Introduction

In a public conference on ‘The Maya calendar,’ Ian Xel Lugold, a Californian author with connections to New Age circles, was asked by a member of the audience how Mayas came to devise their calendar. His responded as follows:

We do not precisely know. They have their own legends. The legends are all we actually know about it. Their legends tell that a person, or a god, named Itzamma, came down to the Maya people and delivered information about language, writing, mathematics and the calendar. So, they received this information as a gift. Where Itzamma came from, and where he went, we do not really know. And frankly, it is none of our business to know where they got it. It is much more important what we do with this information now.

(Ian Xel Lungold, ‘The Mayan Calendar. The Evolution Continues’. YouTube, accessed on April 12, 2019—part 9, 3 min.)

Lugold’s answer reveals how pragmatism rules as concerns matters of authenticity and religious authority, a characteristic that is widespread among Westerners interested in ‘Mayan spiritualities.’ This pragmatic logic involves ‘considering real what they perceive to be useful’ (Champion 2004, p. 70) and is a central aspect of what Véronique Altglas calls ‘religious exoticism’ (Altglas 2014), which she defines as a way of constructing and idealizing otherness, and taming it through forms of decontextualization and romanticization (Altglas 2014, p. 24). Such processes are at work in the various contests about religious authenticity within the transnational circulation of actors, values, practices, imaginaries and symbols that characterize whole strands of the New Age nebula, enhancing hybridization. Connections between so-called New Age spiritualities and ethnic ‘cosmovisions’ have been particularly fertile since the 1990s, for example in the production of transnationalized imaginaries surrounding the December 2012 phenomenon in neo-mayanists publications. The millenarian approach of ‘2012’ flourished in Californian circles close to the New Age (Mayer 2014). The term cosmovision refers to an understanding of the world centered on the interrelationship between human beings, nature and...
the cosmos (Galinier and Molinié 2006, p. 23; Macleod 2013), and which is said to be typical of the Indigenous people of Latin America.

These authors reported having visited different archaeological sites in Central America in order to decode the ‘Long Count’ of the Mayas, a pre-Hispanic calculating system made up of 13 cycles also known as b’ak’tun, with each of these cycles corresponding to approximately 394 years (Sitler 2006). The date ‘21.12.12’ was believed to mark the end of the 13th cycle and the beginning of a ‘period of greater human enlightenment’ (Sitler 2006, p. 26, cited from Argüelles 1987). Mexican-American neo-Mayan authors like José Argüelles see ancient Maya civilization as ‘carrying a primordial message for the spiritual evolution of the planet’ and considered this date to be ‘an important step’ in the harmonization of the relationship between humans, nature and the cosmos (Bastos, Engel, and Marcelo 2013, p. 315). In his book The Mayan Factor (1987), Argüelles wrote that Mayan identity was not confined to ethnicity and thus accessible to everyone, thereby universalizing the significance of the 21.12.12 date. In his account, remarkable historical figures such as Plato, Pythagoras, Goethe and Jung had all been ‘Mayas,’ and thus carriers of a perennial brand of Mayan wisdom. Argüelles was one of the first neo-Mayanists of the 2012 Phenomenon to have disseminated the vision of a mythical, decontextualized and universal Mayan wisdom and identity, and his writings inspired an entire generation of non-Indigenous neo-Mayas.

The aim of the chapter is to show how ‘indigeneity’ has been reinterpreted and re-appropriated within a contemporary transnational context. This will help to highlight the recent emergence of so-called ‘neo-ethnic’ hybrid traditions and identities of which neo-Mayanity is only one example, in relation to issues such as authenticity and the symbolic quest for legitimacy. My argument draws from the results of a multi-sited research project among transnational neo-Mayan circles, extending from the Americas to Europe. I argue that neo-Indigenous performativities represent new ways of doing religion in which complex processes and claims of belonging, expression, identity and authenticity are at work.

Varieties of Mayanity

Transnational religious dynamics have profoundly transformed the territories of ethnic identities in Central America. Following James MacKenzie (2017), one can distinguish between three types of competing identities.

- First, there are traditionalist types of syncretic cosmovisions (costumbristas), which are found mainly in territorialized Indigenous communities, and are centred around the cult of Catholic saints.
- Second, forms of Mayan revivalism, such as that heralded by activists from urbanized and middle-class ‘Maya’ movements. This has been a widespread trend in Guatemala since the 1990s, for instance. MacKenzie refers to this type in terms of ‘Maya Spirituality,’ stressing how its proponents often seek to purify pre-Colombian Mayan beliefs and practices from Catholic influences (MacKenzie 2017, p. 359).
- Finally, the range of New Age neo-ethnic ‘spiritualities’ (e.g. neo-Indian, neo-Aztec, neo-Mayan and neo-Incan) which are born out of transnational dynamics and which combine New Age references and claims regarding ‘Indigenous Spiritualities.’
The present chapter focuses on the third and last type comprised of people who adhere to neo-ethnic ‘spiritualities’ and consider themselves ‘Indigenous at heart’ or by ‘reincarnation.’ I call the latter neo-Mayan, who are part of a more widespread, de-territorialized and globalized movement for which New Age and tropes of self-realization provide the grammar as well as the format.

Towards the end of the 20th century, in the absence of historical facts supporting the belief in the coming of the ‘New Paradigm of Aquarius,’ some scholars questioned whether New Age understood as a ‘new religious movement’ would fade out. Scholars have hinted at an important change within New Age, which has diffused into innumerable networks of ‘alternative’ therapies based on individual transformation and well-being (Champion 1995). Authors have therefore talked about the shift towards a sort of ‘post-New Age’ or ‘Next Age’ (Mayer 2014, p. 8 cited from Hanegraaff 1996; Introvigne 2001; Melton 2007). Using the example of neo-Mayanity, this chapter seeks to illustrate the current extension of New Age through new and transnationalized processes which are reshaping ethnic identities. The 2012 Phenomenon has played a major role in this respect, and deserves our attention.

It is helpful to distinguish between Mayanity and neo-Mayanity. Neo-Mayanity can be defined as the most recent transnationalized and spiritualized form of self-identification with the Maya which do not require ethno-linguistic anchoring. Mayanity, on the other hand, retains a relation with Mayan cultures and a form or another of direct historical heritage. A historian of Mayan civilizations, Mercedes de la Garza, defines Mayanity as the property of a series of communities which inhabit several regions of present-day Central America, from Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, western El Salvador and western Honduras. While these communities do not form a homogeneous cultural whole and speak different languages (not simply dialects) and have diverging customs and historical legacies, they do share certain common traits which enable them to be classified as a singular cultural unit (De La Garza 1999). From a historical perspective, the generic term ‘Maya’ is a polysemic, socially constructed ethno-linguistic concept (Chavarochette 2013, p. 134). The political and legal definitions covered by this category also vary from one national constitutional framework to another. In Mexico, for example, the word ‘Maya’ designates ethno-linguistic communities associated with specific territories (Villa Rojas 1985, pp. 46–78): Yucatán (Mayas Yucatecos), Chiapas (Lacondones, Chols, Tseltales, Tsotsiles, Tojolabales, Mames) and Tabasco (Chontales). However, some recent historical and anthropological works have questioned Mayan ethnicity and its boundaries. Wolfgang Gabbert (2001), for instance, has demonstrated that there is no empirical evidence of any shared Mayan ethnic self-identification among Mexican indios or indígenas, whether in colonial times or at the end of the 19th century. The term ‘Maya’ was established as a category by the colonial powers, based on supposed ‘biological’ criteria rather than self-identification. Moreover, Mayan identity is unpopular nowadays among certain indigenous Mexican communities (Loewe 2007). In Yucatán, for instance, some people speaking Yucatec do not identify as Maya, claiming they are ‘not Indigenous’ (Castañeda 2004, p. 38). Mayan self-identification is restricted to a small section of the middle class, an urban indigenous elite that works in governmental institutions, development or education. Lower classes tend to prefer calling themselves mestizo, mayer, campesino, gente del pueblo or osílmak” (Gabbert 2001, p. 476). These discrepancies help explain the ease with which the term ‘Maya’ has been appropriated by a wide array of people, including certain Western New Age adepts. In sum, ethnic categories and classifications in Central America tend to be negotiated and defined by context and interactions (Barth 1969) rather than given and stable.
Neo-Mayas, for their part, perform a *hermeneutical shift* in their interpretation and appropriation of the term Maya. By using it exclusively as a means of ‘spiritual’ and symbolic identification, they move the term away from the classical boundaries of ethnicity, language, territory, history and heritage. Neo-Mayas call themselves ‘Mayas at heart,’ in reference to the work of religious studies scholar Marion Bowman (1995). In her research on contemporary Celtism, Bowman uses the expression ‘Cardiac Celts’ to designate people who ‘feel’ and identify as Celtic: ‘Celticity is coming to be seen as a quality or a matter of choice rather than an issue of history, geography, language or ethnicity: it is a thing of spirit, not of heritage’ (Bowman 1995, p. 245). The consequence of this is that anyone can be or become a ‘Cardiac Celt’ since the relationship is ‘emotional and spiritual.’ The same process is at work among the neo-Mayas, who identify as Maya and claim to ‘act ritually Maya,’ without being ethnically attached or otherwise to ‘the Maya.’ Significantly, some neo-Mayas present themselves as ‘the reincarnation of cosmic Mayas.’ In such cases, the lineage is an obvious (re)construction. The prefix ‘neo’ is fitting as it underlines this type of reconstruction and (re)appropriation of ‘Indianity’ which has emerged in Latin America since the 1990s (Galinier and Molinié 2006). Paradoxically, the prefix references a movement ‘back’ to an ancient cultural heritage, as the result of an encounter between the local and New Age global networks (De La Torre and Gutierrez Zuñiga 2013, p. 155). The notion of ‘neo-Mayanity’ is a compromise which aims to capture both the actors’ modes of self-identification while signaling the essentially performative and constructed nature of these identities.

**Translocal territories of Mayanity at heart**

The ethnographic examples I present in this chapter are part of a wider set of data from a multi-sited research project among different neo-Mayan milieus as observed in Guatemala, Mexico, Germany and Switzerland, between 2012 and 2015. As part of a larger interconnected ensemble that includes a large body of literature, video, conferences, workshops and festivals, these territories are traversed by transnational networks of healers, neo-shamans and seekers invested in Maya-bound ‘shamanistic’ initiations. The research sought to collect the varieties of motivations that lead people to identify with Mayan spirituality, while tying them to the life-stories (see Bertaux 2005 [1976]; Bertaux and Kohli 1984) and religious pathways of the actors as way to define common imaginaries and the modes and dynamics of such reinvented traditions (Capone 2014). The purpose was to situate biographical elements—ruptures, crises, transitions—which lead participants to change their lifestyles through processes of religious exoticization.

‘Mayas at heart’ share certain socio-demographic characteristics. They all live in urban areas and are mostly non-Mexican or *Mestizos* (which ‘invites at least a nominal association with an indigenous ancestry’ [MacKenzie 2017, p. 360]). They come from the upper middle-class (and occasionally upper-class backgrounds) and often sport university-level education. Research revealed how ‘Mayas at heart’ explain their turn to Mayan spirituality as the result of a dissatisfaction with former lifestyles and their disappointment with Catholicism. Former lifestyles, actors confessed, were based on social success: marriage, family, work, social performance and wealth. Their narratives evoke a moment of crisis in the form of a divorce, an illness or a bereavement, for instance, which prompted them to reassess and redirect their personal values, objectives and trajectories.

‘Mayas at heart’ often confess being initially attracted to Mayan spirituality because of the millenarianist, end-of-the-world prognosis and messages about the calendars. The experiential nature of this religiosity counts as another oft-mentioned reason for their interest. A majority insist on the appeal of the applicability of Mayan spirituality to everyday life, such as working...
with the four elements or four directions as well as prescriptions applied to water, food and breathing. Many confess to owning a Mayan altar at home and using it for daily prayer as well as to assist in their personal development. They look upon Mayan spirituality as a ritualistic and deeply pragmatic system, easily accessible and readily exportable. Most neo-Mayas also practice other forms of rituals and alternative therapies and techniques such as reiki, women’s circles, sweat lodges, yoga, astrology, numerology, neo-Kabbalah, tarot and various other forms of body work (e.g. massage). Such practices radiate from the capital, Mexico City, and are spread through an intra-national network of holistic healers, reaching outposts such as Mérida (capital of the State of Yucatán), where I conducted part of the fieldwork. Mexico City is portrayed to be ‘progressive,’ as its population is in majority in favor of the right to abortion, gay marriage and adoption. This contrasts with the rest of Mexico where a more or less secularized form of Catholicism still has influence on issues relating to family and couples (Blancarte 2013, p. 137). This is especially true in Yucatán.

As a state, Yucatán is considered to have some of the most conservative values in Mexico and a high level of sexual and domestic violence towards women. A high percentage of its inhabitants self-identify as Catholic. In addition to this, the region has seen an important rise in Protestant evangelical and Pentecostal churches in the last few decades, as well an increase of those claiming ‘no confession’ (Hernández Hernández, Gutiérrez Zúñiga and De la Torre 2016). As a sign of the penetration of New Age and personal development tropes within the fabric of this otherwise conservative and traditionalist region, public spaces in Yucatán are flooded with holistic flyers, brochures and posters. Mystic tourism linked to the ‘2012 Phenomenon’ starting in the early 1990s contributed to the rise of this holistic milieu, despite an initially hostile context. Research shows that neo-Mayas from Mérida have adopted holistic or neo-ethnic worldviews in challenging social environments, in the face of conservative and traditionalist milieus closed to holistic worldviews. Some of them confess disguising their beliefs and practices in the face of evangelicals and Catholics who perceive them as ‘deviant’ and even ‘satanic’. They declare having suffered humiliation in both family and the workplace, which has compelled them to develop themselves as independent (and somewhat underground) neo-Mayan therapists.

Mayas at heart cite therapeutic reasons to justify their involvement in this neo-Mayanity. This is the case of Cristina, a 40-year-old mestiza from Mexico City. A child of the Mexican bourgeoisie, she is now a psychologist and has two children. She received a Catholic education and used to be at the head of her own company before her life changed dramatically following her son’s illness. While exploring non-medical solutions to complement his treatment, she received training in alternative therapies and was later initiated into Mayan spirituality through, a neo-Mayan movement from Yucatán (south-East Mexico). She then travelled to Córdoba, Argentina, where, over several months, she completed specialized training in ‘therapies of the soul.’ Her transnational network emerged through ‘non-hazardous’ encounters, which she understands as steps in her initiation, and she began to simultaneously attend different holistic circles. She later travelled to Australia for an ‘individual pilgrimage’ at Mount Uluru (Ayer’s Rock), recognized by natives for its importance within Aboriginal symbolism. In her narrative, Cristina ‘mayanizes’ this pilgrimage to a far-away place by referring to it as part of ‘the sacred serpentine walk,’ following the name of Yucatec pilgrimages to Mayan temples in the classical period. In her story, Uluru serves as a symbolic equivalent to a Mayan pyramid, thereby dissociating it from its native (Australian aboriginal) cosmology. For Cristina, Mayan identity is something like an ontological posture, a ‘state of being-in-the-world’ or a ‘spirit.’ She recalls a particularly striking experience during a neo-Mayan workshop:
And all of a sudden, a Maya appeared wearing a tunic, and I said, ‘Well, what’s that?’ In fact, it reminded me of a lot of things from my life, no? And he started to talk to us about the Mayas. It was in a marble lounge in Mexico City. In a neighbourhood called Bosques de las Lomas, which is a very upper-class neighbourhood, no? And they told him, ‘You’re going to get sick on the marble floor,’ and he answered, ‘There are no sicknesses, it’s all in your mind. I am more than this body.’ Wow! I said, ‘I want that, too. Where did you learn that? I want that, too.’ He then told me, ‘I’m Maya, but the Maya isn’t an area, it isn’t a territory. The Maya is cosmic.’ ‘Even if I wasn’t born in Mérida, can I be Maya?’ That was my first question. ‘Of course, you can. Mayas are from all over the world. When you feel called from the sun. We’re all children of the Sun.’

In the 1970s, Mexico saw the rise of Mexicanidad (Mexicanity). This social movement was initiated by urbanized intellectual mestizos, who sought to recover ancient heritages and re-Indianize the national culture. Performing an ‘idealized reinterpretation of the pre-Hispanic past and an exaltation of an archetypal image of the Indian’ (De La Peña 2001, p. 96), the movement produced two strands: radical Mexicernity and neo-Mexicanity. The former was characterized by politicized, anti-Western and anti-syncretic discourses as well as a ‘radical Indianist nationalism,’ which valued ‘authentically Indian’ culture (De La Peña 2001, p. 101; De La Torre and Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2011, p. 183). The latter was more ‘spiritualist,’ transnationalized, pluralistic and related to a New Age-style global project. Many neo-Mayas like Cristina had been initiated to neo-Mexicanist circles before getting in touch with neo-Mayanity. Both act to universalize the figure of the indigenous in general and the Maya in particular. The reference is not to the ethnic Mayas of Central America, but to a global form of ‘primordial energy,’ accessible from within, from the ‘depths of the self’. Mayanity is thus transformed into an essence that can be combined with an infinite number of symbolic representations and practices.

The Consejo de Ancianos y Sacerdotes Mayas, which was established in the 2000s and whose executive committee sits in Mérida, Yucatán, coordinates the meetings of continental Indigenous representatives working towards the ‘development and promotion of Maya cultural values.’ It also holds local ceremonies and fights against ‘any form of cultural discrimination and economic marginalization of the Maya people’ (official document, General Assembly of December 21, 2014). In 2015, Ricardo became the first non-Maya to be initiated into the Mexican Council of Maya Elders. Born in Mexico City with Oaxacan, Mixtec and Zapotec roots, Ricardo practices Mayan acupuncture, Mayan massage and ‘pre-Hispanic sound healing,’ and confides feeling ‘Maya in his heart.’ His relationship with Mayan spirituality is internalized, affective and subjective. In this contemporary view of Mayanity, Mayan identity is situated in a meta-historical and meta-cultural time-space which enables its transnationalization in a variety of local contexts. Such view raise a number of issues regarding authenticity.

Issues of authenticity

In The Children of the New Age, Steven Sutcliffe (2003) describes a history of the New Age in Anglo-Saxon culture from the 1930s to the 1990s. The author deconstructs the idea of a New Age movement while showing how this ‘false category’ has nonetheless become firmly rooted in the sociology of new religious movements. Rather than characterizing New Age as a movement or a homogeneous entity, he conceives it as a loose term to refer to the heterogeneity of so-called ‘alternative spiritualities.’ More than a movement, New Age is better envisaged as a widespread and ill-defined community of seekers. Similarly, Latin American scholars such as De la Torre and Gutiérrez Zúñiga refrain from using the term Maya revival movements.
New Age as a substantive, describing it rather as a ‘matrix of meaning’ that revolves around holistic and millenarian worldviews and cosmologies which predict the arrival of some kind of ‘New Era’ (De La Torre and Gutierrez Zuñiga 2013).

Such an approach is fruitful for seizing the recent hybridizations that have occurred between Mayan spirituality and New Age on at least two counts. First, it sheds light on the dynamics by which traditional cultures and identities have been recast as both de-historicized and de-territorialized. Secondly and simultaneously, these developments have acted, somewhat paradoxically, to ethnicize New Age (at least discursively) by grounding it in Latin American Indigenous cultures. Indigenousness-seeking movements generally develop transnationally within the New Age as a ‘matrix of meaning’. ‘Transnational,’ meanwhile, refers to any phenomenon that crosses cultural boundaries (Capone 2010, p. 238). This concept emphasizes the idea of a multidirectional process which multiplies a tradition’s ‘places of reference’ and roots, against a background of ‘power relations’ (Capone 2004, pp. 16–17).

A body of scholarly literature has recently investigated the Indigenousness-seeking process within New Age in Latin America. Renée De la Torre and Cristina Gutiérrez Zúñiga (2011, 2013), Carlos Alberto Steil, Renée De la Torre and Rodrigo Toniol (2018), Francisco De la Peña (1999, 2001), has suggested generalizing the use of the prefix ‘neo’ to mean the ‘requalification of the traditional’ (De La Torre and Gutierrez Zuñiga 2013, p. 18) within transnational fluxes, e.g. neo-tradition, neo-religion, neo-Mexicanity, neo-Indian, neo-Inca, neo-Aztec and neo-ethnic. Galinier and Molinié (2006) refer to this general movement as ‘neo-Indianism,’ by which those ‘symbolic appropriations of the past’ are seen as ‘different’ from the ‘authentic’ practices of ‘ethnic Indian’ communities. Such a perspective goes beyond description, however, by providing academic legitimacy to normative claims as to what constitutes an ‘authentic’ set of practices and beliefs. This is problematic, as it inherently opposes supposedly pure and immutable ancestral practices to impure bricolage, thereby disqualifying the social actors’ experiences involved in the latter. This, I argue, goes beyond what should be the task of the social sciences in the analysis of such phenomena.

A transnational approach, on the other hand, makes it possible to avoid making authenticity into a normative tool for defining these movements since drawing the frontier between ancestral and crafted traditions is challenged by the fact that the reality in the field is muddy. For instance, even in rural communities, strands of Indigenous people are reinterpretting their practices in the terms of spirituality and with references to energies and chakras, even though this remains the case of a minority. Many community curanderos (healers) say they practice ‘authentic’ Mayan sweat lodges and integrate pan-Indian and New Age references, even though these are importations and constructions. Neo-Mayanity thus questions the classic distinction between the supposed ‘inauthentic’ quality of New Age and the ‘purity’ of traditional Indigeneity. Thus, authenticity is a discursively constructed notion.

Scholars have underlined how the question of authenticity haunts contemporary religious reconfigurations, and how it simultaneously emerges as an issue in social sciences. The argument of Gauthier (2020) and Meintel (2020), for instance, is two-fold. First, they relate the emergence of the heightened concern for authenticity to a profound shift in the structures of authority due to globalization and the massification of its consumer and hyper-mediated culture. Second, they note how the social sciences have tended to qualify New Age type bricolage as inauthentic in contrast to supposedly pure and authentic Indigenous cultures (Gauthier 2020, p. 3). As concerns the latter, they note how phenomena such as the
Discourses on ‘authenticity’ and ‘purity’ can be observed among a wide range of neo-Mayan people including Europeans, Indigenous elites, Mayan communities or even mestizos who revitalize ‘Mayan identity.’ Neo-Mayanity is indeed characterized by a tension between the quest for purity and for syncretism. This tension includes power issues related to legitimacy. Perceptions also play an important role. The notion of syncretism is often synonymous with impurity, whereas purity denotes something authentic and positive. For most neo-Mayan leaders, purity and authenticity are specifically accompanied by a radical rejection of ‘syncretism’ as a synonym of failure in their ‘mission’ to preserve ‘Mayan purity.’ Their life stories emphasize the fact that they were initiated in a ‘traditional’ way by Abuelos, the Elders from the Yucatán communities. The stories surrounding their traditional initiation grounds their spirituality in a local cultural heritage and therefore makes it more ‘authentic.’

The question of authenticity is indeed at the heart of the neo-Mayan phenomenon, and it emerges from the field as a key notion for thematizing identity boundaries. Overall, neo-Mayas tend to legitimate the authenticity of their practices and beliefs on the basis of their efficacy and the grounds of experience. In this respect, they participate in what Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has called the ‘ethics of authenticity and expressivity,’ according to which each person is unique and must find within the self the nature of this uniqueness and express it through various forms of conducts, adhesions, fashions and lifestyles, for instance. These ethics, Taylor argues, which emerged within the Western and Westernized bourgeoisie in 18th- and 19th-century Romanticism, became massified in the second half of the 20th century through the dynamics of consumerism and its globalization. As Gauthier states, this ‘expressive’ dimension implies that for ‘each individual, having an irreducible singularity,’ it has become a ‘social imperative to discover and express it as an identity principle.’ Researchers such as Charles Lindholm (2002, 2013), François Gauthier (2009, 2012, 2020), Deirdre Meintel (2020) and Daniela Moisa (2011) have noted how these ethics and the focus on the quest and expression of authenticity have penetrated and even shaped recent changes within religion worldwide. These shifts promote the internalization of human experience, the spiritualization of nature, the enhancement of an immediate connection with the sacred, and a focus on the pursuit of personal and shared experience that transfers regimes of authority away from the legitimation provided by tradition or institutions such as churches (Gauthier 2012, p. 103, cited from Taylor 2003, pp. 79–80). Yet Gauthier insists on how this ‘expressive identity’ requires ‘validation, legitimization and therefore recognition by others or by a social authority’ (2012, p. 104), and therefore does not amount to a form of atomized individualism. Rather, such identities need to be constantly recognized in order to be substantiated, and thereby require forms of ‘communitization’ (Gauthier 2014), whether in the actual or virtual realm. Gauthier’s account captures the romantic quest for authenticity that occurs within neo-Mayan and neo-shamanic networks more generally, in which the West is devalued on the one hand, while exoticism and extra-European ‘archaism’ are valued on the other (Gauthier 2009). In a forthcoming contribution focusing on authenticity, Gauthier and Meintel further examine the interactions concerning the ‘quest for an authentic soul’ that brings to the fore issues regarding ‘truth, legitimacy, and knowledge.’ These have become central themes in ‘periods of conflict and profound change’ (Gauthier and Meintel, forthcoming). Transnationalization and globalization are processes which, as we have seen, do play an important role in shaping how the dynamics of authenticity unravel within neo-Mayan circles.
Authenticity is at the centre of neo-Mayan discourses and their relation to issues of power and authority. While some neo-Mayan leaders are criticized by their peers for their tendency to Westernize and export their practices, others are valued as legitimate authorities precisely because they circulate and gain recognition within Western and transnational New Age networks. As such, transnationality may be either positive or negative depending on the context and the personalities involved. Transnationality generates internal competition between the acceptance and dissemination of Westernized practices and their rejection on the grounds of their inauthenticity. The issue of syncretism is similarly at the center of rival claims, and it carries negative connotations. As Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (1994, p. 7) argue, authenticity always depends on discursive strategies:

What makes them ‘authentic’ and valuable is a separate issue, a discursive matter involving power, rhetoric and persuasion. Thus, both putatively pure and putatively syncretic traditions can be ‘authentic’ if people claim that these traditions are unique, and uniquely their (historical) possession.

The quest for authenticity in the creation of these new hybrid identities thus raises the sensitive issue of cultural appropriation. Groups that seek New Age indigenousness are often considered ‘knowledge robbers’ and criticized for their production of images of Indigenous peoples, idealizing their ‘pre-industrial’ lifestyles and casting them as nostalgic artefacts of a ‘Golden Age’ (Boissière and Farahmand 2017). A transnational approach makes it possible to go beyond these perspectives and emphasize the diversity and multilateral dimensions and dynamics of cultural appropriations, for example from the peripheries to the centers (the neo-colonial missionary societies), and from the centers to the peripheries, which result in complex and shared processes of identity foundation and production (Argyriadis and De la Torre 2012, p. 13). Neo-Mayas leave Latin America and circulate towards Japan, Western Europe, South America and North America. By contrast, Westerners travel to Central America in search of exoticism and ancestality (De La Torre 2011). As a result of these movements, all parties are affected and changed, and it is useless to try to oppose authentic indigenousness to inauthentic appropriations.

It is important to stress how this transnational multi-directionality does not prevent the development of class hierarchies that have incidences on the access and recognition of these transnational identities. Not all actors from all social classes have access to (or simply want to access) neo-Mayanity. As we have seen, neo-Mayanit y tends to develop within the mostly urbanized and educated middle classes. In addition, neo-Mayan claims can become a source of local conflicts, competitions and divisions. However, the issue of cultural appropriation still needs to be addressed, and I refer to the approach developed by Janice Hladki (1994). She suggests that we understand cultural appropriation as a complex phenomenon that goes beyond simple power relations involving resistance, subversion and opposition. For Hladki, the multilateral constitution of such hybrid identities challenges any attempt at containing them within dichotomous oppositions such as oppressor and oppressed. As neo-ethnic spiritualities continue to grow and transnationalize, issues of cultural appropriation become increasingly problematic and attempts at opposing normative classifications are thwarted by the increasing blurring of the frontiers between the centre and periphery dynamics among generalized multilateral relations. I therefore agree with Christina Welch’s (2002) critique of the categorization of ‘bad New Agers’ and ‘Indigenous victims,’ based on her research on New Age appropriations of North American sweat lodges.
Rites and initiations: becoming neo-Mayan

Neo-Mayan rituals are characterized by the use of specific accessories and ritual clothing, sets of objects, pre-Hispanic social hierarchies and sounds. On May 1, 2014, I took part in the annual pilgrimage at the archaeological site of Uxmal, Yucatán, an ancient Mayan city. The participants started to march in a single file, arranged according to hierarchical positions, with the Elders taking the lead. The procession made its way to an ancient ceremonial pyramid, the highest in the region at 32 meters. Once the procession arrived at the temple, the followers shouted *Hu Hunab Kú*, which can be translated as ‘primordial energy’ among the New Age Mayanity (see Argüelles 1987), several times before performing a ritual inspired by pre–Hispanic ceremonials. In this reconstitution, the followers collectively prayed to the four directions and four elements, invoking specific deities and brandishing their power sticks to the sky. The ritual ended with collective songs devoted to the earth, the sun, light and universal love. By enacting this spatially, linguistically and materially constructed neo-indigenous performance, the group were claiming to be ‘true Mayas.’

The Maya Solar Tradition is an emblematic neo-Mayan collective. This movement was founded in Mérida in the late 1980s by Mother Nah Kin (*Madre Nah Kin*), a Mexican mestiza woman. Nah Kin was trained in a variety of spiritual paths throughout the world, including Buddhist and Hindu-inspired teachings, South American shamanism, Western esotericism, reiki, lithotherapy, rebirthing and Osho dynamic meditation, before creating her own neo-Mayan movement. The Maya Solar Tradition seeks to return to a Maya Golden Age by initiating disciples to the ‘highest of Maya cosmologies’ (Kin 2012 [1997], p. 2). The movement is built on dynamic processes of transnationalization. Rituals and mythologies have roots in a revised version of the local Yucatec Maya tradition, which is inflected with global images, symbols and meanings. The leader as well as its members enjoy significant transnational geographical mobility, and branches have been created in Latin America, Europe and as far as Japan.

At the end of the 1990s, Mother Nah Kin started to circle the world in order to perform her rituals oriented towards the sacred date of 2012. An increasing number of Westerners were drawn to her message and journeyed in turn to Yucatán to in situ performances. Mexican mestizos, Western New Agers and spiritual holistic therapists, mostly women between 40 and 60 years old working in urban areas, participated in the movement’s activities in Yucatán, taking these teachings and experiences back to their own local contexts. At the end of the 1980s, Mother Nah Kin went to Switzerland to give lectures on the end of the Mayan calendar, thereby drawing on a broad segment of the Western esoteric repertoire (Mayer 2011). On December 21 of that year, she organized a ‘planetary spiritual summit’ in Uxmal, the ancient Mayan city, which marked the end of the ‘Long Count’ of the Mayan calendar. In a spirit of unity, spiritual leaders of the New Age from around the world took part in the event, offering their teachings, building relationships and promoting future transnational exchanges.

As part of its activities, the Maya Solar Tradition offers three modules of training to become a fully qualified ‘Maya.’ After completing the modules, the participants receive a diploma, a ‘power stick’ (a ritual object said to be inspired by pre–Hispanic indigenous tradition), and a set of ritual accessories. They are also given a Mayan-inspired name. The initiation modules feature an eclectic range of references which are all related to Mayanity according to the logic of correspondence. For example, during one initiatory module, one of the leaders exclaimed: ‘The human body has seven chakras that you all know. The Mayas knew these chakras and worked with them as centers of power.’ Following one participant’s
question on the relationship between Mayanity and ‘karma,’ the same instructor replied: ‘The chakra of the Hara is the one that keeps the soul. The best process of liberation is service, the dharma that comes from the word “to give.”’ By such practices, Mayan references were integrated into New Age imaginaries, related to neo-Oriental interpretations and vice versa, as such tropes were systematically referred back to a ‘Mayan’ origin. The Maya Solar Tradition is one example among others which shows how the 2012 Phenomenon became a crucible in which Mayanity and New Age were reconfigured and remixed, created new identities, religiosities and authenticity claims.

Conclusion

The 21st century has been characterized by extensive social, cultural and religious transformations. The neo-Mayan phenomenon shows how new forms of ‘ethnic spiritualities’ are being created which challenge notions of ‘purity’ and show how quests for authenticity do not produce idiosyncratic, individual expressions as much as variations on a theme provided by overarching processes of transnational dissemination of the tropes of self-realization, experience and the ethics of authenticity and expressivity. More precisely, the research that founds this chapter identified a shift in the social representations of the ‘Maya.’ Starting roughly in the 1980s in certain social milieu, a movement emerged by which the Maya has become a multifarious signifier which has been appropriated and reinterpreted through processes of de-ethnicization, universalization and reconfiguration as a means of connection with a ‘primordial inner energy.’ This universalization has enabled the Mayan identity to be combined with a wide range of symbolic representations which have constructed it as a locus for religious investments.

A central argument of this chapter is that Mayan references have been transformed by the encounter with the globalized field of the New Age, reinterpreting ethnic and territorial borders and producing new hybrid symbolic systems. Multidirectional transnational processes have produced contests about authenticity, identity and ethnicity as well as inscribed local hierarchies within the nexus of global New Age networks. A paradoxical situation emerges by which local traditions are reasserted while they are reformed as global friendly. The result is the emergence of a system of complementary yet competing and in some instances opposing ‘niches’ which negotiate their singularity and difference. For neo-Mayas, insertion into a local context, with its codes and references, acts to provide authenticity and purity. At the same time, insertion within transnational networks provide another set of legitimacy through the parameters of New Age.

Mayas at heart are mainly well-educated, female, urbanized, Mexican mestizos and Western or Westernized seekers of upper middle-class backgrounds. The experiential, pragmatic and therapeutic dimensions of these religiosities emerge as central motivational factors. Mayan identity is de-territorialized in favor of a subjective and inner relation to Mayanity. The self-identification is perceived as an important resource for identity and ethics in daily life, such as the daily use of the Mayan calendar, prayers, rituals around the altar or Mayan transcendental meditation as a tool for personal development and self-development through the cultivation of self-acceptance, self-awareness and empathy towards the self. The same can be said about the symbolism of the four elements (water, air, earth and fire) and purification rituals. Other practices include weekly rituals inviting ‘abundance’ and offerings to Mother Earth in the form of cereals, lentils, beans, sunflowers seeds, fruit seeds, corn, sesame seeds and money.
The anticipation that the world would end in 2012 generated a number of important transnational events and alternative neo-Indian pilgrimages. This had repercussions for the tourist industry across central America. For example, between 15,000 and 20,000 visitors attended the archaeological site of Chichen Itzá on December 21, 2012. The fact that the end of the world did not occur on that date did not dampen enthusiasm for neo-Mayan religiosities. Interpreting the date to mean the beginning of a more spiritual and self-conscious era, there has been a significant increase in shamanic imitations in urban public places and ancient sacred sites across Yucatán, Mexico and many regions of Latin America. Indeed, as Jean-François Mayer noted, the majority of New Age milieus ‘did not expect a visible and externally verifiable event for 21 December 2012’ (Mayer 2014, p. 41). For the seekers, 2012 was an opportunity ‘to evolve on the energetic dimension’ rather than ‘the material or terrestrial level.’ It was above all a moment of ‘spiritual transition.’ From an anthropological point of view, 2012 contributed to accelerate the creation of hybrid neo-ethnic identities, halfway between reinvented indigeneities and a globalized form of New Age.

Concretely, the anticipation was a factor that spurred the transnational spread of neo-Mayan beliefs, as conferences, workshops and rituals flourished. Thanks to the 2012 prophecy, neo-Mayan spiritual leaders travelled extensively, creating and solidifying an ever-extending transnational network (Farahmand and Rouiller 2016, p. 66). The result has been both a diversification and standardization of the mythologies, ritual clothing, ritual objects and healing practices that make up the neo-Mayan symbolic system. For the leaders as well the participants, the more they travel and the more they experience, the more they gain a symbolic legitimacy on the global stage of New Age and deepen their connection to their Mayan identity and cosmovision. As we have seen, this transnationalization is stimulated by a paradoxical desire to return to Indigenousness while inscribing it within the nexus of global flows. In response to this two-fold dynamic, one might think that it opens accesses neo-Indigenous identities by ‘emancipating’ them from the particularism of their cultural roots (for this democratized access see Rossi 1997, pp. 20–21). However, data show that ethnic and national references remain central in neo-Mayan quests for authenticity, with references to pre-Hispanic objects and instruments, mythological figures and places. In the context of transnational, virtual and effective social connections, it is possible ‘to feel Mayan,’ to think and act Mayan without ethno-territorial ties to such an identity. What imports is a mixture of personal choice and personal calling in this New Age type of born-again religiosity.

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