

Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed a significant increase in anthropological and archaeological research concerned with the nature of being and reality in non-Western societies. By critically reviewing the concepts and categories of Western modernity, scholars realized that they had inadequately referred to non-Western ontological systems. This critique has drawn attention to the ways people understand the worlds they live in, and one of the responses to the crisis of postmodern anthropology in the 1980s resulted in the emergence of the so-called “ontological turn”, a methodological project that focuses on how different societies define the entities that inhabit their worlds and the relationships between them.

Rather than dealing with people as bounded and fixed entities, the focus has shifted to analyzing the relationships that link them. By moving the attention from humans to material objects, from material objects to non-human entities, and from bounded and fixed entities to continuously changing entities sustained by complex interactive relationships, archaeologists attempted not to impose our modern ideas on prehistoric and other peoples. A theoretical response to the study of interactions between human and non-human environments goes by many names (animism, perspectivism, relationalism, nondualism, etc.), fueled, on one hand, by anthropological thinkers such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Philippe Descola, Tim Ingold, Bruno Latour and, on the other, by process philosophers such as Alfred North Whitehead and Gilles Deleuze (to name just a few). Different ways of perceiving environmental settings must be described, studied, and discussed to gain a more differentiated picture of the past (and the present!).

The growing interest in such phenomena lead us to organize a conference entitled *The Essence of Life and Ontology in the Maya World* which, along with a series of workshops *Introducing Ontological Turn to Maya Anthropology and Archaeological Theory*¹, attracted speakers and audience from over 40 universities around the world. This volume is a product of this conference and aims to present the results of the discussion to a wider public.

The discussion starts with the contribution of Ernst Halbmayer, known from cross-cultural analyses reaching from Amazonia through Isthmo-Columbian region to Mesoamerica. His article constitutes an excellent point of departure. His precise language and great knowledge of current debates in Latin American anthropology introduce the reader to certain significant concepts in order to propose a framework that observes both similarities and differences of Amerindian ontologies.

¹ The 3rd Warsaw Maya Meeting conference was held online in May 2021. The main organizers were Michał Gilewski and Stanisław Iwaniszewski with the support of a group of Warsaw-based Mayanists: Agnieszka Hamann, Przemysław Trzeźniowski and Gabriela Dziki.

The above mentioned concept of perspectivism, so far hotly debated in Amazonian and Andean studies, relates to attempts to describe how through the act of “seeing”, indigenous peoples may actually “see” various worlds. Allen J. Christenson, an expert on the Highland Maya culture and translator of *Popol Vuh*, explores the Highland Maya concepts of “ancestral vision” and “bundles”, which could be related to this discussion.

Daniel Grecco Pacheco contributes a study of the Maya concept of *pix*, or wrapping. Following recent debates in Maya anthropology, Daniel’s paper investigates how textile bundles created, structured and separated various worlds by the very act of wrapping. As this implies that the concept of wrapping and containment was a fundamental philosophical point of reference in the Maya worldview, Daniel re-reads and re-interprets the role of textiles as archaeological artifacts.

Christenson’s discussion of how the Maya perceive seemingly ordinary and familiar things is further explored in Alice Balsanelli’s study of the Lacandon hunt. Her investigation represents a cautious and empirically grounded import of ontological logics from the Amazon to Mesoamerica (which is postulated by Halbmayr in his paper). She argues that the modern Lacandon do not see the nature as a hostile environment, but as a living world of animated beings involved in a network of social relationships, which results in an extension of the Lacandon notion of personhood to animals.

The various conceptualizations of nature are examined in the study by Harri Kettunen. His cross-cultural linguistic investigation of the words for “nature” suggests that, as in many languages of the world, Mayan languages saw nature as a personified entity, though the popular concept of “Mother Nature”, now in use among indigenous Maya communities, appears to be a modern borrowing from the outside.

The notion of the Maya personhood is taken up in a carefully designed study by Susan D. Gillespie, who focuses on its processual and relational character. She continues important for Maya studies debates about *jaloj-k'exoj* ‘change and continuity of life’ and “living with the ancestors” by re-examining the concept of *k'ex* “substitution, replacement”, presenting a new and innovative vision of what personhood was and is to the Maya. In her review of anthropological and archeological evidence, a person is something that continues across generations and is extended both in time and space.

The processual and relational character of Maya personhood is also the subject of archaeological research presented by a group of Mexican archaeologists: Josuhé Lozada, Silvina Vigliani, Guillermo Acosta, Patricia Pérez, Jorge Ezra Cruz, Diana B. Chaparro, and Víctor Hugo García. Their paper showcases how interdisciplinary interpretation of ancient Maya personhood may be applied to iconography and archaeological material on the example of their study of Postclassic rock art on cliffs of Mensabak Lake, Chiapas.

Further, Stanisław Iwaniszewski uses ontological approach to analyze the set of 13 animal figures from pages 23-24 of Paris Codex, frequently compared to

12 European zodiac signs. He suggests that instead of representing Western-style constellations associated with the Sun's apparent path in the sky, they are rooted in ontological systems of premodern societies, who perceived celestial bodies as entities endowed with properties analogous to living beings, thus, he seeks an interpretation of the figures based on ethnohistorical sources.

In the final paper of this volume, Nikolai Grube offers an overview of animated logograms and syllabograms in Maya hieroglyphic writing. He meticulously analyses how throughout its history Maya writing exhibited a strong tendency to give the signs characteristics of living beings. In his view, both writing and language were considered animated beings, proving that Maya hieroglyphic texts also offer an opportunity to evaluate emic perceptions of human engagement with the world.

The diversity of approaches collected in the present issue of *Estudios Latinoamericanos* reflects the search for an appropriate research framework for analyzing how (human and non-human) entities understand and create their worlds, which is entangled with how they get to know that world.

Michał Gilewski
Stanisław Iwaniszewski
Agnieszka Hamann