tensions of authority and obedience, themes that are predominant in Chamula social relations and conflicts.

As clownish or trickster-like public figures, mysteriously wrapped in their colorful costumes that set them apart, the *maxetik* act with impunity, great authority and an almost obnoxious confidence. As if super-human comic book characters, these vibrant monkey-men assume both the role of **guardians** of the Sacred, i.e., the figures of the holy ones (ch’ul viniketik), the Saints, as well guarding those who are in charge of caring for them; at the same time, they also have the public role of **enemies** or antagonists of the holy. This ambiguity is exemplified symbolically in the constant combination of the military and the religious aspects of play: they re-present the now age-old fact of “evangelization” as it came to Mesoamerica in the form of Sword and Cross. They embody the mixed message that has for centuries shaped their ethnic identity as a people.

In their public play, the highly ambiguous role of “good cop/bad cop” reveals the *maxetik* as devilish assistants or monkey guardians who thus act as important animators of the major festivals around which the community has gathered. In La Candelaria, the *maxes* appear at the feast of All Souls/All Saints (November 1 & 2), the feast of the Virgin “Our Lady of Guadalupe” (December 12), Christmas time (but not Easter), the feast of San José (Carpenter), and of course the Feast of the patron Saint, the *Virgin de La Candelaria*. This last feast is about a special biblical aspect of Holy Mary, the

Mother of God (*María* in Spanish, x*Maruch* in Tsotsil), whose festive date is February 2, or the Roman Catholic *Feast of the Presentation*.<sup>9</sup> Mary here is the agency or instrument, which presents the Light of Salvation, Jesus, and as such she is known as *La Candelaria*.

In many of my interviews with ritual leaders in the community, however, data shows that a good number of the Chamula “Catholics” of La Candelaria community are not believing catechized Catholic Christians. Moreover, whether catechized or not, many members do not fully understand the intended theological meaning depicted in the Euro-style image traditionally associated with the Virgen of La Candelaria (Mary holding and presenting the Divine Child, Jesus). In La Candelaria, a good three fourths of community members are customary or “Traditionalist Catholics” rather than church-associated “Catholics”. For these traditionalist Chamula, *La Virgen de Candelaria* is simply the *Santa patrona*, the powerful one who watches over the community and bestows favors, even money.<sup>10</sup> While a seeming lack of theological knowledge about the iconic messages conveyed in the images of the Saints, including the “Virgin Mother” may very well represent a complex series of historical disconnects with colonial forebears (not to mention major lacunae in the Church’s preaching and teaching of its message) this does not diminish the fact that there is a great deal of shared religious knowledge or sentiment within the community. In La Candelaria, where Catholic Christians, Evangelical Protestants, and custom-only Traditionalists are just learning to live together, there is a remarkable sense of common spiritual orientation and some sense, too, of shared cosmological understandings, however expressed in different ways. They all like to dance before the holy, and believing in the divine presence is not a problem; cooperating financially for fiestas, however, is. With respect to the patron Saint *La Candelaria*, one has only to arrive at the Church on the feast day of La Candelaria to see how important this image is for most local members, as she stands surrounded by hundreds of lit offerings, candles flickering as prayers rise with incense asking for her intercession.

### **Form and Content**

Although orientation toward the divine the spiritual is not a problem for most Chamula people, there is, from an academic perspective, a notable incomprehension about or even resistance to the

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<sup>9</sup> This feast day celebrates that moment in the New Testament when **Mary** (and Joseph) enter the temple with the newborn infant Jesus. Here Jesus is depicted as the Light of the World, the Savior of all nations. Mary, in this iconographic frame, is the light holder, or the candleholder. Theologically, Mary is depicted as she holds the child Jesus in her arms, holding Him in such a way as to present a Light to the nations (Luke 2:29-32).

<sup>10</sup> About eight years ago, the festive committee at the time insisted they put traditional coin necklaces around the major figures of the pantheon or altar area, especially for the Patrona Virgen de La Candelaria. Although this event did not provoke a major debate in the church community, the Christian catechists raised their concerns, wondering whether such a “traditional” adornment (as one might find on the Saints in San Juan Chamula) was less than helpful for understanding who Mary was in the gospels, what she actually is supposed to represent.

gospel (and Western theological notions generally). More surprisingly, however, there is also a curious amount of ignorance and resistance to traditional or customary ways. Some community traditions are not easy to follow and many customs represent complicated understandings that are not widely understood or appreciated. Not all *maxes*, for example, are aware of the meanings of the traditional things they themselves do, however much it is “woven” into their clothing. Ironically, those who are most often interested in these “old ways” and customs are the believing Christians rather than the custom-only oriented Traditionalists. For example, the one who actually first promoted the idea of a patronal feast for La Candelaria, as well as the subsequent re-establishment of the *maxes*, was not a “traditionalist” but at that time a young believing Catholic Christian. Often when community members, leaders, or the *maxes* themselves . . . are asked by their peers about what this or that ritual action could mean, their answers are often quite common: *mu jna' - ja' stajel jech* (I don't really know; it is just the custom).<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, they will often point to someone they know in the community who would likely have the answer.

Whether traditionalist or Christian, in both cases *form* rather than *content* seems more important than any grand theological or cosmological system of coherent meanings. In Girardian terms, this would seem to indicate how the container itself has, over time, become a major object of value. Not unsurprisingly, religious forms – as perceived objects of desire are jealously guarded. Forms of religious practices have often been the object worth fighting over for many Chamula, with many competing to “have it” (or the authority and power it represents) in some way.<sup>12</sup> Religious form appears to represent power.

Religious conflicts of recent decades among the Chamula would not be so prevalent, in my view, were it not for the fact that at some point in the past this particular object – religious form – was actually held up as something desirable; in other words, its “value” was in some fashion mediated through a model or exemplar. Modeled, perhaps, historically – as upon the role of religion in Colonial and post-colonial politics. Indeed, many indigenous people besides the Chamula have come to recognize the importance of transcendental power, the effect of forces both visible and invisible. It is in this sense, then, that “power” in its religious forms is thus perceived and eventually interpreted as

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<sup>11</sup> This is certainly true from my own research among the Chamula (August 2009-August 2010); however, Gossen – who did his research in the late 1960s, had found similar indications; see Gary **Gossen** (1974: 182) *Chamulas in the World of the Sun: Time and Space in a Maya Oral Tradition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

<sup>12</sup> For a more ample understanding of religious conflict and the problems of political power and authority in Chamula, see Gabriela **Robledo-Hernández** (1997) *Disidencia y religion. Los expulsados de San Juan Chamula*. UNACH, Tuxtla Gutiérrez; see also Antonio **López Meza** (2002) *Sistema religioso-político y las expulsiones en Chamula*. Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas (Gobierno de Chiapas). For historical context, see Jan **Rus** (2005) “The Struggle against Indigenous Caciques in Highland Chiapas: Dissent, Religion and Exile in Chamula, 1965-1977” (in *Caciquismo in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, ed. Alan Knight and Wil Pansters. London: Institute for The Study of The Americas).

something worth having, and thus worth guarding. Obviously, for the Chamula the most important religious objects of value were those first modeled previously by the friars. Chamula traditional clothing is modeled on the religious *habits* of black capa and white tunic and capuce worn by the Dominican friars (for whom the Chamula labored almost three centuries). After the Dominicans were no longer in Chiapas, religious objects of value were modeled by other historical religious agents, including the Chamula themselves and other indigenous communities. These models imputed an exaggerated sense of value for any number of objects, but above all those religious forms associated with power and the pecuniary. In this sense it is not surprising that the key rebellions in Chiapas were related to indigenous attempts to imitate and appropriate the sense of value associated with religious forms and the kind of power – political and economic – that these forms can generate.<sup>13</sup>

I would argue that Tradition “for the sake of tradition,” whether with or without “content” is not, anthropologically speaking, entirely bad or somehow unusual; in fact, incomprehension and even *misrecognition*<sup>14</sup> may help to preserve the “seeds” of what once was sowed by a group’s ancestors. It seems reasonable to believe that a certain amount of inattention will keep a valuable truth safe, perhaps waiting a better or more propitious day for broaching the truths held profoundly within a myth or tradition serving as a container. This seems to contradict somewhat the traditional Girardian view, namely that all major origin myths are about forgetting the unpleasant facts of an initial ordering of reality – such as what is a presumably originary violence and the truth about the founding murders, all of which supposedly gives rise to primitive “cultural forms” and law-related institutions. However, this idea may not be so clear in the case of the Chamula. Ostensibly, at least in the manner and uniform of the *maxetik*, there seems to be a remembrance and thus a way to celebrate rather than forget or hide what has happened to the Chamula people in the past.

Antonio López Meza (2002: 79-80) describes the very traditional *maxetik* of San Juan Chamula as those who act like soldiers or guardians of the authorities who bear a title position associated with a particular Saint or holy image. As such they hold a special *cargo* or “traditional burden/obligation” within the traditional religious system. The *maxes* of San Juan Chamula, for example, accompany and protect, animate and pray with those ritual actors who hold distinctive titles.<sup>15</sup> Inside the Church or

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<sup>13</sup> See **Kevin Gossner** (1992) *Soldiers of the Virgin: The Moral Economy of a Colonial Maya Rebellion*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press; See also **Juan Pedro Viqueira** (1997), *Dos ensayos históricos sobre la rebellion india de Cancuc, Chiapas, acaecida en el año 1712*. Mexico: CIESAS.

<sup>14</sup> *Méconnaissance*, or what Girard understands as the process by which myth and ritual tend to distort and conceal, albeit unconsciously; cf.: **James G. Williams**, ed. (1996:70).

<sup>15</sup> Some examples would be the *maxes* of San Juan who move in service of “*paxon*” (the job of *passion or the passion*), or serve at the behest of “*nichim*” (flower arranger for a Saint) or serve the “*mayordomo*” (Steward) who is charged with caring for a particular Saint during the period of one year.

“templo” of San Juan Chamula (which dates back to 1524) there are some 62 *santos*.<sup>16</sup> In the Chamula context of the town center of San Juan, the “guardian role” of the monkey character is a major responsibility and involves having the serious understanding and ability to participate in a religious act.<sup>17</sup> So, too, in La Candelaria -- there is just as much seriousness when it comes to this kind of “job” or position, although it is as yet less organized and somewhat incomplete with regard to any full cycle of celebrations. There are formal sets of *monkeys* who serve at the fiestas, but even so, members may participate as they feel welcome (perhaps only once), or only once and a while, depending on how they personally perceive their felt-sense of commitment. Some men (and *max* is for men only) desire to be a *monkey man* because it is a great deal of fun; others see it as a way to be religious and thus either to honor god or thank god, even to do penitence or justice for their personal moral failings and wrongs.

### **Impressions and impersonations of History**

Dressed up, the ritual clothing of a *max* imitates the uniform soldiers from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century European military units. This mimetic aspect would appear to recall in a highly stylized fashion the invasion of the French in Mexico during the *Maximilian* period of the 1860s.<sup>18</sup> The fact of the soldier-like uniform not only reflects Mexico’s own history of constant preoccupation with things military, but also possibly embodies the memory of a perceived difference between the peoples of Mexico and the peoples of Guatemala. Although they have much in common with the Maya and other indigenous peoples of Guatemala, there seems to be an historical sense of difference, perhaps owing in part to the political separations that began in the 1860s. Although not so much today, in the past for many Chamula, the Indians of Guatemala have often represented something bad: set-up as a kind of scapegoat, the colorful clothing worn by Guatemala indigenous appears to have once suggested personifications of evil “demons” or even beings tantamount to “Jews”.<sup>19</sup> It is a curious appropriation, perhaps, but upon the back shoulders of the *maxetik*, is worn a square multi-colored cloth that highly resembles the clothing of Guatemalan indigenous people. As for the *maxes*’ own customary outfit, they can have a variety of small details of difference between one or other group of ritual monkey men, but generally all *maxes* tend to look alike in terms of a general basic style.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. **López Meza** (2002: 51).

<sup>17</sup> This sense of great responsibility was especially conveyed to me in an unstructured **interview** on June 24, 2010 with a young family man of 28 years who was serving as Number 2 *max* of 4 *maxes* in the barrio of San Sebastian in the municipal center of San Juan Chamula. The seriousness of this role was also emphasized by the several *maxetik* from La Candelaria that I have recently interviewed for my fieldwork project (2009-2010) as a Ph.D. Candidate at Arizona State University.

<sup>18</sup> Cf.: **Gossen** 2002: 1041 (no. 3). **Bricker** (1973: 91-1993) indicates that the tall conical hat may echo aspects of the uniforms once part of the French armies invading Mexico during the 1860s during the Emperor *Maximilian* period. The tall bear fur hats distinguished many of the grenadier type foot soldiers.

<sup>19</sup> See **Gossen** (1974: 319; 1994: 22-23).

In San Juan Chamula, as in La Candelaria, the presence of the *maxetik* represents an ambiguous state of affairs, in so far as they evoke both good and bad aspects of Chamula cosmogony. This is visibly manifest in the customary dress of the *maxes*: for instance, it is typical that a *max* wear black and red, colors representing the end of things, the darkness of things. Hiding their eyes behind large dark glasses, the face is further obscured either with black charcoal or with a red or green patterned *pueñuelo* scarf over the nose and mouth area. On his head he wears a long conical hat covered in monkey fur (or whatever can resemble it), held by a fur covered chin strap, and sporting at the base of the back of the hat a long fur tail. The fur hat is also decorated with a plethora of ribbons, yellow, green and red. In La Candelaria, one of the principal ritual leaders for the *maxetik* informed me that these ribbons symbolically represent (for him) the flow of blood from the head of John the Baptist, and the base of the cone represents a plate, the plate upon which the head of the Baptist was served to Herodes. Since all Chamula are known as the “sons of San Juan” (the Baptist), this is not an implausible interpretation.

In San Juan Chamula, however, this particular construal or exegesis does not seem to work very well, or is only in some way implicit. For most, if not all *maxes* who perform in San Juan the ribbons of the *max*'s conical hat represent the splendor of the Sun, Our Father *jtotik* Jesus. In Girardian terms, it is not surprising that the Chamula might want to imitate an interesting object of their nation's enemies, reinforcing their cooperation rather than their rebellion. Surely, uniform of the 19<sup>th</sup> century grenadier soldier would be a most attractive object for imitation, given what must have been a striking other-worldly appearance for many Mexicans, equally so for those indigenous *campesinos* forced to fight with one group of soldiers or another.

But the 19<sup>th</sup> century soldier-like uniform of the *max* would not be the first time indigenous people of Chiapas attempted to mimic the “forms” of power modeled by non-Indian overlords. The Cancuc rebellion of 1712 – 1714 saw Indians not only creatively imitating military structures but also Catholic Church structures as well. Although only a relative few Chamula participated, many groups of indigenous attempted to establish their own version society, replete with their own priests and bishops so as to have what ‘the other’ had. This was especially important not for strategic reasons, but for spiritual ones -- to avoid displeasing to God and thus to insure success for the cause.<sup>20</sup> If anything, the monkey characters of Chamula traditional rituals are meant to be other worldly creatures, and with good reason.

When they perform, *Maxes* must mysteriously appear. This means they do not go about publically in their costumes as though *mariachi* or some other musical band arriving to a gig. Rather,

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<sup>20</sup> See **Prudencio Moscoso Pastrana** (1992) *Rebeliones indigenas en los Altos de Chiapas*. Mexico: UNAM.

they will dress up together out of public viewing, covering their faces and bodies in such a way as to be unrecognizable. In this way they present themselves as having been transformed. With this costume the *maxes* suddenly appear, and soon begin to make music with drum, harp, guitar and rattle, and for several days will run, shout, and blow their tiny trumpets so as to amuse and amaze the community that has gathered for its fiesta. In La Candelaria, during major feasts, the *maxetik* do all this while they dance with the sacred banners (flags) of the Saints, and constantly announce their sacred presence with the little trumpets they carry. In La Candelaria there are some 9 flags or colorful cloth banners, each representing a sacred being (either linked to a specific Saint in the Church's pantheon, or to some aspect of God, such as the holy Cross).

The *max* has dressed himself up in an anonymous fashion so that the public will see him not as a person, but as a mysterious, mythic creature of old: a *mono*, an extraordinary figure whose actions and performance are both precarious and unpredictable (they are guardians yet also “demons”, or “Jews”, either heroes or villains who threaten to kill the Sun-Christ god).<sup>21</sup> They are also ritualistic and revealing -- wearing, as it were, the remnant scars of embattled experiences or the perceived threat of invading foreigners.<sup>22</sup> It is much as anthropologist Victor Turner once described of Ndembu ritual actions he observed in Africa:<sup>23</sup> ritual reflects liminal space, an area or sphere of action that is at once between and betwixt the normal and the non-normal, the social and the anti-social, the structural world of order and the chaotic world of unstructured experiences (chaos). In this sense, the *maxetik* appear as a band of “other worldly” sorts of beings -- who serve as a medium through which the community holds on to and interprets a sense of its past. This is not a past conceived in chronological or rational terms but in ontological or meaningful terms -- a deep or intuitive sense of where the people have been and where they might go; it is a rich past revealed only in the form (per/form) through which the story of old is told. This thematic performance/motif is more emotionally suggestive than cognitively certain.

Without the *maxetik*, there really is no true festival; for it is they -- at least in La Candelaria -- who act as key animators. They not only serve the Saints but also the authorities -- those of the festival

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<sup>21</sup> The presupposed evil nature of the “Jews” is not in reference to any actual relationship to Jewish people, but belongs to the presumptions and prejudices inherited from colonial Christianity. For a more detailed and in-depth understanding of how this “scapegoat” mentality may have developed over time for the Chamula in Mexico, see **Mary Elizabeth Perry** and **Anne J. Cruz**, eds. (1991), *Cultural Encounters: the Impact of the Inquisition in Spain and the New World* (University of California Press).

<sup>22</sup> **Thomas Benjamin** (1995 [1989]: 40) *Chiapas: Tierra Rica, Pueblo Pobre – Historia política y social*. Mexico: Grijalbo. Benjamin points out that during the tumultuous period of 1823-1824 when Chiapas was made to separate from Guatemala and join Mexico, the political climate continued to be unstable for some time, including unrest caused by exiled groups from Guatemala.

<sup>23</sup> See **Victor Turner** (1969) *The Ritual Process* and (1974) *Dramas, fields, and metaphors: symbolic action in human society*.

as well as the wider community authorities, the local elected leadership. In La Candelaria, the *maxetik* open the sacred time of feasting and it is they who preside with spiritual authority over its closure.

More profoundly, however, the ritual commitment of the *maxetik* helps evoke remembrance of centuries-old social violence. The *monkey man* represents good or “goodness” (ja’ lek) by his service in honor of God, gods, or Saints – the powerful beings that protect, save, do favors, heal . . . but, as I briefly mentioned earlier, in Chamula tradition the monkey creature is also a figure of “badness”, a demonic representation of “evil” (*chopol*) in the sense of what can go wrong when we do not obey God (as in the first creation, when men were transformed into monkeys because of their very evil deeds – killing and eating their children!). It is curious to me, however, that even though this is an important memory for moral formation, it does not seem have impacted upon the more powerful Chamula, especially certain oligarchies in the municipality of San Juan Chamula. The *maxetik* seem to have failed in helping authorities to remember they should not “eat their own children” – i.e., they should not expel their own kind from the community. Sadly, since the late 1960s, tens of thousands of Chamula have been expelled, hurt, or killed by politically and economically motivated religious violence.

In their ambiguous state of goodness as well as badness, the *max* figure resembles the classic “trickster” character of indigenous cultures elsewhere, often represented as a coyote.<sup>24</sup> This state suggests that the monkey creature carries a special community “cargo” or burden, one that represents the community or society’s own problems, especially problems caught in the tensions of paradox. Here paradox refers to all those forces that pull human beings in two truths at once; it is the state of light and darkness, above and below, love and hate, comic and tragic. The role of the *max* on many levels represents what is a liminal state of affairs – a state not entirely unknown to indigenous people who have always lived more on the threshold rather than the center or interior of non-Indian society. This liminal state, however, is often generally the state of affairs for anyone’s precarious human sojourn and yet, also, a place or space for wisdom to arise. Like the Mesoamerican practice of praying in caves, negotiating liminal space means learning to pray going down into the dark and the damp. This explains, perhaps in part at least, why even elected community authorities must obey the *maxetik* during ritual moments.

After observing the *maxetik* for several years in Chiapas, it is my own view that this paradoxical and ambiguous aspect of the monkey characters also serves to re-member the Chamula as a people. The monkey men serve the Sacred in order to restore, through recall, a basic ontological sense of purpose and being. This may not always be an explicit claim for Chamula people, or even one that is promoted by the *maxetik* themselves, but it seems to be what their embodied actions “say” – the ritual

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, **Paul Radin** (1987), *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (NY: Schocken Books)

language of body and movement, the creative aspect of ritual clothing and paraphernalia, as well as the simple fact that to be a *max* feels good, right, wonderful – in service of god(s) and fellow community/group!



November 1 & 2, 2009. “Todos Santos” and “Día de Los Muertos”. Band of Maxetik roving about in traditional cemetery of Romerillo, San Juan Chamula. Photo by Michael Rolland

In La Candelaria, what is to me most interesting about the *maxetik* is the fact that their presence in the community is a recent reinvention. When La Candelaria separated itself as an *ejido* (a communal farming community) and thus moved apart from the municipality of San Juan Chamula and joined itself to the largely non-Indian town of San Cristobal de Las Casas, the community had no major traditions of its own. Since, 1973, when the separation occurred – mostly for reasons of religious freedom involving the right to hear the word of God in the Bible, and to celebrate the Catholic liturgy (as represented by the new reforms practiced in the local Catholic diocese) -- the traditionalist community was no longer obligated to fit into the expensive and burdensome religious-political system of service that governs the municipality of San Juan Chamula. Although they soon developed a certain amount of civil officers who would be elected to serve the community – the Comissary (comisariado), the municipal representative to the city mayor (agente municipal), Judges (juez rural), plus their appropriate secretaries (secretarios) and lieutenants (suplentes) and police (mayoletik), what they lacked was a real festival committee. They had not yet invented or acquired a patron Saint or proper festival around which to unite the community.

Ironically, in La Candelaria, it would be young leaders from the small and much persecuted Catholic Christian community who would eventually inspire and lead the largely non-Christian community to renew and organize its customs and traditions. At first, in the early 1970s, the idea was to imitate and reproduce what they knew from their parents and grandparents, i.e., the way things were done in San Juan Chamula. The people of La Candelaria wanted their patron Saint to be a copy of Saint John the Baptist; in other words, to resemble the patron Saint of San Juan Chamula municipality, the place they had separated from. They never did find an image of San Juan that they could purchase for veneration, and finally settled on an image of the Virgin from the original ranch house that used to govern the land. The religious and civil authorities of San Juan, who are best described as customary and “traditionalist” were at this time very much affected on many levels by corruption and bossism (*caciquismo*) under the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (the then long ruling political party, PRI). The *caciques* of Chamula had sought to limit or contain the non-cooperation and resistance of the growing faith community. The reasons for this are historically complex, but suffice it to say here that at one point things had gotten so bad that the *caciques* even destroyed the small church built by the faith community. This persecution had forced them to worship under a large tree. The reason for much of the persecution is one related to many other circumstances throughout Chamula and other indigenous communities of the highlands during the 1960s, and especially in the late 1970s and following decades. Thousands of Christians – both Catholic and Protestant – were expelled from their communities. Although these expulsions occurred supposedly because of irrupting conflicts over competing religious beliefs and practices, the real and more complex reasons were political and economic.<sup>25</sup> And while the material manifestations of these conflicts involved the growing pressures of the “outside world” upon indigenous communities everywhere,<sup>26</sup> it is my view that the fundamental, underlying dynamic generating and perpetuating the violence associated with these conflicts was very much that of a reciprocal mimesis, owing in large part to the growing *desire* to imitate the objects of desire sought by the perceived *other*.

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<sup>25</sup> For a more complete understanding of the many complex social, economic, political and subsequent cultural interactions involved in the exclusion and persecution of Chamula Christians, consult the following literature: **Canton Delgado's** article “Las expulsiones indígenas en Los Altos de Chiapas: Algo mas que un problema de cambio religioso (1997: Mesoamerica 33: 147-69); **López Meza's** book *Sistema Religioso-Político y Las Expulsiones En Chamula* (2002, Gobierno Del Estado De Chiapas); Pérez Enríquez' book *Expulsiones indígenas: religión y migración en tres municipios de los altos de Chiapas* (1994: Claves Latinoamericanas); **Robledo Hernández's** book *Disidencia y religion: los expulsados de San Juan Chamula* (1997: Universidad autonoma de Chiapas, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Asoc. Mexicana de Población); y **Jan Rus'** study “The ‘Comunidad Revolucionaria Institucional’ – The Subversion of Native Government in Chiapas, 1936-1968 (1994: in Joseph and Nugent: *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico*).

<sup>26</sup> For an overview of the kinds of issues leading to social, political and economic conflict see **Collier and Quaratiello's** book *Basta! Land and the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas* (2005: Food First Books).

According to Girard's mimetic theory, this ritual interaction re-configures historical injury through *mimesis* (as appropriation and re-presentation). The attempt to "make one's own" the ritual objects of value that other's have or value, seems to reflect – in the case of La Candelaria at least -- an intuitive attempt to manage conflict by harnessing its "sacred" power. By doing so, by harnessing this kind of power, the Chamula of la Candelaria (like their forbears in San Juan) are able to transform social reality such that even injuries of the past are reconfigured into badges of glory and pride. While on the one hand this appears to be a process *en vivo* of mythological interpretation (mythologization) of what it means to be a people who must struggle in the world as it is given, on the other hand it seems to be a form of revelation -- thus exposing the lies of "normality" through the ridicule of farce and frivolity. In short, the work of the *maxetik* belongs to a complex process of "ethno-genesis" or ethnic identity formation.

The *maxetik* are only one part of what in San Juan is a very complicated and constant process of "ethnogenesis" by which multiple interactions of teams of actors (for instance, there are well over 2000 actors with roles to play during some of the major festivals) gives rise to many cultural forms and roles. Perhaps more than any other role, that of "animation" is primary. It is vital to give life to the people, it is vital to please the gods, including *jtotik* San Juan Baptist, it is vital to keep the Sun on its pathway from East to West. Vitality and revitalization are ancient themes in Mesoamerican cultures. For it is as animator of the community during its feast that the *max* himself gives and conceals evidence of violence and violation in Chamula history; while at the same time he also brings humor, healing, and hubris to play upon the felt-sense of identity of what it means to be a Chamula – then (the past), as now. What may seem crazy to an outsider is for the member of Chamula society something quite ordinary and even necessary.

From a Girardian point of view, however, the role of the *max* seems odd, and perhaps a little contradictory. For instead of "forgetting" or covering up with lies the truth of past violence and transgression, the mimetic aspect of the monkey character constantly forces a remembrance of the past – the actual past of true injury and injustice – iniquities to be remembered, at least in some fashion. The military-like dress and uniform action of the *maxetik* group, the running about with banners unfurled – banners with spear tips and some with crosses – as if to recall the 500 years of invasion, conquest, and incursion. The *maxetik* soldier/guardian/demon/animator provokes engagement with what depicts the tragic long history of Mesoamerica and other regions of Latin America. It forces people to recall and not forget the fact that the gods were displaced by the one God that dominates with power, constantly made clear by the fire-works and hand cannon blasts that accompany every Eucharistic celebration, or any religious ceremony.

The figures of the Saints in the Church that each banner represents in another form echoes the military organization of distinctive units. The fact that a frivolous and even capricious monkey man carries, sustains and honors Sacred Objects (objects made out to have value by the desires of the Conquerors and other agents of power) is a powerful sign. It represents the kind of ambiguity most indigenous people find themselves forced to live since 500 years ago. But instead of forgetting the injurious past, that past is reincorporated into ritual and made very public. Both love and hate, honor and insult are brought to bear in ritual actions that make all major festivals of the Chamula both entertaining and symbolically rich and powerful (not to mention economically viable, as in the case of most festivals in San Juan Chamula).

However, in La Candelaria, as they attempt to reproduce the customs and traditions of their forbears, it has become noticeably different. For example, the traditional fire-run and the Dance of the Warriors during Carnival is shorter and thus modified. Perhaps these ritual expressions were once smaller in San Juan Chamula, in the days before tourists started to arrive and sacred ritual moments began to grow more elaborate. In any case, the main themes of suffering, penitence, and redemption are clearly present. In the Dance of the Warriors, for example, the soldier-like *maxetik* capture their leaders and cover them with the animal skin of *bolom-chon* Jaguar. Once “captured”, then each “victim” must carry the sacred banner of our Lord, until they complete the circle three times. At this point another actor will lift up the victim toward heaven, and the banner he carries he moves in the sign of the four directions, after which he is placed on the ground again – reincorporated, initiated anew, redeemed and cleansed. It is Lent and Easter all in one ritual moment. In La Candelaria, this “Sacred Games” ritual now exists and gets better each year. Perhaps because it is not yet a threat to meaning, let alone economic advantages of tourism, this “copying” or imitation of the original practice is benign. The difference is due in part at least, to a measure of incompleteness or inexactness in the way some rituals are done at the moment in La Candelaria. If we were to compare, for example, the way carnival is done in La Candelaria and the way it is expressed in San Juan Chamula, we would find major differences, perhaps even in cultural terms “errors.”

Yet what is important here is to keep in mind that the role of the *maxetik* in La Candelaria is still new. Historically, the same is true in San Juan Chamula where the role of the *maxetik* is undergoing development and change – itself a relatively new “tradition” that stems mostly from the 19<sup>th</sup> century – especially when the Dominicans were compelled to leave México by liberal anti-royalist forces, preventing them from any further control of religious expressions among the Chamula.

Finally, in terms of what Girard means by “things hidden” (since the foundation of the world, cf. Matthew 13:35) and “seeing Satan the accuser fall like lightning” (cf. Luke 10:18), I would interpret

Chamula ritual life and their *maxetik* as structured ways to limit uncontrolled *mimesis*. Unconstrained imitation and copying, according to mimetic theory, brings out the true demons, making it all the more necessary to establish a structured, institutional, customary means that would help control the propensity to imitate the “badness” of ‘others’ -- especially foreign others. The dances and games performed by the trickster-like *maxetik* is one way to dampen untold historical resentments that still threaten to raise its ugly head in violence.

Unfortunately, in San Juan Chamula, the ritual no longer seems to work or have effect – as many Chamula political bosses continue to imitate the powerful non-Indian world of corrupt gatekeepers in the local power structures. Most recently this was in some ways manifest in the typical political campaign for mayor in which an indigenous candidate took third place in the final elections. Political imitations of powerful “movers and shakers” may yet happen in La Candelaria, but for now, there is one essential difference: it is the Christian believers who continue to develop and guide the revitalization of their old customs and traditions, and to infuse them with the implicit if not explicit sense of the gospel – Christ as true man and true God, liberating human kind from its own misrecognitions – while at the same time animating their communities to not repeat the errors of the past, i.e., to become like those ancient beings who could only live by feeding off others, “killing and eating their own children.” In the community of La Candelaria, the sons of San Juan the Baptist continue to live and thrive as the “washed” (baptized) sons and daughters of Christ, and thus learn the propitious imitation of how the authorities refuse – as much as possible – to consume and destroy their own members in the community.