

8. Everyday work as spectacle: celebrating Maya embodied culture in Belize¹

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Maya Day celebrations in southern Belize have been characterised, since 2004, by new identity performance strategies deployed among different Maya groups and villages. Maya people have adopted different representations – condensed in this festival – of dynamic, strong identities intended to make cultural and political statements that contest their current marginalisation within the Belizean state. The Anglo-Caribbean *Kriol* establishment still largely perceives the Maya as being made up of immigrant groups from Guatemala and has only recently (and reluctantly) acknowledged their status as native peoples of Belize. This reluctance is, in turn, reflected in public debates, disputes over land rights and political participation, and in the lack of recognition of the Maya's historical importance in the formation of the Belizean nation. Organisation of the Maya Day festival addresses these issues both directly and indirectly while taking up the challenge of representing Maya identities in innovative ways.

The programme includes several rituals, traditional dances, sporting events, marimba and harp music, academic and information talks, and food stalls. One of the main attractions for both Maya and non-Maya attendees is the festival's range of competitions where Maya villagers perform a variety of everyday tasks, such as firewood splitting and corn grinding. These competitions convey widely accepted notions of 'Mayaness', such as physical strength and resilience, resourcefulness and family cooperation. This chapter will examine why these competitions have become so important for Maya activists in Belize and consider what happens when daily, embodied practices become spectacle. It will also highlight the festival's significance in promoting the Maya peoples' demands for political recognition and social inclusion.

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Maya Day: history and significance

Tumul K'in Centre of Learning, an autonomous intercultural education project based in the village of Blue Creek, has been organising Maya Day for almost a decade. The school provides secondary education to Maya and non-Maya teenagers from different villages in the southern district of Toledo and beyond. Tumul K'in (TK), meaning 'new day' in the Mopan Maya language, is an educational project that some scholars describe as an 'experiment in postcolonial pedagogy' (Wainwright, 2008, p. 225). Established in 2002, when a group of teachers occupied the abandoned facilities of a failed development project to create a Maya school for the Maya people, the Centre sees its work as contributing to the struggles for recognition of Maya rights and culture in Belize and enjoys the support of other Maya activists and organisations.

As well as being the only secondary education institution in Belize to teach Maya languages, TK is the only one to teach Maya values, spirituality and arts. The school's pedagogy actively encourages students to learn Maya performance genres (marimba and harp playing, and dances). Teachers believe that students gain a sense of identity through exploring these traditions, as well as through reconstructing lost performing arts – for example, stilt dancing, described in a passage from the ancient *Popol Vuh* (the book of the Kiche' Maya), has been reintroduced (Tedlock, 1996). For these Maya activists, researching, teaching and recovering the arts, sports and science of ancient Maya civilisation is an important component in the decolonisation of minds and the empowerment of Maya villagers. This is why the stilt dancing, as well as *chaj chaay* (a sacred Maya ball game) and fireball games, have been incorporated into Maya Day.

Held annually, always on a different date, the Maya Day festival is scheduled according to the school year, and specific days are selected according to the



Figure 8.1. Stilt dancer – image from the Madrid Codex. Source: Vail and Hernández, 2011.

Figure 8.2. Stilt dancers' performance – Maya Day 2012. Video still: Genner Llanes-Ortiz.

Maya calendar kept by the Kiche' Maya. Involving several ritualistic, sporting and artistic performances, it began in 2004 as an open day showcasing the work of Maya students for parents and other people from the villages. The festival grew in scale and complexity after all those involved in the first event pronounced it a success and agreed its continuation. From the start, certain components have become synonymous with 'celebrating Maya culture'. Among these are traditionally choreographed dances – like the Deer, the Cortes and the Monkey – harp and marimba music, and the preparation of Maya food, such as maize tortilla, *caldo* or spicy soup, and *tamales*. Also important, as previously mentioned, are the competitions, the particular focus of this chapter.

The celebration of Maya Day acquires particular significance when considered within the context of Belizean cultural politics. The Maya in Belize (formed by three linguistic communities: the Yukatek, the Mopan and the Q'eqchi') are widely perceived as a group of immigrants from Guatemala and Mexico by the dominant Kriol – descendants of British woodcutters and former African slaves (Medina, 1999). The long history and presence of the Maya in Belize is often ignored and invisibilised by Kriol political and cultural establishments. The Belizean government only observes national holidays that celebrate the heritage of the Kriol (St George's Caye Day and Commonwealth Day) and the Garifuna (Settlement Day). This is one of the main reasons why the Maya decided to organise their own public celebration to assert their continuous presence in Belizean territory and their contribution to the nation – a festival that can be interpreted as a strategic symbolic gesture defying their invisibilisation.

Staging Maya Day

The inclusion of competitions, the most anticipated performances of Maya Day, reflects the TK's understanding of Maya education and culture. Its curriculum encourages students to labour constantly in the field, the kitchen and the classroom. Hard work, the school board and Maya villagers believe, is what will make these youngsters Maya. The teenagers also enjoy free time though, during which they may choose to learn a craft, play the marimba or join in a football game.

Competitions were initially conceived to allow students to demonstrate what they had learned in school. However, so as to include other Maya villagers in the celebration, the number and nature of these activities grew. The organisers were keen to differentiate Maya Day from other festivals that had been initiated by hotels and other tourism-related businesses in the region, and which claimed to represent Maya culture. As Esther Sánchez, TK's managing director, explained:

We really wanted something that people from the communities could come and feel [was] theirs. That [they would] take ownership of the day, of the event and make them feel that ‘this is Maya’, ‘it makes me proud of who I am’, ‘of what I have’ ... We also talked about the competitions and how, again, we should make competitions that really highlighted what people in the communities are good at. They have a lot of skills, a lot of knowledge but it is in their own area. And if we do not have somebody who will promote it, then how will they be able to value and really appreciate what they know? All of [these questions were] in the discussion when we spoke about Maya Day. And that is why we’ve made it with the different competitions we have, which are always a highlight of the day.²

These competitions thus contribute to promoting a notion of Maya culture that is embodied and, at the same time, *performatic* – to use Diana Taylor’s term. Taylor uses the adjectival form ‘performatic’ to stress ‘the nondiscursive realm of performance’ (2003, p. 6), the realm of actions and interactions. She notes that philosophy, linguistics, dramaturgy and rhetoric, which have greatly influenced the field of performance studies, place a strong emphasis on language and normative practice in their analytic use of ‘performative’ as an attribute of reiterative acts. According to Taylor’s perspective, ‘performatic’ marks certain aspects of performance where subjectivity and cultural agency are not subsumed by discourse. In this particular case, I consider ‘performatic’ to be an appropriate description of the quality of these staged embodied displays that, while consonant with conventional discourses about Maya gender identities, disrupts them by virtue of the performances’ transformation into spectacle. This is because, while clearly based on traditional domestic roles, the tasks competitively performed on the festival stage simultaneously index alternative notions of Mayaness. Rather than simply cementing specific roles and hierarchies, the competitions acknowledge broader, cross-gender qualities, such as self-reliance and cultural expertise. Admittedly, more competitions are staged that give men the chance to display their physical and cultural competencies, but by including and celebrating the embodied performances of Maya women on the same stage, these activists contribute to a repositioning of women’s work, bodies and knowledge, making their contributions equally important as men’s in the continuation of Maya culture. Focusing not merely on the performativity of gender roles, but on the performatic quality of the competitions allows festival-goers and the wider audience to become spectators of Maya corporeal vigour and cultural dynamism.

Photographic records from earlier Maya Days show how these competitions have evolved – so to speak – ‘from the ground up’. In 2007, competitions

2 Esther Sánchez, interview with the author, Blue Creek, Toledo, Belize, 29 March 2012.



Figure 8.3. Harp dancing competition, Maya Day 2007. Photograph: Esther Sánchez.

like tortilla-making took place on a low wooden platform placed on the margins of a green field in the middle of TK's school compound. Spectators were able to inspect the competition closely and thus participate quite directly by encouraging and/or criticising the competitors. In the early stages of the festival, even harp dancing competitors performed at ground level (see figure 8.3). Later, in 2009, festival organisers decided to locate the platforms higher up, creating a stage that dominated the main green of the compound and which became a venue for some competitions.

This photographic record bears witness to the growth and diverse incarnations of the festival in its brief history. The third official Maya Day (2007), which took place on different dates and venues across the Toledo district, included a spiritual ceremony and the sale of Maya food in the main square of Punta Gorda (capital of the Toledo district) as well as a Deer Dance presentation, traditional marimba and harp music, and the staging of various competitions (marimba playing, tortilla-making, caldo eating, traditional dance and best dress) on the school compound. Maya Day 2010 repeated the same format. In that year, there were Maya spiritual ceremonies, a torch run starting from the archaeological site of Lubaantun, chaj chaay demonstrations in a Maya village, and the 'Lords of the Rainforest' bicycle race across different villages. A festival of dance, music and cultural performances 'depicting everyday Mayan life' was

held at Punta Gorda's Sports Complex. And the school compound hosted best dress, greasy pole, slingshot and firewood splitting and carrying competitions, along with La Chatona and Cortes dances and, again, chaj chaay and fireball game demonstrations.

Over the years 2007–10, the numbers of people gathering in the compound in Blue Creek rose significantly from one dozen to approximately two hundred. The Centre took advantage of this increase to showcase its educational work and to raise funds for future activities by charging a small fee to attend the festival. The showcasing took place in booths selling food, fizzy drinks and clothes. In 2011, TK was the host organisation of the International Encounter of Maya Peoples, an annual celebration where Pan-Maya organisations and activists from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Belize come together to discuss common topics of interest, share their knowledge and traditions and unite as one voice to demand greater recognition and respect for their rights. For the first time, Maya Day attracted – according to some eyewitnesses – nearly a thousand spectators, a real logistical challenge. In response to earlier complaints lodged by some Maya villagers and authorities about the entrance price, on this occasion attendees were asked only to make a symbolic contribution of one Belizean dollar (approximately 35 pence).

The remarkable development of Maya Day in less than a decade is perhaps indicative of how effectively it reflects the desire of Maya villagers in Toledo to see their identities represented and celebrated in the public sphere. Inevitably, Maya Day organisers have had to engage – although seemingly only minimally – with foreign tourists' expectations of authenticity when visiting remote areas like southern Belize.³ These visitors tend to be of three types: cultural tourists, eco-tourists and, what are here called, 'solidarity tourists' – most being international workers for non-governmental organisations (NGOs), anthropologists and archaeologists. A significant proportion of foreign visitors to Maya Day are archaeologists, whose numbers have increased considerably since 2009 (again, according to the photographic record). Tourism scholars have demonstrated that a desire for 'spectacle' powerfully drives the engagement and interest of tourists, even those seeking unconventional experiences like eco-tourism (see Ryan et al., 2000). As the main agents behind the organisation of Maya Day, TK members do not reject the presence of tourists – in fact, it could be said that they encourage it since they also advertise Maya Day in hotels and other tourism service providers. They are aware of, and engage with, these audiences yet they continue to be primarily accountable to their original public, the Maya villagers, as will become apparent from a closer analysis of Maya Day competitions and performances.

3 For a discussion of how this has affected Maya villages see Medina (2003).

Researching performance and competitions

I first made my proposal to TK members to study and document their festival during the summer of 2011. They agreed to participate and even enriched my original project with interesting recommendations. At the time they had big plans for 2012, a date that had become synonymous with a purported Maya prophecy of the end of the world (Sitler, 2006). Foreign fascination with the prophecy had been fuelled by the New Age belief that the contemporary Maya possessed a hitherto hidden knowledge about the future of the planet, about its catastrophic end or 'mystical' new beginning. There was little echo of these Western millenarian anxieties among Maya activists and even less among Maya villagers in Belize. All this attention, however, created an opportunity for TK to gain more visibility and support for the festival. They had envisioned an even more ambitious programme for the year, which did not take shape, since funds promised by state agencies never materialised and principally because the national government called for general elections during the month typically dedicated to the festival.

They went ahead, nonetheless, and as usual invited people from all over the Toledo district to attend the main celebration in Blue Creek. The Centre runs a local radio station with sufficient coverage to reach most of the Maya villages in the district. Aurelio Sho, a media-conscious Mopan Maya, directs this station, which is called Ak' Kutan (the Q'eqchi' phrase for 'new day'). His ideas and instincts about showmanship and communication have, in recent years, driven important changes in the way Maya Day is organised. Aurelio produced a radio advertisement clip for the celebration that was broadcast nationally by Love Television, a media company based in Belize City. The clip portrays Maya identity as linguistically diverse and different from, yet well integrated in, Belizean society. With background marimba music, the advert features the voices of TK's young Maya students encouraging people to attend the festival in four languages: Mopan, Q'eqchi', Kriol and English. Aurelio's voice then invites the crowd in English to 'come and experience a vibrant Maya culture: the food, the music, the people, the dance and arts and crafts. Witness the main stage competitions, such as: conch shell-blowing competition, corn-grinding competition, firewood-splitting competition, caldo eating, just to name a few'. The radio clip clearly frames the competitions as 'centre stage' performances in the festival. My experiences of Maya Day 2012 confirmed this impression. During the conch shell-blowing competition, for instance, all eyes were directed at the stage as participants waited to step into the (scorching) limelight while a TV crew recorded every detail for its national news programme. The corn-grinding contest also attracted intense interest. This time audience members,



Figure 8.4. Corn-grinding competition – Maya Day 2012. Video still: Genner Llanes-Ortiz.

particularly children and young people, climbed up and crowded together on the stage to get closer to the action (figure 8.4).

A closer look at the type and mode of the competitions further illustrates the ways in which they become framed as ‘spectacle’ during the event. For heuristic purposes, Maya Day competitions are classified here according to two broad categories: i) ‘traditional performance’, that is those that reward artistic talent and culturally appropriate performances of traditional genres, such as marimba and harp playing, dancing and the modelling of traditional dress; and ii) ‘everyday tasks’, the larger category which encourages ostentatious corporeal skills in the execution of everyday village activities. The latter tasks are judged according to certain cultural norms. Not only are these expressions of embodied cultural knowledge relevant for Maya economic viability, but they also represent highly valued traits of Mayaness. As noted earlier, such chores tend to be gender-specific. Predominantly male competitions are firewood splitting, palm knitting, sling shooting and bicycle riding, whereas female contests involve tasks like corn grinding and the making of tortillas and palm fans. Both sexes are accepted in a handful of contests, such as water carrying, cornshelling (this is, in fact, a family-based competition) and caldo eating. ‘Traditional performance’ competitions tend to have a more balanced gender representation: harp and marimba players are essentially men; women do most of the traditional dress modelling, while dance contests are based on the performances of mixed couples.

These two broad categories overlap to form a third ‘hybrid’ type of competition. Referred to here as ‘cultural tasks’, these activities are not executed daily, but nonetheless involve bodily skilfulness and strength. They are almost exclusively performed during socially and culturally important events and festivities. Among these competitions, which are nearly always enacted by men, are palm knitting, conch shell-blowing and greasy pole climbing. From this brief description, it becomes apparent that all the competitions index a celebration of Maya bodies within a context of discrimination and invisibilisation – something I have discussed elsewhere (Llanes-Ortiz, forthcoming).

Of all the activities upon which competitions are based, the performing arts (that is, music and dance) may be more ‘naturally’ recognised as ‘spectacle’. The same can be said of the traditionally choreographed dances – the Deer, the Cortes and the Monkey. However, from a strictly Maya perspective, they are understood as serving more important religious goals and are seen as forms of communication, devotion and storytelling that engage with supernatural forces and spiritual entities. I observed this spiritual element in 2012, when I witnessed the organisation of the traditional greasy pole competition – *tak'in che'* (money tree) in Mopan Maya. Music and dancing formed an important part of ritual preparations of the pole, yet these performances did not always require an audience. Other rituals involved incense smoking and praying on the spot where the tree selected for the competition was to be felled. Having been cut down and cleaned, the post was transported to the village outskirts. The festival organisers then called on the Deer dancers to form a procession to accompany the pole to the competition venue. Participants engaged in overnight prayers, incense smoking, marimba playing and dancing, and alcohol was consumed in a long succession of stages involving the preparation of materials and the mounting of the prize at the top of the greasy pole. These latter performances were not intended to be watched, but were part of a normative procedure to guarantee the favour of supernatural entities for a smooth-running and successful game. The actual competition, on the other hand, seemed to have a more explicit objective to entertain and thrill festival-goers. However, according to one Mopan Maya villager, in order to climb the greasy pole successfully, competitors needed not only good muscles but also appropriate traditional knowledge, namely to recognise and prepare a particular type of bark that, once dried, would allow them to climb even the most slippery tree trunk in the forest.

An emphasis on the right approach also shaped the ‘everyday tasks’ competitions. The key to success was not only physical strength and endurance, but ultimately the correct cultural knowledge, often explained as ‘tradition’ or the ‘traditional way’. As some scholars have elucidated – notably Ingold and Hallam (2007) – ‘tradition’ is more than just a static recipe to organise social

life; it is a creative and contradictory way of knowing and transforming the social, cultural and natural environment. 'Tradition' carries a set of solutions to problematic situations that are continuously tested and corroborated in the laboratory of everyday life. In many societies, including post-industrial and urban ones, 'tradition' as a form of knowledge is passed from one generation to the next through non-verbal means; that is, by way of demonstration, observation and practice, all of which are involved in performing arts and practices and which encompass the 'performatic' as conceived by Taylor (2003). Within the context of Maya Day, however, everyday-work-cum-embodied-knowledge-cum-'tradition' has experienced another transformation, recast from a mundane performance into spectacle.

Everyday work as spectacle

Regarded as a whole, Maya Day may best be understood as a 'ramified performance type' combining ritual and games in a larger festival structure, a notion first used to characterise the Olympic Games (MacAloon, 1984, pp. 258–9). This mixture of performance genres has helped to transform this global celebration into 'the greatest spectacle on earth'. Interestingly, TK has in fact organised a 'Maya Olympics' event in the past. Like the Olympics, Maya Day integrates ritual, games/play, festival and spectacle genres, interconnected in a single performance system. Its organisers have altered and mixed these genres with the conscious aim of finding new ways to engage Maya villagers and Belizean society in a public conversation about what it means to be Maya in the 21st century. Yet, as with the Olympics, the act of bringing together performance genres that have thus far not been on a stage – let alone shared the same one – inevitably changes their appeal and effectiveness. As a spectacle, Maya Day demonstrates two key components: the presence of spectators seeking to be entertained and the grandiloquent scale and framing of the performances within the event. Some performances and competitions clearly resonate with this conception of spectacle. A closer analysis is needed, however, to unpack the processes whereby daily chores are transformed into spectacle.

When staging 'everyday tasks' competitions, it is the 'witnessing' component that effectively transforms a common practice – perhaps even a pedagogical performance – into something directed towards a detached spectator. The obligation to engage and participate that is inherent to ritual, festival, practical work or play vanishes, replaced by 'the spectacle's satisfaction with entertaining and pleasing the eye' (MacAloon, 1984, p. 264). The discursive packaging, the aggrandising commentary, which runs alongside these competitions as they unfold contributes to the sensation that one is witnessing a performance that is essentially spectacular, worth watching, deserving of handclaps and demanding

cheers. Consequently, something ordinarily constituted as a mundane activity, an almost unconscious daily task, is indexed as a crucial component of identity and culture. The central stage simultaneously separates the festival attendees from, and draws them towards, the participants' bodily actions, which heightens the spectacle effect in a performatic manner. In this sense, the transformation of everyday work into spectacle is clearly intended as a form of entertainment, an aspect that reinforces the qualities of game and festival that this event was originally envisioned to have.

The various performative components of the event come together in a celebratory dynamic focused on Maya bodies as the locus of physical strength and cultural practice, as I observed first-hand in 2012. On a hot and bright Sunday, a multitude of approximately 1,500 people gathered in Blue Creek to celebrate Maya Day. Most came from neighbouring and even quite distant Maya villages. There were also representatives from Maya organisations and NGOs working in southern Belize. Some tourism service providers regularly dropped off a few slightly disoriented tourists who spent a couple of hours roaming around the festival and taking pictures of the different performances and competitions, before visiting other sites of interest, such as nearby caverns and waterfalls. A small crew from Love Television came to do a news report and spent the entire day shooting video and talking to different participants and spectators. The audience, both present and virtual, was numerous and diverse, while the raised stage framed most performances in a deliberately spectacular way. Facing the stage was a covered area where people could stand to watch the performances and competitions. Between these two spaces, a white clearway, used at times as an alternative stage, allowed people to get closer to the action. Exhibition booths and food stalls surrounded the green area at the centre of the TK compound where the greasy pole for the *tak'in che'* competition was being perfumed with incense and prepared for erection. In the booths, representatives of the Maya Leaders Alliance and other Maya activist groups promoted their work among villagers and explained it to foreign visitors. US archaeologists and villagers working at the Aguacate Community Archaeological Project exhibited ceramic pieces and other objects found during excavations of a nearby ancient settlement. The festival started with a religious fire ceremony and an invocation in *Q'eqchi'* (later translated into Mopan and English). Then, the president of the TK advisory board, a man of Kriol descent, formally opened the Maya Day celebrations, highlighting that this was 'a day that lets us know that we [the Maya] were here yesterday, we are here today and we'll be here tomorrow'.

As anticipated, the competitions drew large crowds. Audience members had to be kept out of the way to allow enough space for contestants during most of the 'everyday tasks' performances, especially the corn shelling and corn grinding. Judges made their decisions based on rules that were not necessarily

spelled out in advance. Their rulings seemed to depend on implicit norms of what constituted a proper and 'traditional' procedure. As the competitions unfolded, festival presenters constantly reminded the audience that some of the most laborious tasks were an intrinsic aspect of Maya life and people were expected to take pride in them.

Competitors from four different villages signed up for the firewood-splitting contest. An emcee/judge explained the procedure: obtaining bark ropes to tie and carry the logs, getting them from a nearby location, cutting them into four equal pieces in front of the stage and, finally, transporting them to the 'Maya house' exhibit built for the occasion. During the competition, the emcees praised the strength and practical skills of these 'real Maya men', while also light-heartedly teasing and joking with them (and the audience). At one point they asked the leading competitor for his impressions. When he replied that he felt very proud of himself, the emcees chortled and there was also a hearty laugh from the audience, suggesting no one was taking the event too seriously. 'Tradition' was only invoked when it was ruled that the logs had to be carried 'properly', that is, tied and secured on the competitor's back with bark ropes, as was commonly done before the Maya had other means to transport firewood. A young competitor did not obey this rule and, in spite of his best efforts, ended up dropping all the logs, prompting the audience's laughter.

Another interesting example of this light-hearted style of celebration was the corn-grinding competition, which this time involved women from different villages. The rules for this contest were relatively simple: competitors had to grind the maize grains properly, using the traditional grinding stone and water, into a tortilla dough. It had to have the right consistency – thick but not too dry, soft but not too weak – and competitors were not to allow any grains to fall from the stone in the process. A group of elderly women would make the final ruling about the quality of the dough. The emcee for this event, a man of Kriol descent, again praised the hard, physical work and cultural talent deployed by the competitors, but in a rather amusing style resembling that of a sports commentator. While the emphasis was on tradition and self-reliance, the female presenter of the first prize (a hand-operated steel grinder) relativised the contest's apparent conservatism by declaring that the award acknowledged the winner 'could use the grinding stone'. This comment implied that 'tradition' should not prevent the hard-working Maya women from using 'modern utensils' like the steel grinder.

It follows that an emphasis on tradition does not necessarily translate into excessive earnestness since the competitions – as Aurelio explained to me later – were not only intended as canonical representations of Mayaness but also as an excuse 'to have fun'. Loud, hearty laughs were constantly provoked by mild references to sexual prowess symbolised by energy and forcefulness in the

accomplishment of tasks. In another example, during the conch shell-blowing competition, the emcee commented on a vigorous performance by an elder, stating that 'I see the lungs are well; the cheeks are well. I don't know what else is well!', prompting the public to guffaw. The body celebrated in Maya Day is thus a cultural muscle transformed into a dignified symbol of Mayaness. Yet, in a more light-hearted fashion, it also provides an occasion for laughter, by virtue of a culturally indexed – and unsuspected – sexual potency and desirability.

This ambivalent celebration of the Maya body, exalting and derisory at the same time, distinctly conforms to the 'gay relativity' that Mikhail Bakhtin defines as a key component of 'folk carnival humour'. Bakhtin sees this 'special idiom of signs and symbols' as a boundless source of subaltern and subversive aesthetic expression. 'All the symbols of the carnival idiom', he writes, 'are filled with [a] pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities' (1984, p. 11). Festive laughter is not negative, individualist parody for Bakhtin, but positive and universal in scope. In Maya Day, laughter is not only directed at the competitors but reflects back to the laughing Maya villagers, thus forming a sort of utopian festival community. Bakhtin sees one of the defining features of spectacle in the conjunction of 'gay relativity' with the sensual celebration of the body in folk carnivals (p. 7), but perhaps the most interesting correspondence between Maya Day performances and Bakhtinian analysis lies in his 'material bodily principle'. For Bakhtin, images of the body in folk festive humour present it as 'contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable' (p. 19).

Conclusions

The most spectacular competitions of the Maya Day festival focus on an embodied culture expressed in the skills and resilience that the Belizean Maya value and cultivate in their everyday life. The display of Maya bodies hard at work stresses their long presence and successful adaptation to the tropical forest's harsh conditions. In this way, Maya Day competitions performatively enact – by virtue of their recasting of Maya dynamic identities as culturally spectacular and socially relevant – an open challenge to the Belizean establishment's denial of Maya nativeness. Furthermore, by showing that Maya 'tradition' is about proper knowledge and use of the body in relation to the environment, Maya Day competitions redefine the notion of 'Maya identity' to focus on practice rather than essence. Whereas competitors are praised and dignified for their performance of physically demanding tasks, Maya Day competitions appear to be increasingly intended and framed as spectacle and entertainment. This apparent contradiction, however, turns out to be perhaps the festival's most surprising strength.

MacAloon notes that '[s]pectacle has destructive effects on genres like festival, ritual and game, genres that reduce in their various ways the distance between actors and audiences, that demand that all take active roles in the performance, and that all agree at some level on the typification and transcendental ground of their actions' (1984, p. 268). However, insofar as it belongs within a 'ramified performance type', spectacle can also become 'a recruiting device', 'a sort of servomechanism for the liminal genres nested within it' (pp. 268–9). This operation seems to be at play in the organising and staging of Maya Day competitions. For although the spectacle of everyday work may be seen as appealing to the expectations of visitors coming to the region for cultural solidarity and/or ecological tourism, it fundamentally responds to the needs and aspirations of Maya villagers and their organisations. This is reflected in the reactions that competitions provoke among festival attenders. It appears that tourists find the competitions amusing and entertaining but do not qualify them as 'spectacular'. During my research I did not get much opportunity to talk to foreign visitors about Maya Day, but from a handful of valuable blogs, online commentaries and photo albums registering the responses of US expatriates and other non-Belizeans, I get the sense that foreigners are more attracted to the most colourful and apparently 'traditional' performances, like the spiritual ceremonies, the choreographed dances, the chaj chaay and fireball games and the demonstrations showcasing the dresses and music of Maya women.

Maya villagers and local visitors also made abundant use of their mobile phone cameras during the festival, but I was unable to gauge how prominently competitions featured in them compared with 'traditional' performances. I did, however, witness the high level of participation in radio programmes and discussions about what competitions should be included and which ones appealed to Maya villagers. During a casual conversation, two representatives of Maya organisations in Blue Creek told me that the competitions were a true reflection of Maya identity, whereas other performances – especially the fireball game – were not. Judging by the amount of attention and participation the competitions attract, it would seem that the spectacle surrounding them has indeed functioned as a 'recruiting device' encouraging conversations about Mayaness and 'tradition' at grassroots level. As James Clifford observes: 'Tradition is less about preservation than about transformative practice and the selective symbolization of continuity' (2000, p. 100). This is certainly a strategy in which Maya organisations and activists have been invested for a long time (Wilk, 1987).

It would appear that Maya Day not only combines various performance genres but also diverse aesthetic sensibilities that allow it to engage with different audiences. The importance of spectacle may reside in its appeal to

tourists and potential allies, as well as to Maya villagers. Yet, as observed earlier, competitions are also staged and wrapped in a language of innuendo, mockery and competitiveness that might in fact be considered as corresponding to a more 'traditional', folk entertainment genre. By encouraging a sense of pride that celebrates hard work, resourcefulness, ingenuity and social practice as important elements of what it means to be Maya in Belize – while at the same time being able to humour and entertain others and themselves – TK and other Maya activists are reinforcing aspects of an open, yet selective, 'tradition', one that could potentially be crucial for the construction of new intercultural performance strategies to advance their demands for greater social justice and recognition.

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