

SAINT BARTHOLOMEW, THE RAY OF  
VENUSTIANO CARRANZA. RELIGIOUS  
BELIEFS AND AGRICULTURAL RITUAL  
BETWEEN THE TOJOLABALES OF  
BUENAVISTA *BAWITZ*, CHIAPAS

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— Abstract—

The Tojolabales of Buenavista Bawitz, in the state of Chiapas, make throughout the year a circuit of pilgrimages to different sacred points of the entity which has as fundamental purpose to impetrate the rains to the lightning-saints. From the study of the ritual and the worldview we will examine the image of Saint Bartholomew, patron of Venustiano Carranza which is visited by Tojolabales in April of every year. We will see how its climate management capacity derive of a series of conceptions: its faculty of transmuting in lightning its association with the hills and the corn.

**Keywords**

*Ritual; worldview; ray; hills; corn.*

In the following lines, the divine figure of San Bartholomew, the tutelary saint of Venustiano Carranza (Chiapas), is examined schematically, from the study of the ritual life of the Tojolabales of Buenavista *Bawitz*. The inhabitants of this community, located in the border town of Las Margaritas, attend every year to the city of Venustiano Carranza in April, to deposit offerings and prey to this superhuman entity as part of a wider circuit of pilgrimages to various sacred sites in the state of Chiapas; and whose main purpose is to impetrate the rains and agricultural fertility to the deities responsible for climate management. Emphasis is placed, above all, on its aquatic attributes: its link with hills, lightning, rain and corn within the framework of the Mesoamerican worldview.

The central content of the article is structured in seven sections. In the first, the general characteristics of the pilgrimages practiced by diverse populations of the border municipalities of Chiapas are described roughly, and then the role of the sanctuary of San Bartholomew is described in the following section. Subsequently, the cycle of pilgrimages is examined as practiced by our studied community and then some of the most important aspects of the peregrination that has Venustiano Carranza as destiny are pointed out, above all, emphasis is placed on the importance that it fulfills. The last sections describe the rites that take place in honor of Saint Bartholomew and the complex of beliefs associated with his divine figure. Finally, through an exercise in comparative ethnography, we review a series of beliefs shared by several Mayan peoples of Chiapas according to which, as with the Tojolabales of *Bawitz*, the patron saints are considered lightning.

#### METHODOLOGY

This research is of a qualitative nature (Hernández Sampieri, Fernández-Collado and Baptista Lucía, 2014) and the ethnographic method (Guber, 2001) and the comparative method (Tonon, 2011) were employed successively as methodological strategies. In the ethnographic field, data collection was done using the techniques of Participant Observation and the Ethnographic Interview (Guber, 2011). It was observed and participated in the ritual carried out by the Tojolabales of *Bawitz* in honor of Saint Bartholomew, in the years 2015 and 2016. The interviews, about a dozen, were carried out, mostly, during the stay of the rituals in that city and focused on investigating especially the religious ideas around St. Bartholomew and to a lesser extent on aspects related to the religious organization of the pilgrimages and in the agricultural and seasonal cycles of the *Bawitz* region. From the friendship that I have established with some people dedicated to pilgrimage, I have visited *Bawitz* on several occasions, since March 2016, where I have also carried out interviews related to the same thematic lines. The data obtained from these activities

have been recorded in field notes that I have been able to collect on site and in field journals that I regularly wrote at the end of the field day. It was essential to use electronic devices to record the interviews; also several dozens of photos have been captured, which, together with the rest of the data, have formed the basis of our ethnographic analysis. To contextualize our study it was important to carry out a thorough review of the historical and anthropological literature on the peregrination a of the border area of Chiapas. This methodological exercise was fundamental for the drafting of our sections one and two.

To include a second level of analysis in the study, I resorted to the comparative method. Simultaneous to the process of analyzing my ethnographic data, in which I was understanding the series of beliefs and religious practices linked to Saint Bartholomew, I began the search and review of ethnographic literature on religious life in the Mayan area of Chiapas. This methodological approach included the analysis of about 50 texts between books, chapters and specialized articles. I searched among this considerable corpus for information about practices and beliefs analogous to those registered in my field work, or rather, I considered a single variable: the Mayan peoples of Chiapas in which the patron saints are conceived, with the power of Lightning. In this way I founded my comparative activity privileging similarities over differences. The texts that complied with the variable were studied jointly and in relation to the results of my ethnographic research. Agreeing with what Alejos García (2018) said about the ambivalence and contradictions between "the model and praxis", I must point out that I am aware of the

Concrete existence of a diversity of ritual meanings among participants (...) even divergent and conflictive (...) but I also recognize a plane of abstraction in the culture itself where fundamental ideas of culture are condensed (...)

In this sense, it is important to clarify that this study proposal is located in a certain plane of abstraction of culture, recognizing the enormous changes, historical and contemporary, as well as the level differences between the mythological stories, the ritual canon and the "reality" concrete "where the phenomena may appear far from the proposed model and even contradict it, as could be the case of the" faithful or the "community"; the mythological narrative may present contradictory versions, or have disappeared, or not be linked by the villagers to festive activities, or new rituals may coexist, or internal conflicts may arise related to the rejection of "the traditions", etcetera. In my opinion, these phenomena do not necessarily contradict the abstract model, but rather they are located on a different plane of cultural life, their distance or proximity being points of reference with respect to the model itself. (p.141)

Finally, I deem it convenient, without pretending to delve into the extensive and inexhaustible epistemological debates referring to the link between theory and method<sup>1</sup>, to emphasize in this section that the research, both in its ethnographic dimension and in its comparative level, had as theoretical referent the concepts of worldview and ritual proposed by Broda (1991, 2001) and López Austin (1996, 1998) in their studies on religion in Mesoamerican societies. The first author defines the worldview as: "the structured vision in which the members of a community coherently combine their notions about the environment in which they live, and about the cosmos in which they situated the life of man" (Broda, 1991: 462). Its study "aims to explore the multiple dimensions of the cultural perception of nature" (Broda, 2001: 16). The worldview, López Austin (1996) tells us is a historical fact, it is a social creation product of the daily relations of man with nature: "as a historical fact it is a human product that must be studied in its temporal evolution and in the context of the societies that produce it and act based on it" (472).

We understand, meanwhile, by religious rites "all practice strongly directed that goes to the supernatural" (Lopez Austin, 1998: 6). The rite implies an act of communication. The *ritualists*, through verbal and non-verbal expressions, intend to enter into a dialogue with the deities. The rites have precise purposes: they seek to affect the will of the gods (López Austin, 1998). In as much the ritual is a social fact, is action, its execution reflects the conceptions of the world of its practitioners. The rite "expresses in an empirically observable way the worldview". According to Broda (2001), the ritual establishes the link between the abstract conceptions provided by the worldview and concrete men. It implies an active participation and affects the reproduction of society.

#### THE PILGRIMAGES OF THE BORDER AREA OF CHIAPAS

Originated in the first decades of the last century, the *k'u'anel*, as the pilgrimage is called in the Tojolabal language, continues to be a central activity in the religious life of several peasant communities in the border municipalities of Chiapas. A brief compendium of the anthropological and historical works that have studied from different perspectives this religious manifestation should include Ruz (1990 [1982]), Adams (2005 [1988]), Gómez Hernández and Pinto López (1998), Gómez Hernández (2000, 2012), Guzmán Coronado (2001), Moreno Muñoz (2001), Chavarochette (2004), Cuadriello Olivos (2008) and more recently Straffi (2015) and Nájera Castellanos (2016).

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1 See, for example, the discussion generated on this topic in Vasquez (s.f.).

On the origin of this practice there are different opinions among researchers. Mario Humberto Ruz (1990) points out in his classic study on the Tojolabales; that the pilgrimage in honor of Saint Bartholomew of Carranza arose in the 1930s and after that of Saint Thomas of Oxchuc, which would have been established in 1919 after a drought that struck the border region. The one of Saint Bartholomew would have arisen after the devotees put in doubt the effectiveness of Saint Thomas in its functions of enabler of the rains<sup>2</sup>.

On the other hand, it seems that the pilgrimage to Saint Mateo Ixtatán, in the Guatemalan department of Huehuetenango, is even older than the previous two. According to Straffi (2015) who carried out ethnographic fieldwork with the pilgrims of Tseltal descent from La Trinitaria, Don Juan, one of his informants, told him that in the "Casa de Junta" a notebook with records was kept since 1910 on the pilgrimage to Saint Mateo. At present, this book is lost. Don Teófilo, an 86-year-old man -Straffi carried out most of his research between 2009 and 2011- told the anthropologist that his grandfather, who died aged 110 when Don Teófilo was still young, told him that he had not witnessed the origin either of this pilgrimage. These ethnographic data have led Straffi (2015) to consider that the pilgrimage to Ixtatán could begin around 1860 although there is no historical evidence to support it.

The pilgrimages, which start mostly from agrarian communities in the municipalities of Las Margaritas, Comitán, La Trinitaria and La Independencia, are destined for sanctuaries of saints, virgins and Christ that are considered rain givers, throughout a complex ritual geography that includes peregrinations sites in Chiapas and even the neighboring country of Guatemala. In this sense, the dates in which ceremonies take place are commonly correlated with seasonal and corn cycles.

Today several groups from these municipalities, on dates and with different pilgrimage destinations, separately carry out pilgrimages, but it did not use to be like that before. For the pioneering works of Adams (2005) and Ruz (1990) we know that until the end of 1970, the participating communities were united in a single corporation under the direction of the Tseltal *rezadores* of La Trinitaria. The conflicts that arose during those years culminated in the disintegration of the large delegation, leading to the formation of several minor contingents, a process that continues to this day, apart from the fact that several communities have abandoned this ritual custom in recent decades. The major split occurred when several Tojolabal communities, bordering the city of Comitán, formed another group, dispensing with the religious specialists of La Trinitaria since then (Straffi, 2015).

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2 In this regard there is a myth that I recorded for the first time in April 2015, which, as we will see later, involves both saints.

To this group that separated from the "original" contingent, Straffi (2015) calls it "Villahermosa Yalumá Romerías Organizers" because it is in this latter community where the main managers currently reside. According to the version of one of its members, its founder, don Hermenegildo, was originally from the community of Los Riegos, in Comitán and it was because of a fight with the *rezador* of La Trinitaria during a pilgrimage to Venustiano Carranza that he decided to leave the group and create another (Straffi, 2015). Unfortunately, the year in which such an event occurred is not mentioned (Image 1).

It is precisely these two religious corporations: on the one hand that of the "Organizadores de romerías de La Trinitaria" and on the other, that of the "Organizadores de romerías de Villahermosa Yalumá", the most important in terms of the number of communities that make them up<sup>3</sup>. In addition they are those that have been reported during the last years in the studies on the pilgrimages; however, in addition to these groups, there are others from the municipalities of Las Margaritas and La Trinitaria, which on their own carry out the pilgrimage circuit to request rains and that, to wit, have not yet been reported in the ethnographic literature.

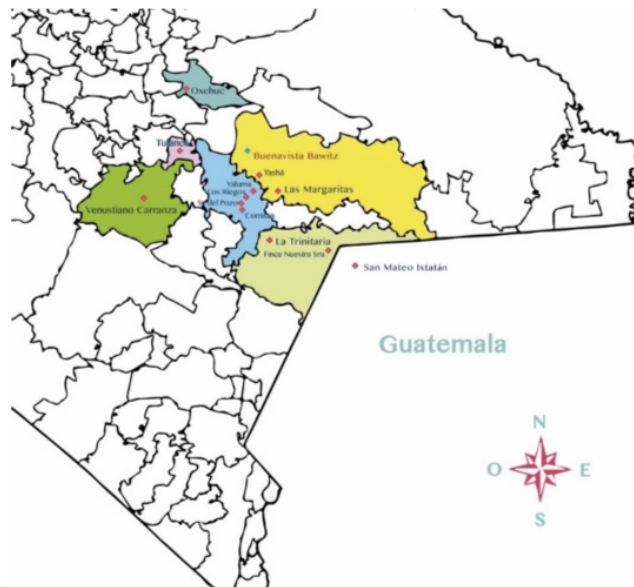


Image 1. Towns mentioned throughout the article. Source: Personal archive

3 We chose in this study to use these terms with which Straffi (2015) designates the two troupes. From now on we will refer to them preferably with the expressions: those of "La Trinitaria" and those of "Yalumá".

It is precisely one of these contingents that we will discuss here. In recent years I have followed the groups of pilgrimages who arrive in the city of Venustiano Carranza between the months of March and May, specifically I have documented the presence of devotees from Buenavista *Bawitz*. Today, it is difficult to determine how many communities in the border region continue to practice pilgrimages and how many groups exist

#### PILGRIMAGES WHO GO TO VENUSTIANO CARRANZA

Venustiano Carranza is one of the centers of peregrination that is part of the cycle of pilgrimages of several peasant communities, even though in the last decades the number of individuals who attend them has come down<sup>4</sup>. Established in 1930 in honor of Saint Bartholomew, this pilgrimage seems to be the third in antiquity practiced by inhabitants of the border region, only after that of Saint Matthew in Ixtatán and Saint Thomas in Oxchuc (Ruz, 1990).

When Walter Adams (2005) carried out his field work in 1977, before the disintegration of the pilgrims, he recorded that the numerous troupe carried out:

(...) five pilgrimages a year (...) The first is to Saint Mateo Ixtatán, Guatemala, corresponds to the second Friday of Lent. The second to Our Lady [farm located a few kilometers from the municipal seat of La Trinitaria] (...), is held on March 22. On April 11 pilgrims visit St. Thomas in Oxchuc; and on April 26 they venerated Saint Bartholomew and other saints in Venustiano Carranza. The last pilgrimage is towards Las Margaritas, on July 11 (94).

Now, this researcher mentioned in 1988 - year of the publication of his article in English, that is, 11 years after his field research- that the pilgrimage to Venustiano Carranza had been carried out for the last time in 1977. According to this author, the reason for the suspension of the pilgrimage was due to the fact that the inhabitants of the latter city prevented the assistants from arriving with flowers, rather the locals wanted to monopolize their sale. In this way the Tseltal manager of La Trinitaria excluded this point of pilgrimage from the annual ritual cycle (Adams, 2005).

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4 The elderly inhabitants of Carranza account for this, according to estimates made by several of them, during the seventies and eighties came to Carranza between 500 and 700 pilgrims. The current estimates I have made for the years 2015 and 2016 indicate very low figures: between 120 and 140 pilgrims and approximately 23 to 25 communities continue to send their delegates annually.



Whether this version is truth or not, the important thing to note is that Walter Adams (2005) certainly obtained this information from La Trinitaria specialists with whom he developed his ethnographic research, however I consider that the 1977 date is about the end or about the last years of the pilgrimage to Carranza from the "Organizadores de romerías de La Trinitaria", not from the rest of the communities.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, what is clear is that with the division of the pilgrims into two blocks the pilgrimage destinations were modified, thus, those of "La Trinitaria" stopped attending Venustiano Carranza, while those of "Yalumá" continue to perform the pilgrimage to this day. This fact has not gone unnoticed among the residents of Carranza who still remember that once "this pilgrimage had many participants while 'they're only a few now" (Straffi, 2015: 427).

Nothing strange is that the communities that continue to promote the pilgrimage to Venustiano Carranza are, above all: Yalumá, Yaxhá, Los Riegos and Señor del Pozo within walking distance of the city of Comitán. Mario Humberto Ruz (1990) indicates that in the 30's when this city was integrated into the annual cycle of pilgrimages "were the colonies bordering the municipality of Comitán, the closest to the town of Carranza, who were responsible for propagating the virtues of Saint Bartholomew" (228). In this sense also Straffi (2015) reports the importance that this cult has for the devotees that make up the group of "Yalumá" and supports what was said by Ruz (1990).

Another aspect of the pilgrimage dedicated to Saint Bartholomew that has been documented by several researchers (Ruz, 1990 [1982], Adams, 2005 [1988], Díaz de Salas, 1995, Gómez Hernández, 2012, Moreno Muñoz, 2001, López, 2013 Straffi, 2015, Nájera Castellanos, 2016, among others) are the rites that take place on the sacred hill, on whose slopes is the city of Venustiano Carranza, commonly known by the pilgrims of "Yalumá" with the name of "El Volcán". At present these ceremonies enjoy a central importance for this last contingent and are carried out during the first days of May and after the Catholic feast of the Holy Cross, festivity with which these rites are linked.

On the other hand, also a small contingent of the community of San Diego, belonging to the municipality of La Trinitaria, has been going for

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5 Do not forget that in the version that Straffi (2015) compiled with those of "Yalumá" about the division of the pilgrims, it is mentioned that the conflict between the rezador of the Trinitaria and the old man of Los Riegos took place during a pilgrimage to Carranza but the case of the supposed obligatory sale of flowers is not mentioned at all. The current versions that this anthropologist compiled with those of "La Trinitaria" regarding the abandonment of the pilgrimage to Carranza explain it especially in terms of lack of economic resources to cover the expenses of this pilgrimage.

about 15 years to make offerings to St. Bartholomew in his church and to celebrate rites on the sacred hill. The ladino peasants of this town, dedicated mainly to the cultivation of seasonal corn, arrive at Venustiano Carranza during the last week of April, days before the feast of the Holy Cross.

This pilgrimage; however, it includes few individuals and, contrary to the other contingents that arrive in the city, it is not of a community nature. That's right, it is organized in a particular way by some men without the intervention of the political and religious instances of the community. Years ago the number of individuals who participated was on average 20, but in 2016 it decreased to 11 people: five women and six men. The third and last group that makes a pilgrimage to Venustiano Carranza, although the first to make its arrival, is that of Buenavista *Bawitz*. It is about this community that we will speak in the following sections.

#### PILGRIMAGES CYCLE OF BUENAVISTA BAWITZ

The *Bawitz* calendar includes six annual pilgrimages. The order of visits is given in the following way: 1) *k'u'anel* to the Eternal Father, La Trinitaria (February); 2) *k'u'anel* to Saint Thomas, Oxchuc (March); 3) *k'u'anel* to San Bartolomé, Venustiano Carranza (April); 4) *k'u'anel* to the "Señor del Trapichito", Tulancá municipality of Amatenango del Valle (end of April or beginning of May); 5) *och nichim*<sup>6</sup> to the Eternal Father, La Trinitaria (May or June) and 6) *och nichim* to Saint Margarita, Las Margaritas (July 11) (Image 2).

This activity, at least as practiced in *Bawitz*, involves practically all the members of the community –although is only a small contingent of pilgrims- and legitimizes their belonging to it. In fact, each head of the family has to cooperate 50 Mexican pesos for each of the six pilgrimages. There is, however, an exception with six families "who are not Catholic" and

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6 It seems to be that at least in the case addressed here there is a differentiation of the terms *k'u'anel* and *och nichim*, both in the Tojolabal language. The ritual format of the *k'u'anel* is more linked to the agricultural ceremonial. For example we could say that throughout the year there are two pilgrimages to the shrine of the Eternal Father, in the Trinitarian, however the February is considered by the Tojolabales as *k'u'anel* and according to their exegesis is closely linked with the sowing of the corn, while the one that takes place during the movable festival of the Holy Trinity, between May and June, is considered *och nichim* (entrance of flowers) and it is done because it is the official date in the catholic santoral of its commemoration, the ritual format in both cases is different. No doubt deeper studies will help us understand the local classifications of these activities. The analytical concepts of pilgrimage and peregrination have been used indiscriminately by the majority of researchers who have devoted themselves to the study of the subject that concerns us here. Both concepts have been, in a broader sense, discussed by various social science researchers who have studied this religious phenomenon. As the subject is not exhausted and as here we are interested above all in the analysis of the rite in the church and the worldview, we have considered not going into the matter. Here we use both terms pilgrimage and peregrination indiscriminately, because both are, in Spanish, of common use among *ritualists*.

to whom a fee of 100 pesos has been established for each pilgrimage, twice as much as the rest of the families, this "for not getting involved in any of the activities". The money collected, prior to each departure, is deposited in the hands of the ritual specialists who are the voice of the community during prayers for rainy requests and is basically used for the purchase of community offerings.

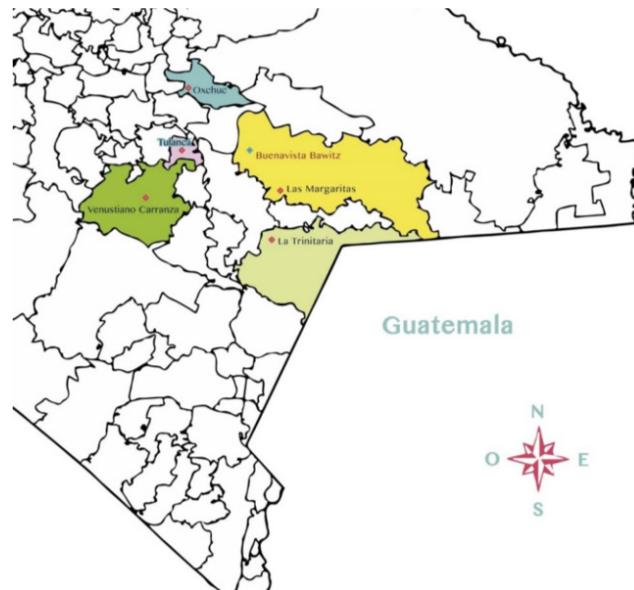


Image 2. Pilgrimage circuit of Buenavista Bawitz. Source: Personal archive

To make the circuit of visits there are six permanent groups that rotate annually the pilgrimage points. Each procession is made up of 25 individuals, but before carrying out each pilgrimage, people from the community who want to participate are invited whether for a debt and for any particular request they wish to make to the sacred entity visited.

Finally, it should be noted that the cycle of pilgrimages is organized by "the group of catechists", representatives of the official Catholic institution in the community. The catechists are at the same time responsible for leading each group. For example, the 2016 *rezador* who led the pilgrimage to Venustiano Carranza, Don Antonio, 55 years old, is at the same time a catechist, although this does not exclude that he shares common elements of the conception of the world with the rest of the Tojolabals.

#### PEREGRINATION FROM BUENAVISTA BAWITZ TO VENUSTIANO CARRANZA

As it was already mentioned, here we will take as an ethnographic reference the pilgrimage in honor of Saint Bartholomew, patron of Venustiano Carranza,

who year after year carries out a Tojolabales troupe from Buenavista *Bawitz*, community belonging to the municipality of Las Margaritas. Both locations are not far from the border with the neighboring country of Guatemala and close to the city of Comitán de Domínguez.

During the month of April and determined by the movable date of the Holy Week<sup>7</sup>, the Pilgrims, designated by the community, travel in vehicles in an approximate time of two hours, the 120 kilometers that separate it from the pilgrimage center (Image 3). In this sense, the movement of pilgrims, once carried out on foot, is characterized by the gradual descent from the temperate lands of the Central Highlands, where *Bawitz* (1710 masl) is located, to the fertile and warm lands of the Central Valleys. In the vicinity, on the slopes of an orographic elevation, is Carranza (780 masl). In effect, this last city is easily located from different geographical points because it is settled on the slopes of one of the few elevations that, detached from the Altiplano, enters the region known as the Central Valleys (Viqueira, sf) (Image 4).



Image 3. Pilgrimage route from Buenavista Bawitz to Venustiano Carranza. Source: Personal archive

These particular characteristics of the local landscape of Venustiano Carranza have been a fundamental reference in the construction of the belief complex of the Tojolabales. The hill where Carranza sits is considered

<sup>7</sup> It is a ritual norm to carry out this pilgrimage after Holy Week. In the years 2015 and 2016 took place on April 11th and 12th and on April 9th and 10th respectively.

a sacred space by the Pilgrims as they link it with Saint Bartholomew (Image 5).<sup>8</sup> The cult of this saint was introduced by the friars of the Order of Santo Domingo since the founding of the former village of San Bartolomé de Los Llanos -name with which Venustiano Carranza was known until 1934-, in the middle of the 16th century (Calnek, 1990, Morales Avendaño, 1985).



Image 4. Sunset in the Central Depression. In the background you can see the sacred hill where the city of Venustiano Carranza is located. Source: Personal archive

On the other hand, it should be noted that Buenavista *Bawitz* is a small town that did not add, in 2010, the 800 inhabitants, most of them, around 84%, were speakers of the Tojolabal language (INEGI, 2010). As in the whole region of study, social life is determined in part by the economic activity of growing corn. The farmers of *Bawitz* practice seasonal agriculture. The sowing of corn takes place between the months of February and March. Rainfall during these months is scarce; however, the sporadic rains support the corn plant, which in April "is already raising". This last month undoubtedly constitutes a crucial period in the cycle of this crop, since it is urgent, as soon as possible, that the rains be established regularly to avoid risks of loss.

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8 The fact that the hill where Carranza sits is surrounded by lowlands, dominating different geographical points, has also been a central factor in the conformation of the ritual landscape of the tsotsiles that inhabit it for whom it is also the sacred orographic elevation par excellence. This observation had already been made by Díaz de Salas (1963): "The great prestige of the hill [called *Ch'ul Vits* - sacred hill - by the local tsotsiles], is explained, in natural terms, since it is an atypical phenomenon in the region; it is the only considerable elevation in a vast plain "(266).



Image 5. San Bartholomew, titular image that is being kept in the greater altar of the main church of Venustiano Carranza. Source: Personal archive

The pilgrimage dedicated to Saint Bartholomew is framed according to the calendar. The ritual sequences, which include prayers, offerings, drums and flutes music etc.; they are on the way, as our informants insistently affirmed, to achieve the establishment of the rains. The Catholic saints mark August 24 as the date of celebration of this saint; however, for the Tojolabales interviewed, this date does not seem to have such significance, nor does the canonical hagiography of the saint<sup>9</sup>. Saint Bartholomew is, above all, a superhuman entity with the power of Lightning, as we will see later.

## THE AGRICULTURAL RITUAL<sup>10</sup>

### *Preliminaries*

The Pilgrims devote a weekend, on Saturday and Sunday, to this religious practice. The troupe, which in 2016 was made up of forty-six members<sup>11</sup>, is directed by the *rezador*, a religious specialist in charge of establishing communication with Saint Bartholomew during the rites. It is helped by a

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9 On the theoretical distinction between canonical hagiographies and popular hagiographies, consult the works of Báez-Jorge (1998, 2013).

10 The description presented in this section is based on the observation of the 2016 ritual.

11 22 men and 16 adult women; in addition to 8 children.

small group of men, who perform tasks related to collective offerings; such as his transfer and his offer. A third subgroup of men, who march in front of the processions, is responsible for carrying the ceremonial banners; one major and the other minor which are inscribed with the name of the locality, and also to perform the ritual music using two large drums, three small ones and a reed flute. The women, who do not neglect the children, sing the second voice during the prayers directed by the *rezador*. Some men more without apparent charge, complete the entourage.

The collective offerings: candles, torches, incense, rockets and flowers; they constitute the element of exchange with Saint Bartholomew, ritual forms developed by the Tojolabales that seek to obtain the gratitude of this and thereby deserve reward, that is, it is a clear example of what Mauss (2009) has called *give and take*. These offerings have been purchased with money that some days ago every family in *Bawitz* had to cooperate as part of their obligations and responsibilities but also of the benefits they get from being part of the community.

Beginning of the rite and first part of the ritual discourse. On Sunday, April 10, in the morning, the pilgrims move in a ritual procession from the temple of Saint Peter, where they stayed the night before, until the church of Saint Bartholomew<sup>13</sup>. After walking for a few minutes the main streets of the city, enter the interior of the temple, thus formally beginning the ceremonies dedicated to St. Bartholomew (Image 6). Immediately everyone, except the men without charge, kneel in front of the image of the saint, which is deposited on the cusp of a neoclassical cypress, on the high altar. The *rezador* proceeds to execute "prayers and praises" in Spanish that last a few minutes (Image 7). The musicians, meanwhile, continue to perform outside of the church.

### *Community offerings*

At the conclusion of the "prayers and praises that are dedicated to our Lord St. Bartholomew," the *rezadores* and their auxiliaries place communal offerings in front of the saint, under the toral arch that divides the nave and the main altar of the church. 30 candles are offered and four candles arranged in four rows, and two bouquets of flowers are placed on the sides. The offerings are

12 In 2015 the rites to Saint Bartholomew were unfolded in the afternoon of Saturday, April 11.

13 Halfway through the ritual tour they visit the sanctuary of Señor del Pozo, an image of a crucified Christ of dark tonality. Saint Peter and Señor del Pozo are also the object of a secondary cult during the pilgrimage. The ritual sequences in honor of St. Peter are, in general terms, similar to those that unfold to St. Bartholomew. Mr. del Pozo is only visited for a few minutes and not offered.

taken by the oldest auxiliary (Image 8). During this operation, the rest of the *ritualists*, seated in the wooden benches that are arranged in the nave of the church, hold candles in their hands and make personal requests to the saint. Later these place their candles, already consumed in part, next to the community offerings. The musicians have stopped playing.



Image 6. Pilgrims troupe on its way to San Bartholomew church. Source: Personal archive



Image 7. Pilgrims pray in front of San Bartholomew. Source: Personal archive



Image 8. One of the elderly lightning the candles in front of the saint. Source: Personal archive



### *Prayers to request rain*

Only when the communal offerings have been set in their entirety and at an indication of the prayer, do the women gather next to the offerings and kneel in front of St. Bartholomew. The *rezador* directs a new account "prayers and praises" in Spanish. When concluding, the prayers begin. This ritual act, which is carried out exclusively in the Tojolabal language, is undoubtedly the moment of greatest danger in the pilgrimage. Likewise, in a certain way, it is the culmination of a ritual process that involves, directly and indirectly, all the members of the community. The ritual specialist, who becomes the voice of the community, interacts Saint Bartholomew, with a certain subordination, that sends the necessary rains for the corn and that protects the inhabitants of *Bawitz* from diseases. Prayers last between three and four minutes. When concluding, the participants cross themselves (Image 9).

### *End of the pilgrimage*

The Tojolabales return in a ritual procession to the Temple of Saint Peter. The flags are disarmed and musical instruments are saved. They depart back to their community with the satisfaction that they have fulfilled their obligations, looking forward, in the best of cases, to the establishment of the rains.



Image 9. Pilgrims praying for raining season. Source: Personal archive

### *Belief complex around Saint Bartholomew*

In July of 1961, the anthropologist Marcelo Díaz de Salas (1995) held an interview with the tsotsil Bartolo Sabanillo during his stay in Carranza. In it, Bartolo told him that the inhabitants of this town believed that the Tojolabal pilgrims, who since then came in May to perform ceremonies at the top of the sacred hill, sought to take to their lands "the spirit of water." This fact explained, said his informant, that rainfall had decreased throughout the region in recent years. Two years before the interview, if we must believe Sabanillo, the elders of Carranza celebrated at midnight at the top of the hill a ritual to "call back the water spirit", after one of the elders dreamed that the pilgrims had extracted it from their interior.

More than five decades of this story, this conception continues in actuality. For several decades, the Principales de Carranza<sup>14</sup> forbade the groups of pilgrims to ascend the hill before the agricultural ceremonies that the local inhabitants carry out in said elevation, the Saturday after the feast of the Holy Cross. In 2016, a Tsotsil religious musician was outraged to learn that a small contingent from San Diego, La Trinitaria, climbed the hill on April 26 or 27. Since this group does not use drums or flags, nor does it burn rockets, its presence has gone almost unnoticed in recent years. This explains why the *Bawitz* tojolabals, who reconfigured their cycle of pilgrimages independently in the 1990s, have been banned from climbing the hill in April<sup>15</sup>. The Tojolabal version of this fact roughly coincides with that of the Tsotsiles, except that those instead of talking about the spirit of the water say that "the leaders [tsotsiles] do not allow [ascending to the hill before May] because of the corn spirit". The above is only understood if we take into account that both indigenous groups conceive the hills as water deposits, in addition to being containers of plant seeds and riches in general.<sup>16</sup>

Despite this prohibition, the "Cerro Calvario" or "Cerro Dolores", as *Bawitz's* name refers to this elevation, continues to be a central reference point for its beliefs. The idea of its underground connection with the

14 The Krincipaletik (Main) are the religious specialists responsible for holding the agricultural ceremonies in the sacred hills of the region in May.

15 Meanwhile, as already said, those of "Yalumá" come to Carranza on dates after the feast of the Holy Cross, regularly arrive on May 6. This group does perform rituals in the hill and, at least in previous years, requested authorization to do so with the authorities of the "House of the People", an indigenous organization that administers the communal lands of that locality. On several occasions, the rituals of those of "Yalumá" coincide with those performed by Carranza's with a difference of one or two days.

16 Mario Humberto Ruz (1990) and Antonio Gómez Hernández (2012) have delved deeper into the symbolism of the mountains in the Tojolabal worldview. In this language the word *altz'il*, in one of its meanings, designates certain psychic entities. The gods have *altz'il* (spirit). Inside the mountains lies the *altz'il* (soul, spirit) of vegetables (Ruz, 1990). To deepen the notions of Carranza's tsotsiles around hills, rains and corn, see the texts by Díaz de Salas (1963, 1995), an author who has deepened the religious life of this indigenous group.

Tojolabal lands is expressed in a story that Don Antonio's grandparents, the *rezador*, transmitted to him. It is said that many years ago *Bawitz* farmers burned their land for planting; located near a cave without noticing that the smoke that was produced from this activity entered the hollow. The smoke soon reached Cerro Dolores filled with this subtle matter, so immediately two "Sanbartoleños", trying to find out where this substance came from, followed the underground path until they reached the entrance to the cave where the Tojolabales men worked.

The importance of this hill for the Tojolabales can also be understood by the close relationship it has with Saint Bartholomew. Owner of the hill and corn, Lord of the rains, Lightning, saint eponymous of Carranza, all these attributes make up the divine image of this saint. Although the idea is very confusing, there are pilgrims who consider that before going to their church and being the patron of their city, Saint Bartholomew was at the top of Dolores hill. Other similar versions; however, they suggest that these two manifestations, on the one hand as Dueño del Cerro and on the other as a resident of their church, constitute a fragmentation of the same divinity.<sup>17</sup>

There is a link between dwelling on the hill and being lightning. The main attribute of Saint Bartholomew is precisely that of transmuting into lightning what gives it the ability to control the climate at its arbitrariness. It is also in his capacity as the guardian saint of Carranza that he is responsible for protecting the corn seed against the threats of other lightning saints who intend to seize it for the benefit of their peoples. Possession or not of the seed or spirit of corn is linked to the abundance or absence in the production of this cereal. In a version of a story that those of *Bawitz* remember during the pilgrimage to Saint Bartholomew, it is said that he and "Thomas", patron of the Tseltales of Oxchuc, clashed in this last town after Thomas went to Carranza with the express purpose of stealing corn seed. The confrontation of the saints, imagined as a true meteorological battle between their lightning *nahuales*, culminated with the defeat of Thomas and the triumphant return of the "Bartolo" to his people with the coveted seed, which explains that, while in the temperate lands of Oxchuc produces a lot of apple, in Carranza the main production is corn.<sup>18</sup>

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17 The idea of the fragmentation of the divinities in Mesoamerica has been studied extensively by López Austin (2010). In the Mesoamerican religions the gods "can fragment and occupy two different places" (López Austin, 2010). A faithful image attracted a portion of the divine essence and became its recipient (López Austin, 2010: 127). This theoretical proposal helps us to explain, in part, the manifestations of Saint Bartholomew. A portion of its essence is contained in the wooden image that is kept in the temple, while another lies in the hill, San Bartolo dwells in it.

18 The narrations of oral tradition around the disputes for the spirit of corn between lightning *nahuales* from different communities flood the Tojolabales beliefs for example I note again the works of Mario Humberto Ruz (1990) and Antonio Gómez Hernández (2012).

Another attribute to this saint is the Lord of the rains. The exegesis of the Tojolabals that I interviewed does not offer doubts: the pilgrimage to Saint Bartholomew takes place "to ask for water for the cornfield". The ritual action is aimed to achieve this end. For the pilgrims the peregrination is "a promise", a kind of reciprocal contract with this sacred entity in which the visit is exchanged for rains, hence the belief shared by several devotees that regularly, after making the pilgrimage to San Bartholomew, it rains on *Bawitz* farmland. As an elder of this community would say "after going to Carranza, when you get to *Bawitz* is already raining".

#### THE LIGHTNING SAINT RELIGIOUS COMPLEX BETWEEN THE MAYAN PEOPLE OF CHIAPAS

##### *Comparative perspective*

In her already classic *Supernatural power and social control*, published in 1970, anthropologist Esther Hermitte (2004) recorded the belief, until then unparalleled, in the ethnographic reports of the Mayas of Chiapas, according to which the patron saint of a town, in this case Saint Miguel Arcángel of Pinola, it was lightning "Saint Miguel has thirteen *nahuales*. It is Lightning and saves Pinola so that no other saint comes to harm people - it may be Saint Augustine of Teopisca who wants to come and do evil, or Saint Bartolo from his village." (p.53)

According to the author, derived from this, the Tseltal considered him the superhuman entity that, as Lightning sent the rains and decided on the fate of the crops, in such a way that the rites associated with the corn cycle, especially those that took place before the sowing and immediately after the harvest, they went precisely to him. It was usual in Pinola, for example, to offer mass and prayers to Saint Miguel when the rains were delayed. In its main festival, on September 29, the Pinoltecan farmers picked the first ears of corn from their fields and offered them to the saint. It was also, it was said, the person in charge of protecting the spirit of the corn and the beans of other peoples who wanted to kidnap them. The older peasants practiced in their cornfields, at the end of the corn harvest, an elaborate ritual in gratitude to this divinity. They separated the harvested corn into four piles. They dug a hole where they introduced a small image of a saint, preferably of Saint Michael, and offered four candles in the hollow. Rockets were burned and workers were invited to drink chocolate and alcoholic beverages; the four corners of the cornfield were also incense burned with incense. People considered that if the ritual was not done, the lightning would take half of the harvest for himself, gradually decreasing this cereal,

by moving it home. The youngest, however, had simplified this ritual, eliminating several procedures, as they said:

(...) it was not worth doing all those rites, since the corn spirit had been taken away by Amatenango and it was too late to get it back. The myth related to the decline of the crops says that Saint Michael, who was the guardian of the corn and beans spirits, had them well hidden under his feet, but once he was distracted and raised his foot; then the Amatenango *me'iltatiles* stole some of them and took them away. As their *me'iltatiles* are smarter than those of Pinola, those spirits are unlikely to be recovered. (p.58)

Years later Mario Humberto Ruz (1990) recorded the relationship between Lightning-Saints present in the imagination of the Tojolabales, conceptions that later other researchers would study more deeply in communities of this language. Ruz indicated that, although the belief was shared by very few inhabitants, it was considered that Saint Mateo of the chuj people of Ixtatán, Saint Thomas de Oxchuc and Saint Bartholomew de Carranza, owned *wayjel* or *nahual* for Lightning. Several Tojolabales communities participated, led by specialists of Tseltal descent of La Trinitaria, in the pilgrimage circuit that had as main destinations Ixtatán, Oxchuc and Carranza. The three pilgrimages were made before the beginning of the rainy season, between the months of February and April, and had as a central purpose to impetrate the establishment of the rain regime. Saint Mateo was visited at the beginning of Lent. The pilgrimage to St. Thomas, meanwhile, took place in the first half of April; while on the 22nd of the same month they would go to Carranza.

More recently other researchers (Gómez Hernández and Pinto López, 1998, Cuadriello Olivos, 2008, Gómez Hernández, 2012, among others) have provided evidence that broadens our knowledge about saints with lightning power among the Tojolabals. Gómez Hernández (2012) has the merit of reporting the presence of these religious notions among people from Yalumá and Yaxhá, ladino communities of Tojolabal descent who actively participate in the pilgrimages. His informants told him that the Eternal Father, Patron of the Trinitarian as well as Saint Bartholomew of Carranza and Saint Mateo de Ixtatán become lightning. The inhabitants of these communities conceive the Eternal Father, as the most powerful Lightning and giver of water. During the pilgrimage to La Trinitaria, between May and June, seeds of corn and beans are taken, placed next to the holder image to be consecrated, and on their return the pilgrims mix them with the rest of the seeds they will use in the next sow "so that they germinate well and give good pods" (p.56). Of Saint Bartholomew, who is visited on May 7, it is said that many years ago, in his attribute of Lightning, rescued the sentinel snake that other lightning

enemy had kidnapped from the source of the town of Los Riegos.<sup>19</sup> The reintroduction of the snake made the water of the spring resurface again:

It is considered lightning because it gave rise to a spring that lightning enemy, when stealing the sentinel snake, had dried up. The inhabitants "costumbristas" of the Ranchería Los Riegos, Comitán, who know the power when it becomes the natural phenomenon referred to drying the eye of water from which they supplied themselves, decided to go with the ritual specialist to ask for their help (. ..). (p.67)

On the other hand, Sánchez Morales (2011) and Sánchez Morales and Isunza Bisuet (2015) have documented this complex of beliefs among the Tseltals of Petalcingo, north of Chiapas, beyond the area in which it had been reported before. These authors have noticed the complex association that the Tseltals establish between their patron Saint Francis of Assisi and the lightning. Saint Francis is a being with human qualities; at times he is presented as affable and kind and in others grumpy and evil. Controls the climate at his will. He is imagined as a humble peasant. In a version of the founding myth it is narrated that prior to the formation of Petalcingo, the unhappy people died of hunger and suffered from drought. The arrival of the patron saint by the river *Pajwachil* meant the end of the drought and with it the abundance of corn. Saint Francis gave corn for the first time to man, as an old man by the name of Marceal Mendez related.

Francis, his work was then in the town, because they say then that if he was not there, there was also no corn, no beans, what they used to lack before, he gave it. Then they say that his party came in, they say that he sent them the corn. They say that nothing grew, it is his miracle then that there is what we already have (...) it started to happen when he arrived in our town, then, our patron. So happy began to eat and drink our ancestors (...) he became the owner of corn (...). (Sánchez Morales, 2011, p.13)

The control of Saint Francis on the rains derives from his *nahual* lightning as they refer several of the stories contained in the texts that occupy us. His temperamental character keeps the Tseltal constantly worried, because if he gets angry he may not send the rains in time or unleash terrible storms, hence the rites in his honor have to be observed punctually. Another of its functions is to take care of the soul of the cornfields and the animals.

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19 Among the principals of Carranza we have also registered ethnographically the beliefs in the lightning-saints. In this city it is said that the patron Saint Bartholomew is Red Lightning, while Saint Peter Mártir, which is found in the church that bears his name, is transfigured in Green Lightning.

(...) Father Saint Francis is very strong, takes care of the soul of the cornfields, crops, of the animals, of the harvest. When it rains and is angry, his face lights up, he sends lightning. That screw us up then, no longer grows plants, breaks the trees (...) Someone of the main managers did not do what he should, maybe that's why he gets angry. When it rains hard, it is true, the cornfield is knocked down by the winds, it is trampled with water, many lightning fall, the plants die (...) that's why the elders were right to ask for forgiveness to calm him down, so it comes out a little by little the cornfield, the bean, a little bit for the animals, the chicken too, well, we have to have respect, if we do not, we die of hunger, because the earth dies. (Sánchez Morales, 2011, p.15)

### FINAL NOTES

The attributes and functions that the Maya give to the images of the saints clearly express the symbolic reworks that have taken place in the context of contemporary indigenous religions. Indeed, the canonical hagiography of the saints is absent from the thinking of Mayan informants. They are, above all, superhuman entities that participate in human passions: they get angry, they could not send rains, if rituals are not performed in their honor and they can even fight with other saints. In the collective imagination of these peoples, as we have seen succinctly, they are closely associated with the lightning, the hills, the corn and the rain. Its capacity in the handling of the climate derives precisely from its main attribute: the Lightning

Outside of the observance of the official representatives of canonical Catholicism, the Mayans have modeled their religious practices and beliefs based on their material conditions of existence. The survival of an agricultural economy and the ever-present need to influence the will of the saints who personify meteorological phenomena are fundamental to understanding these expressions of indigenous religiosity. In the symbolic structuring of corn, a precious food in the indigenous worldview, there is an effort that indigenous thought focuses its world around agriculture (Sánchez Morales, 2011).

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