

WHEN COLLECTING ARTIFACTS IS A CONVERSATION WITH THE GODS

Linda A. Brown

Keywords: Maya religion, Maya priests, Guatemalan Highlands, divination process, ethnography

For some time now, archaeologists have admitted that archaeological sites are important in contemporary Maya habits. However, little attention has been given to the function that prehispanic artifacts have in modern Maya rituals. Therefore, this investigation will focus on the function of prehispanic artifacts used in contemporary ceremonies, while specific emphasis will be made on the collection of prehispanic artifacts and their importance for communicating with the gods in contemporary Maya rituals.

DIVINE CHOICE AND RITUAL COLLECTION

During an ethno-archaeological project that was being carried out at Santiago Atitlán in the department of Sololá, it was observed that the Maya priests had interesting objects which they used for divination (Brown 2000). A good number of those items were small prehispanic objects collected for divination purposes. Discussions held with ethnographers and an examination of the ethnographic literature confirms that collecting objects is a very common practice among the Maya priests of both the Highlands and the Altiplano. To Maya priests, collection is a crucial activity because it helps identifying those people that are selected during the initiation process. Subsequently, the objects collected ritually confirm the supernatural authorization for the sacred status of the priest, and in addition, they are as well useful as a channel for the ancestral powers that communicate with them.

Some Maya priests are selected by divine choice, referring to an experience where some individual believes to have been chosen by the gods for a sacred profession. Whenever an individual is called to become a Maya priest by divine election, there usually is some physical, psychic and emotional crisis going on, such as a disease. Disease or bad luck will not go away until that person accepts his/her destiny as a priest. During this crisis, the person begins to find special objects that will later be used like divination tools. Rosa, a Tz'utujil midwife from the town of San Pedro La Laguna, explained that her initiation began with a visit of the spirits of dead midwives during a dream, having subsequently undergone the following experience:

“One day, Rosa found a strange object in her way –a shell. She was frightened and would not touch it. That night, the spirit of the dead midwives showed up again. Their spirits reprimanded her for rejecting the magic shell and told her to go back and pick it up. The spirits told her that the shell was her virtue. Another day, Rosa found a

knife with the image of a fish and an infant on the haft. This time, she took it with her. She visited the shaman to find out what did those strange objects mean. He confirmed what she told her in her dream. The shell was her virtue and the knife was to be used to cut the umbilical cord” (Paul and Paul 1975: 711).

It is clear that the objects the gods put on her way cannot be ignored and must be collected. After this, the objects are used for receiving information and knowledge from the ancestors through dreams. The following story was told by a Yucatec priest (*h-men*) following the finding of his *zaztun* (stone of light).

“The first night after I found the zaztun, I dreamt that two men were sitting close to my hammock. They came with herbs in their hands, each one of them brought a different herb and they began to teach me medicine. –Papa Loh, this is the medicine that cures this type of affliction. With this medicine this disease is cured, and this is the amount needed-. The other man began to say. He told me. This medicine cures this type of affliction. This medicine cures this disease and this is the quantity you must use. But, you need to take care of us! Do not let us die!” (Gutiérrez-Estévez 1993: 271).

In the Tz’utujil village of Santiago Atitlán, the objects ritually collected are seen as “direct communication lines with the world of the spirits” (Douglas 1969: 138). He notes as well that the Atitecos use the Spanish word “pepenar” (*scavenge*) to describe the collection, which means something more than just an accidental finding (Douglas 1969). For the Atitecos, specifically, the objects collected are presents the gods put on their way. Although some of the new priests may receive their divination tools from their teachers, the ethnographic literature reports that the objects collected are very important because they are the proof of supernatural selection for the sacred status of priest. For example, in the K’aqchikel village of San Lucas Tolimán, Woods (1968) reported that the Maya priests cured several types of sacred things on the altars, including: images of saints, candles, mirrors, glasses with liquor, cigars, as well as prismatic obsidian blades and small stones they found in the woods. The obsidian and stone objects were particularly important, because those had been given by the gods and represented the destiny of a person as a *shaman* (Woods 1968: 129).

ETHNOGRAPHIC REFERENCES TO RITUAL COLLECTION

A revision of ethnographic literature reveals that ritual collection is a very common practice among the Maya priests of the Lowlands and the Altiplano (Figure 1). This practice is well known among the Yucatec Maya, where the priests, known as *h-men*, collect divination tools called *zaztun* (Arvigo 1994; Gutiérrez-Estévez 1993; Kunow 1996; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934). A Maya priest described his *zaztun* as a “stone of light that works as a toy for the Maya spirits, it is the blessed tool of the Maya healer” (Arvigo 1994: 21).

Gutiérrez-Estévez (1993), notes that the *h-men* prefer to gather their *zaztun* in the vicinities of archaeological sites and mounds. Kunow (1996) recorded that the

zatzuns used by priests in the town of Pisté, Yucatan, could consist of marbles, quartz crystals or prehispanic artifacts such as obsidian and flint. In the Altiplano, many priests and midwives collect divination tools (Cosminsky 1972; Douglas 1969; Paul and Paul 1975; Woods 1968), specialists who cure snake bites (Douglas 1969), people who cure broken bones (Douglas 1969; Paul and McMahon 2001), priests who use sacred bundles (Brown 2000), and priests who devote to the Maya calendar (Bunzel 1952; Douglas 1969; Schultze Jenna 1954; Tedlock 1982).

The sacred objects of the K'iche' priests that worked with the Maya calendar include personal bundles (Bunzel 1952; Tedlock 1984). The bundles have abundant beans of a tree known as *palo de pito* and a variety of objects found close to the ruins. While the priests receive the first bundle from their teachers during the initiation, later, whenever they find prehispanic objects, they collect them and add them to their bundles (Bunzel 1952: 287). During divination, beans are manipulated while the collected objects are exhibited. Midwives from the K'iche' and Tz'utujil area are called to their profession through dreams and the collection of objects that reveal their destiny (Cosminsky 1972: 179; Paul and Paul 1975).

At San Pedro La Laguna there are Tz'utujil priests who cure broken bones and collect a small sacred bone they use to communicate in their dreams, and these little bones teach them how to cure bone injuries (Douglas 1969; Paul and McMahon 2001). Also in the town of Santiago Atitlán, the Maya priests with sacred bundles are called to their profession through their dreams and through the collection of sacred objects.



Figure 1. Map of the area where Maya priests collect their divination instruments.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF RITUAL COLLECTION

Which are the types of artifacts that may be used as a kit to communicate with the gods? Maya priests collect cultural and natural things to use in divination. The cultural objects correspond to the prehispanic and colonial periods, and more recent objects may be included, though this is rare. The prehispanic objects collected anew include prismatic blades, obsidian points and polyhedral cores, fragments of clay figurines, spindle whorls, polished axes and polished stones in the shape of perforated circular artifacts –the so-called “doughnuts”. More recent objects collected for divination uses include: glass bottle stoppers used for medicine, perfume, and marbles. Usually, these objects are used as crystals; priests use them for divination and to observe the flame of a candle through the glass. Also, dolls from the XIX and XX centuries are collected because of their antiquity and small size, what makes them unique.

Together with the cultural objects, natural objects are also collected, like for example quartz crystals and concretion of stones in the shape of beasts, humans, or greens (Tedlock 1982: 81). The priests from San Pedro La Laguna who cure broken bones use to collect small bones to use them as a divination tool. During the consultation,

the priests holds a bone in his hand, and the bone works as a guide for the priest's hands, and helps him with the medical treatment whenever the injuries caused by the broken bones are serious (Paul and McMahon 2001).

The ritual collection of contemporary priests has archaeological implications. This activity affects those archaeological sites where people collect artifacts, and in addition affects those sites that have not been explored yet. Usually, when people remove objects from an abandoned site they take them out in one piece, because those objects are useful (Schiffer 1987). On the contrary, Maya priests remove fragmented objects that are not useful to them. Specifically, priests collect fragmented objects that were once well manufactured, such as lithic blades and points, stone axes, polyhedral cores, whistles and figurine fragments.

The size of the artifacts ritually collected is important, as many Maya priests tour the forest on foot, and pick the objects that are small and easy to be carried with them; that is to say, the archaeological sites close to their pathways could be looted with this ritual collection.

Whenever the objects are collected as a divination tool, they have a sacred status which is related to where and when the objects are once more returned to their archaeological context. Some families keep the objects after the priest's passing. In the town of Todos Santos, once the priests die, their divination tools are scattered on top of an archaeological mound, thus creating new archaeological deposits (Oakes 1951: 51). In Santiago Atitlán, when a priest dies, his apprentice throws away his divination tools in a sacred place near the town.

THE FUNCTION OF RITUAL COLLECTION

Which is the function of ritual collection? From an indigenist perspective, when Maya priests are undergoing their initiation stage, ritual collection is a way of communicating with the gods. The objects collected are the supernatural proof that they have been chosen to begin their work in a sacred profession. Subsequently, the objects perform as a supernatural antenna that transmits information to the individuals. However, Maya priests do not believe that the materials collected are inanimate objects. Instead, they consider the objects to be animated by spirits.

Maya priests in the Tz'utujil and K'iche' areas say that their divination tools can never be kept in their bedrooms. The reason for this is that the spirits associated with the objects collected have an intimate relationship with the priest. The priests believe that these spirits are their first husbands, and therefore they cannot be kept in the same room where the priests sleep and cohabit with their spouses. If the spirits saw the priest in bed with the spouse, they would be jealous and furious and would not allow anyone to sleep in the house. The objects may make plenty of noise and move the sleeping persons and throw objects across the entire room. Simply, sleeping is impossible in such a situation. For this reason, the spouses need to be in a separate place, and the objects kept someplace else, like in a ceremonial building.

From an anthropological perspective, the initiation of a Maya priest through divine election is a process of self-identification. During initiation, an individual experiences a number of crises in his life that are solved when the identification of a new social status like a Maya priest has taken place. But each identification process needs the creation and preservation of a social boundary (Barth 1969). Ritual collection is a crucial activity that works for identifying those who will have access to the supernatural. In association with this activity, there is a change of perspective in which the archaeological objects found are taken as associated sacred objects in communication with the gods and the supernatural powers. The Maya priests believe that their destiny is similar to that of the sacred objects, as illustrated in the following citation:

“The sacred objects that take over the midwives have miraculous powers... [The objects] may disappear and appear whenever they want to. The destiny of the objects is always bound with the destiny of the priests. A woman who becomes a midwife discovered that her children found her objects. The children broke the objects in the house yard. The woman quickly took them and wrapped them in a silk cloth, but the damage had already been done. Shortly after, she died of a fever”.

Likewise, though from a different perspective, the destiny of the Maya priest and the destiny of his objects are inseparable. This is essentially a dialectical relationship; in other words, just like an individual finds and shows an object as sacred, the object found teaches the individual that a Maya priest is also sacred.

The Maya priests from the Lowlands and the Altiplano collect objects as divination tools. With this practice, the persons mark a sacred domain in local communities. The ritual collection of artifacts is a means of religious power that exists out of the control of the common institutional religions.

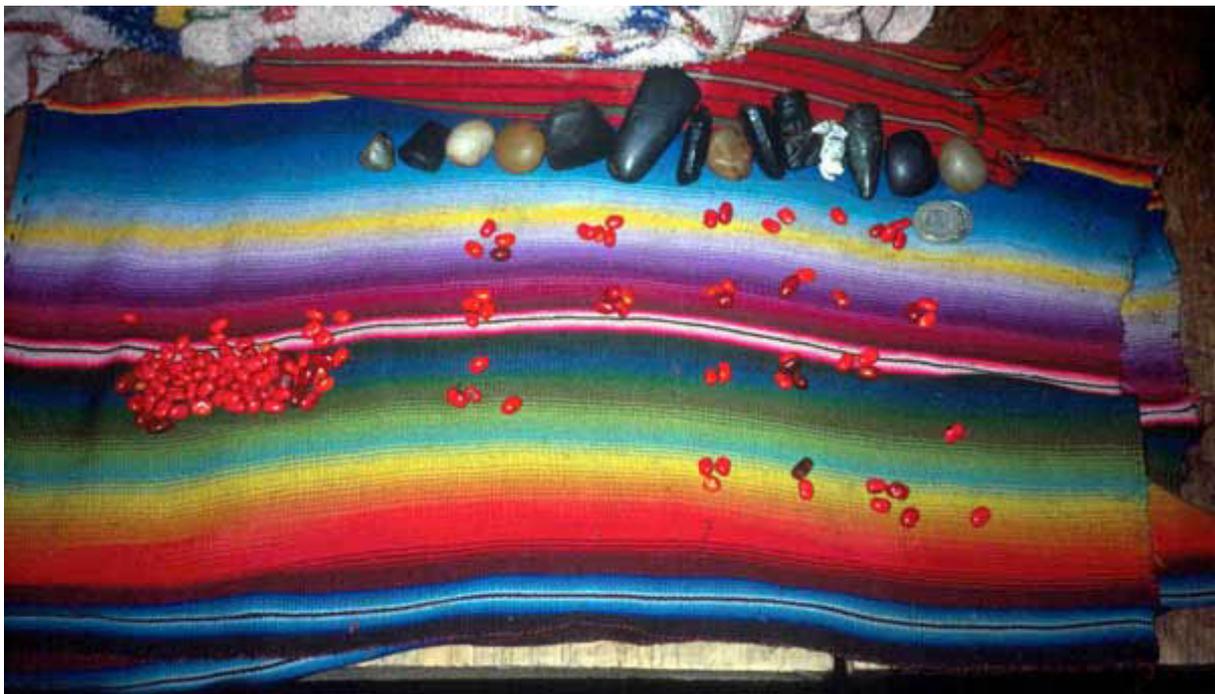


Figure 2. The results of a divination, with the collected objects shown in the upper section.



Figure 3. The divination kit of a Maya priest from Santiago Atitlán.



Figure 4. The altar of a deceased Maya priest (photo by Harriet Beaubien).

TABLE 1
OBJECTS COLLECTED AS A DIVINATION KIT

Prehispanic Artifacts	Natural Objects	Colonial and Recent Artifacts
Spindle whorls	Quartz crystals	Glass stoppers
Figurine fragments	Concretions	Marbles
Whistles	Small stones	Old or peculiar coins
Ceramic supports	Shells	Dice
Sherds	Palo de pito beans	Dolls
Prismatic blades		Toys
Lithic cores		Porcelain figurines
Points		Spurs
Blades		Bells
Polished axes		Metal pieces
Circular stones or doughnuts		

REFERENCES

Arvigo, Rosita

1994 *Sastun: My Apprenticeship with a Maya Healer*. Harper San Francisco, New York.

Barth, Fredrik

1969 Introduction. In *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (edited by F. Barth), pp. 9-38. Little, Brown and Company, Boston.

Brown, Linda A.

2000 From Discard to Divination: Demarcating the Sacred Through the Collection and Curation of Discarded Objects. *Latin American Antiquity* 11 (4): 319-333.

Bunzel, Ruth

1952 *Chichicastenango, a Guatemalan Village*. American Ethnological Society Publication 22, Locust Valley, New York.

Colby, Benjamin, and Lore Colby

1981 *The Daykeeper: The Life and Discourse of an Ixil Diviner*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Cosminsky, Sheila

1972 *Decision Making and Medical Care in a Guatemalan Indian Community*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Anthropology Department, Brandeis University.

- Douglas, Bill
 1969 *Illness and Curing in Santiago Atitlán*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Anthropology Department, Stanford University.
- Gutiérrez-Estévez, Manuel
 1993 The Christian Era of the Yucatec Maya. In *South and Mesoamerican Native Spirituality. From Cult of Feathered Serpent to the Theology of Liberation* (edited by G. Gossen), pp. 251-278. Crossroads Publishing Company, New York.
- Kunow, Marianna Appel
 1995 *Curing and Curers in Pisté, Yucatan, Mexico*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Anthropology Department, Tulane University.
- La Farge, Oliver
 1947 *Santa Eulalia. The Religión of a Cuchmatan Indian Town*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- La Farge, Oliver, and Douglas Byers
 1931 *The Year Bearer's People*. Middle American Research Series No. 3. The Department of Middle American Research, Tulane University, New Orleans.
- Oaks, Maud
 1951 *The Two Crosses of Todos Santos: Survivals of a Mayan Ritual*. Bollingen Series. Pantheon Books, New York.
- Paul, Lois, and Benjamin Paul
 1975 The Maya Midwife as Sacred Professional: A Guatemalan Case Study. *American Ethnologist* 2: 707-726.
- Paul, Benjamin, and Clancy McMahon
 2001 Mesoamerican Bonesetters. In *Mesoamerican Healers* (edited by Brad R. Huber and Allan R. Sandstrom), pp. 243-269. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Redfield, Robert, and Alfonso Villa Rojas
 1934 *Chan Kom: A Maya Village*. Carnegie Institution of Washington, No. 448, Washington, D.C.
- Schiffer, Michael B.
 1987 *Formation Processes of the Archaeological Record*. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City.
- Schultz Jena, Leonhard
 1953 *La Vida y las Creencias de los Indígenas Quichés de Guatemala* (translated by A. Goubaud Carrera and H. Sapper), Biblioteca Popular, Vol. 49. Editorial del Ministerio de Educación Pública, Guatemala.

Teadlock, Barbara

1982 *Time and the Highland Maya*. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.

Waggley, Charles

1948 The Social and Religious Life of a Guatemalan Village. *American Anthropological Association, Memoir No. 71*.

Woods, Clyde M.

1968 *Medicine and Culture Change in San Lucas Tolimán*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Anthropology Department, Stanford University.

Figure 1 Map of the areas where the Maya priests collect divination instruments.

Figure 2 The result of a divination with the collected objects shown in the upper section.

Figure 3 The divination kit of a Maya priest from Santiago Atitlán.

Figure 4 The altar of a deceased Maya priest (photo by Harriet Beaubien).

Conversations with God (CwG) is a sequence of books written by Neale Donald Walsch. It was written as a dialogue in which Walsch asks questions and God answers. The first book of the Conversations with God series, Conversations with God, Book 1: An Uncommon Dialogue, was published in 1995 and became a publishing phenomenon, staying on The New York Times Best Sellers List for 137 weeks. The succeeding volumes in the ten book series also appeared prominently on the List. Berlin has one of the biggest collections of Egyptian artifacts and I know the Nazi symbol was adopted from ancient Vedic civilization. The plots of two of the Indiana Jones films also make reference to the Nazis looking for the Lost Ark and the Holy Grail. I know 'it's a movie' but I'm sure Lucas and Spielberg were pulling their source material from at least a little fact.Â The artifacts and documents there could certainly be proof. But there is a reason they spent a thousand years shaping the narrative. [permalink](#). [embed](#).