Contagion and Alterity: Kowoj Maya Appropriations of European Objects

ABSTRACT  From initial contact with the Europeans until their conquest (C.E. 1525–1697), the Itza and their political rivals, the Kowoj, dominated Petén, Guatemala. Colonial artifacts at Zacpetén record the initial appropriations of European objects by the Kowoj. All such objects rested in ceremonial contexts, indicating that the Kowoj considered them positive sources of sacred power. The Kowoj were in contact with the Spaniards and knew they were the source of the valued materials; hence, the materials also signified otherness. Social elites frequently retained objects obtained from long distances, even those of oppressive colonial groups, as positive contagion. I argue that the Kowoj incorporated colonial objects into their rites to harness the power of alterity. [Keywords: Maya, colonialism, ritual, archaeology, materiality]

S EVEN COLONIAL artifacts curated in labeled plastic bags and vials in a bodega in Petén, Guatemala, once served a critical role in my dissertation and other research by revealing that the Kowoj, a Maya sociopolitical group, occupied the site of Zacpetén until at least the mid–17th century (Pugh 2001:110, 2003:421; Rice et al. 1998:245). However, the objects’ role in the cultural entanglement between the Kowoj and European colonial powers has not previously been explored. The contexts of colonial objects appropriated by the Kowoj indicate that their use to evaluate a distant “other” began around 350 years before their excavation. These objects were truly border fetishes (Spyer 1998:1), intercultural objects whose meanings and values were distorted by the tides of colonial process. They originated outside the Kowoj world, an unknown place that threatened and ultimately engulfed them. The Kowoj appropriated the peripheral materials and planted them in their most central ceremonial spaces as positive contagion.

Many Maya imagined their world in turtle shaped, crocodilian, circular, or rectangular forms circumscribing time (Clendinnen 1980:382; Sosa 1985:417; Taube 1988:154–174). Sculpted turtles with calendars circumscribing them (see Figure 1), frequently found at Middle to Late Postclassic (C.E. 1200–1525) sites, represented the earth: the edge of the world was paralleled with the edge or end of time. The modern Yucatec imagine the border of time–space as a “great beach,” beyond which churns water that separates and connects the earth and sky (Sosa 1985:319, 428–429). The ocean could inundate the earth unless the proper rituals mediated calendrical junctures. The world’s end was often imagined as a great deluge (Taube 1988:171–172). Europeans crossed these waters into the Maya world. They originated outside the boundaries of ordered space–time, possibly in one of the layers of the sky, and carried many strange things. Some Maya sought these objects from beyond to appropriate the power of the periphery and alterity.

CONTAGION AND ALTERITY
As intercultural objects traverse boundaries, they move from one meaning to another. Careful consideration of such objects, their contexts, and biographies can illuminate social constructions of value (Appadurai 1986:16–56; Spyer 1998:1–4; Thomas 1991:28–29; Turgeon 1997:2–4). Many scholars once argued that the impetus to trade at initial contact with Europeans was the desire to acquire technologically advanced tools. However, indigenous groups often employed these tools for “nonutilitarian”—particularly ceremonial—purposes (Miller and Hamell 1986:314; Smith 1987:35, 119–120). These items frequently became inalienable objects: artifacts not subject to everyday exchange or circulation that store knowledge and act as foundations of social and individual identity (Mills 2004:240; Weiner 1992). The production of inalienable objects generally requires “special knowledge” (Mills 2004:240), but the artifacts of focus in this article were appropriated from afar, rather than produced in local contexts. Nevertheless,
their appropriation and use was extremely restricted. Because they were obtained from distant social others, these inalienable objects carried with them decidedly “alien” baggage.

While inalienable objects promote individual and group identities, they can also connote alterity (Thomas 1991:26). Michael Taussig (1993:19) has illuminated that one can become and appropriate some of the power of the other through the imitation or representation of “the other” or their objects. In this article, I investigate another strategy of “othering”: the appropriation of objects once belonging to the other. Possessions are frequently believed to retain some of the spirit of their former possessors (Mauss 1990; Miller 2001). Correspondingly, objects once in contact with a being can have power over that being (reverse contagion) or derive “essence” from contact with the being (forward contagion; Frazer 1935:174–214; Rozin and Nemeroff 1990:207–208). Contagion can be positive or negative, although negative contagion or “contamination–pollution” tends to be more common, powerful, and enduring (Rozin and Royzman 2001:298–299). A clear example of positive contagion is the Northern Lacandon use of stones taken from the houses of gods to seat deities in human-made images, described below (McGee 1998:44–45). The avoidance of ritually discarded house “sweepings and old utensils” in colonial Yucatán (Landa 1941:151–152) exemplifies negative contagion.

Foreign objects and persons may be sought after or avoided, depending on their perceived contagion. When positive, families may strive to incorporate foreignness into their bloodlines through intermarriage. Foreign materials can signify knowledge of the powerful outer world, evidence of foreign travel, or brokerage with the outside (DeBoer 2004:101; Helms 1988:101–171; Lucero 2003:544; Thomas 1991:143). The accumulation of foreign things is a defining feature of some revitalization movements (Wallace 1956:267). Many factors attribute a positive valence to foreignness. Gaps in knowledge inherent in long-distance exchange may tie certain items to the “unknown,” thereby increasing demand (Appadurai 1986:56). Of particular interest here is the juxtaposition of foreign places with existing unknowns, such as places of creation, thereby imbuing some foreign objects with primordial power (Godelier 1999:167–170; Helms 1988:33–65; Sahlin 1981:9–32). Elites also struggle over the possession of powerful objects as well as access to their sources, resulting in their singularization. When “the other” is powerful or admired, certain goods reserved for elite performances may act as metonyms “of a whole system of power, prosperity, and status” (Appadurai 1986:52).

Alternatively, otherness may evoke negative contagion. As “matter out of place,” foreign objects often have restricted roles in societies with strong external boundaries (Douglas 1988:114–128). Out-group ancestry, regardless of the amount, may render one an outsider (López 2006:20). Foreigners are sometimes tied to contagious disease and paralleled with vectors such as rats (Faulkner et al. 2004:333–334). Anxiety that foreign immorality, “impurity, criminality, and sexual deviance” could corrupt the social system may accompany fear of biologically based contagion (Enoch 2004:59) or arise independently. The “other” need not even be a foreigner: in some societies, one gender can contaminate another gender through certain types of personal contact (Meigs 1995:63–72).

Reactions to negative contagion vary, often unpredictably. Taboos usually define its restrictions and avoidance. Nevertheless, during revitalization movements, groups may strive to eradicate negative contagion, including foreignness, to achieve a state of perceived purity (Wallace 1956). Nevertheless, restriction can empower distinguished items and people (Leach 1966:37). Furthermore, pollution can be “enshrined in sacred places and times,” perhaps in opposition to absolute purity, as the epitome of change and fertility (Douglas 1988:159–179). Interactions with negative contagion can ironically symbolize purity. For example, Central Mexican images of humans consuming their own excrement represented purification (Klein 1993:22). The duration of pollution also varies. As is often the case of undesired ancestry, it can be permanent. In other cases, polluted objects and persons gradually lose their contagion, as it is transferred to other objects and persons (Meigs 1995:63–65).

Societies frequently have multiple systems of value: one faction may perceive foreignness as positive contagion and another as negative contagion, while still another may be indifferent. Intercultural objects are frequently positive contagion for elites, but negative contagion and, therefore, items to be avoided by everyone else. However, elite exemption from certain taboos may intensify demand for such goods (Appadurai 1986:30–32; Sahlin 1981:43–46). Increased interaction over time can weaken taboos, and thus restricted objects can become increasingly available to the larger population. This “trickle-down” process eventually decreases the status projected by their consumption;
hence, elites may bolster their restriction or adopt new items (van der Veen 2003:409–410).

In situations of contact, contagion frequently plays a prominent role in ideologies and systems of value, which appear in practices of avoidance, restriction, or appropriation. In this article, I trace these practices among the Kowoj during their initial entanglement with the Spaniards.

**EUROPEAN THINGS**

The first Spaniards landed on the east coast of the Maya world, paralleling the heroic journeys of Maya ancestors. In late-17th-century Petén, the Spaniards emphasized their eastern origins, their passage across water, their beards, and the connection of these qualities to Maya prophecies for political advantage (Avendaño y Loyola 1987:31). Spanish politicking did not occur in a vacuum but in the midst of a struggle between two powerful rivals. The Itza dominated 17th-century Petén (see Figure 2), but the Kowoj, their adversaries, had attempted to overthrow them just 17 months before the Spaniards succeeded in doing so in 1697. The Itza, influenced by Spanish appropriations of indigenous symbols of legitimacy, placed the Spaniards in the future as the rulers of a forthcoming calendrical cycle. Others doubted such claims: on hearing Fray Andrés de Avendaño y Loyola’s assertion that the new calendrical cycle meant religious conversion, AjKowoj, the Kowoj ruler, questioned, “What matters it that the time has come when we are to be Christians, if this slender point of my flint lance has not worn out?” (1987:41).

AjKowoj’s sentiments were shared by many Maya (Farriss 1984:22). Indeed, several Yucatec groups attacked the Spaniards at first contact (Díaz 1980:27–50). Alternatively, many respected Spanish iron weapons (Restall 2003:143), and some appreciated Spanish knowledge, regarded clergy as wise travelers, and at least initially compared the Spaniards with the legendary Itza (Clendinnen 1980:384; Helms 1988:151). However, like the legendary Itza, the Spaniards were also known for their immorality and sexual depravity (Chuchiak 2007:77–83). Apparently, Avendaño y Loyola’s knowledge so impressed the Petén Itza that they gave the title Kikkaan or “Father of Heaven,” while the Kowoj schemed to kill him (Jones 1998:208). Although not gods, the Spaniards possessed powerful objects and knowledge from afar and were certainly “others.”

Before and after the conquest, Maya peoples experienced and appropriated European material culture. Christopher Columbus visited the Atlantic Coast of Honduras in 1502 (Chamberlain 1948:9–12). This and subsequent visits brought European goods such as cloth, cut glass, glass beads, and iron. They also expelled lead projectiles and iron dart tips in warfare. For example, Hernán Cortés passed through Cozumel and Yucatán in 1519, leaving cloth, beads, “trinkets,” religious symbols, and military projectiles (Díaz 1927:27–67). Cortés (1992:241–243) visited Nojpeten, the Petén Itza capital, with a sizable army in 1525 and gave gifts to the Itza ruler, Ajaw Kan Ek’, and left them an injured horse. The Itza constructed a statue of the horse, which they understood as a type of tapir, and may have venerated its bones in a temple (Avendaño y Loyola 1987:33–34).

Spanish emissaries visited the Petén lakes during the 172-year period between the visit of Cortés and the conquest of Nojpeten in 1697, bringing iron axes, machetes and knives, trinkets, beads, cloth, and religious objects (Jones 1998:158–205). Avendaño y Loyola suggested that Maya desire for European objects was “insatiable” (1987:29). On his way to visit Nojpeten in 1696, Avendaño y Loyola encountered a group of Chak’an Itza, who stole from him gifts meant for Ajaw Kan Ek’.2 The Chak’an Itza ruled the northern province of the Itza kingdom and wished to prevent Ajaw Kan Ek’ from attaining these powerful items. They had allied with the Kowoj in a failed attempt to overthrow

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**FIGURE 2.** Seventeenth-century political geography of the Petén Lakes region.
the ruling faction in 1695 (Jones 1998:192). The nephew of Ajaw Kan Ek’ later took Avendaño y Loyola’s crucifix by force (Avendaño y Loyola 1987:30). As Martín de Ursúa y Arizmendi prepared to attack Nojpeten in 1697, his forces gave “gifts of axes, machetes, knives, and salt” to men and “bead earrings, necklaces, and belts” to women,” hoping the gifts would convince the Itza to convert to Christianity (Jones 1998:267).

European goods were also obtained through Petén Maya initiatives. The Itza sent emissaries to Merida (Jones 1998:167–186), and these individuals likely acquired Spanish material goods. Goods also moved into Petén through trade routes, especially through the central trade node at Bacalar (Jones 1998:40). The Petén Maya traded with the Kejach Maya and the site of Tipú in what is now Belize for “hatchets and machetes” (Avendaño y Loyola 1987:42). These same routes supplied indigenous exotics such as ocean shell, stingray spines, sharks’ teeth, coral, gold, and copper. In the southeastern United States, similar preexisting routes allowed Spanish materials and diseases to arrive in interior regions ahead of early explorers (Smith 1987:35).

The Spaniards strategically used material culture to enforce cultural hegemony and secure political power. They manipulated Maya desires for Spanish objects to further their political objectives. Elite Maya of Petén and other areas recognized that the Spaniards utilized their material culture for political ends (Avendaño y Loyola 1987:29–45) and correspondingly manipulated Spanish symbols for their own objectives. The K’iche’ Maya melded Spanish military symbols and Christianity with local histories, promoting their political objectives in opposition to those of the Kaqchikel Maya (Akkeren 2003:237–254). The European-style coat of arms of one elite Yucatec group, the Xiw, included a k’atun wheel, an indigenous calendar tied to rulership (Cortez 2002:209–212; Rice 2004:280–284). Some Chilam Balam, indigenous colonial documents held by particular communities, also contain Spanish political motifs. Hence, local elites utilized the symbols as positive sources of political power and local resistance, as well as foundations of identity. Nevertheless, Spanish material culture was not always politically advantageous. In 1696, Ajaw Kan Ek’ donned European dress and political symbols, thereby angering lesser nobles and nearly destroying his political legitimacy (Jones 1998:208–209).

Spanish material practices also involved the destruction of negative contagion—particularly those that they associated with Satan or insurrection. A number of autos de fe (ritualized condemnations of heretics or heretical activities) in the early Colonial period called for assaults on indigenous religious material culture. Although the Petén Maya likely heard bits about Diego de Landa’s infamous auto de fe of 1562 in Yucatán, they would have been very familiar with that at Tipú in 1619, which resulted in the destruction of “idols” and corporal punishment (Scholes and Thompson 1977:49). Besides autos de fe, Spaniards formulaically placed churches and other religious objects on razed indigenous ceremonial architecture to silence indigenous religions while capturing central nodes in their sacred landscape (Giffords 2007:71–72). They also attacked living symbols: central rulers, who the Spaniards systematically captured and often killed (Restall 2003:25).

Indigenous people of the Americas also occasionally attacked European objects. In 1612, indigenes of La Florida sought to eradicate the Spaniards, their livestock, trees, and seeds (Saunders 1998:415). During the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, they methodically discarded all Spanish elements including language, Spanish names, goods, plants, settlement plans, and ceramic styles. They also annulled church marriages and baptisms (Liebmann 2006:374–375, 2008:363–367). Although desecration existed before contact, one wonders whether some groups appropriated Spanish auto de fe techniques ironically as vehicles of nativism. Nevertheless, not all indigenous people correlated Europeans with European-originated material culture—particularly late in the colonial process. For example, the Shipibo-Conibo of Peru believed that whites stole their material culture from the Inca but that the ultimate destruction of whites would be followed by the Shipibo-Conibo inheritance of these goods (Roe 1988:128).

At times, Maya groups also attacked Spanish objects as negative contagion. As part of their resistance in 1546–47, Yucatec prophets called for the destruction of all Spaniards, Maya allied with the Spaniards, Spanish settlements, horses, cattle, chickens, cats, European dog breeds, trees, and plants (Chamberlain 1948:238–241; Restall 1998:14). They considered Spanish material culture contaminating and a threat to their identities. During the Quisteil Rebellion of 1761 in Yucatán, Jacinto Uk ordered that records be destroyed and pigs slaughtered, with the resulting meat taboo. The prophet argued that Spaniard souls rested in the animals, and their slaughter would likewise kill Spaniards. He appropriated other aspects of Spanish culture, such as Catholicism, to support the rebellion (Patch 2002:138–140). Uk—quite the hybrid character—was a shaman with Spanish education who took on the titles of Canek and Moctezuma [sic], referring, respectively, to the last independent Itza and Aztec rulers and likened himself with Christ. He also appropriated the powerful Spanish–Itza claim to have crossed the ocean from the east—but on an English ship (Bricker 1981:70–74; Patch 2002:134–137).

Petén was likewise an arena of materiality. In 1618, Fray Juan de Orbista destroyed the statue of “Cortés’s” horse and, therefore, killed the “god,” an event long remembered by the Itza (Jones 1998:53–59). This event attributed the Spaniards a strong negative valence and the Petén Maya attempted to contain their spread. They built statues of Spaniards along roads to contested settlements in what is now Belize. These were ritual barriers meant to block the Spaniards from Itza territory and curse those who passed. The Itza also destroyed missions, religious objects, and towns. They warned Maya communities that in addition to
Itza wrath, submission to the Spaniards would bring about catastrophic floods (Jones 1998:52–53). The Kowoj elite also detested the Spaniards. In 1696, the Kowoj, their allies the Chak’an Itza, and possibly contacts in Tipú schemed to murder and dismember Avendaño y Loyola and his entourage (Jones 1998:207–216). These diverse practices and those seen elsewhere in the Maya world illuminate the varied politics of contagion directed toward harnessing or restraining the process of cultural entanglement.

**ZACPETÉN AND KOWOJ MATERIAL CULTURE**

After the conquest of Petén, the Kowoj led various “revolts” against the Spaniards (Jones 1998:325–402). Even so, the Spaniards only sparsely described the Petén Kowoj. Our knowledge of Kowoj materiality was primarily derived from archaeological work at the sites of Topoxté, which rests on an island in Lake Yaxhá, and Zacpetén, which is located on a peninsula on Lake Salpetén (see Figure 3). Of these sites, colonial goods have only been described from Zacpetén, although Tipú, which eventually became a visita mission, bears architectural and ceramic similarities with Topoxté and Zacpetén and was occupied by Kowoj for at least part of its periodic missionization from the mid–16th century until it was reduced in 1707 (Cecil 2009:261–263). Most colonial goods likely traveled to Zacpetén via Tipú.

Critical to the interpretation of Spanish goods at Zacpetén is whether the Kowoj associated the Spaniards with European material culture. Missionized Tipú, occupied by Kowoj, contains Kowoj-style ceramics produced in Petén in association with Spanish ceramics (Cecil in press). The Petén Maya spied on Spanish activities in Yucatán through Tipú (Jones 1998:183). The Kowoj may have incorporated a Xiw faction that migrated from Yucatán to Petén around 1536 (Jones 1998:19) and would have experienced the initial Spanish attempts to subdue Yucatán. Many Maya fled into areas outside Spanish control, such as Petén, after the conquest of Yucatán, bringing outside information. The Petén Maya visited Spaniards in Yucatán on several occasions and the Petén lakes experienced a number of Spanish *entradas* between 1525 and 1697. Although we cannot resurrect Kowoj thoughts, it seems implausible that...
the Kowoj elite were unfamiliar with the Spaniards and their material culture.

The excavations at Zacpetén focused on two ceremonial groups and five residential areas, including a range of social classes. Zacpetén was periodically occupied from the Middle Preclassic period (ca. 800–700–300 B.C.E.) until around the Spanish conquest (ca. 1697). At contact, religious rites at the site included the use of deity effigy censers in temples located in temple assemblages. Temple assemblages include a variety of religious and political buildings in a specific layout. We encountered most colonial artifacts in Zacpetén’s two ceremonial groups—Group A and Group C—both of which contain a temple assemblage. These assemblages were common at Mayapán in Yucatán, which the Kowoj claimed as their ancestral city (Jones 1998:16). Temple assemblages are found in the Kowoj area in Petén, but not in the Itza region, and represented the foundations of Kowoj social identity (Pugh 2001:594–600, 2002, 2003:418–426). Kowoj identity was also projected through residential and ceramic styles (Cecil 2004:402; Pugh 2004:361–362).

Among the most critical ceremonial—inalienable objects of the Kowoj were ceramic deity effigy censers, which include a standing deity with outstretched hands mounted on an hourglass-shaped vessel (Rice 2009). They burned copal resin in them as offerings to the represented deity. The Northern Lacandon of nearby Chiapas produced deity effigy censers until relatively recently. Their practices may be analogous to the Kowoj, as the Lacandon emerged from refugees from Yucatán and Petén fleeing the Spaniards (De Vos 1988:223–224; Pugh 2009). The Lacandon communicated and made offerings to deities through these censers, which contained part of the deities’ spirits (McGee 1998:43). They ensouled the vessels by painting them to represent the deities and by placing ash from the censer they were replacing and a stone from the deity’s house, usually a cave or archaeological ruins, in the new censer (McGee 1998:44–45). Hence, positive contagion played a part in their production.

Just as the Lacandon activated their god pots with sacred stones, caches activated the temple assemblages of Zacpetén. Caching involves the ritualized deposition of special materials into the earth or a construction, thereby ensouling the spaces. Once activated, spaces were “alive” and connected with the divine (Pendergast 1998:61–62; Stross 1998:35). Buildings often had specified life cycles and were “terminated” at the end of that cycle. Termination involved the destruction of caches and often defacing the building signaling its death (Mock 1998:9–10). When the Kowoj rededicated both of the Late Postclassic civic-ceremonial temples at Zacpetén, they deposited new caches activating the reconstructions. The stratigraphy of ceremonial buildings represents generations of “death and rebirth,” mimicking human, plant, animal, and astronomical life cycles (Mock 1998:6–13). Because ceremonial buildings represented the larger world, caches and reconstructions embodied the renewal of the Kowoj world and identity. Furthermore, such performances create “intersubjective relations of persons, places, and material” that then manifest central social memories and enhance the political capital of participants (Gillespie 2008:124–136).

Zacpetén’s occupants killed effigy censers and caches by smashing them and scattering the sherds in special refuse areas such as behind ceremonial buildings. Some of these deposits were used on multiple occasions. Similar practices are found in other parts of Mesoamerica (Mock 1998:10). The Lacandon terminated their effigy censers yearly by burning them, emptying their contents, and placing the vessel in a cave (McGee 1998:45). The Colonial period Yucatec cyclically terminated everyday objects and avoided the resulting refuse deposits as the formerly useful things had been transformed into negative contagion (Hutson and Stanton 2007:137–138; Landa 1941:151–152).

The curation of dead inalienable objects signaled both respect and fear of pollution: termination rites had altered their values. At Zacpetén, dismembered inalienable objects were also separated, mixed, and then deposited. The Kowoj placed sherds from particular effigy censers in multiple deposits, often behind different buildings. The separating of terminated vessel sherds is found in other times and places of the Maya world (Lucero 2008:201–204). Unlike the inalienable objects described by Annette Weiner (1992:8–11), the Kowoj strove to thwart material permanence. Although they were certainly “kept,” the mixing of fragments of various objects of different classes would have enhanced forgetting specific objects. The Kowoj and many other groups in the Americas (Blake and Smith 2000) created material and social permanence through cycles of birth–death–rebirth of objects and spaces, rather than through material preservation.

Caches activating buildings at Zacpetén generally include a ceramic vessel containing copper, coral, greenstone, serpentine, and spondylus shell objects or stingray spines—all imports. Those in plazas include gold, iron, and human remains. The majority of caches at Zacpetén contained objects derived from beyond the borders of the Kowoj world. Caches established a link with the supernatural, which was likely metonymically and contagiously evoked with objects from afar.

FROM BEYOND

While the Spaniards linked the Maya to the Afro-Asian-Euro world system, they were already involved in an indigenous world system connecting them to Oaxaca, Central Mexico, and other parts of the Americas. During the Classic and Postclassic periods, Maya elite exchanged goods and ideas and imitated goods from Central Mexico (Braswell 2003:1–41; Hosler 2003:163–171; Kowalski 1999:99–103; Lucero 2003:544; Masson 2003:194–200). Many of the objects were everyday necessities such as obsidian tools. However, items composed of copper and gold alloys were uncommon in the Maya world, especially Petén.
Bronze artifacts appeared in the southern Maya Lowlands at approximately C.E. 1150. This technology arrived in West Mexico from Ecuador at around C.E. 600 (Hosler 1994:100, 208). The Maya obtained bronze objects from West Mexico, Central Mexico, Belize (Simmons 2005:236–237), and Yucatan (Paris 2008). The people of West and Central Mexico believed that the gods created the first humans from ash and metal alloy; therefore, metals were animative. Mesoamerican elites materialized supernatural and material power with metals (Hosler 1994:227–250). In Yucatec Maya, ta’-k’in refers to gold and other metals but literally translates as “sun’s excrement.” It would have also held this meaning among the Kowoj (Andrew Hofling, personal communication, May 7, 2008). Although excrement was a pollutant, ta’-k’in was the excrement of one of the most sacred entities in the Maya universe. Similar to cattle dung among Hindus (Douglas 1988:9; Harper 1964:181–183), the most polluting aspect of the sun was “pure relative to” humans. In Mesoamerica, acquiring too much wealth could produce a shift from positive to negative contagiousness. Many postconquest Aztecs considered the deceptive accumulation of gold and wealth to be “filthy” and paralleled with excrement (Klein 1993:26).

The use of indigenous metals was highly restricted at Zacpetén. Excavations documented bronze and gold objects in an elite residential group (Group 719) and the central ceremonial group (Group A). Group 719 included a large residence with an associated domestic temple and statue shrine (see Figure 4). The group was constructed as an abridged version of a temple assemblage combining residential and civic-ceremonial contexts (Pugh et al. 2009). The bronze artifacts were not cached and included two small bells and half of an axe. The bells rested in the back room of the residence and may have been placed along the primary axis. Their precise use could not be derived from their context, although figurines often depict bells sewn into clothing. The axe fragment was associated with numerous composite censers (censers without deity effigies) in the front room of the residence. These ceremonial objects were not terminated refuse or in active use but were stored on top of a wall at the time of the residence’s sudden abandonment.

Most bronze objects in the central ceremonial group, Group A (see Figure 5), were cached. One cache rested along the centerline of a small temple (Structure 605) and included a single bell. Two fragments of copper or bronze and other exotic objects were also placed into a lidded ceramic pot cached in front of the altar along the centerline of the main temple (Structure 602). These objects helped animate the temple. A second bell rested in a large deposit of ritual refuse that lay behind an open hall (Structure 615), along with deity-image and composite-censer sherds as well as hematite mirror fragments—all ritual artifacts that had been ritually “killed” prior to their deposition to allow for safe discard.

All gold objects encountered at Zacpetén rested in the central ceremonial group (Group A), which included four small pieces of rectangular gold foil. Two of the artifacts rested in ceremonial refuse adjacent to the northern stair of the main temple (see Figure 5). This deposit included a number of fragmented deity effigy and composite censers, a ceramic drum, a quincunx cup, and a cache vessel as well as large numbers of stone arrow points. Most of these items were terminated ceremonial objects used in Structure 602, as sherds from the deposit joined with some resting on the temple floor. Two cached fragments of gold foil rested in separate locations immediately in front of the temple’s western stairway (see Figure 5).

**COLONIAL OBJECTS**

The contexts of the sparse European artifacts encountered at Zacpetén indicate that the Kowoj reinterpreted their meanings. All rested in ritual contexts or in refuse deposits of “terminated” ceremonial objects. Group A contained three pieces of iron. One lay in a ceremonial refuse deposit behind Structure 606a, an open hall. This thin rectangular object appears to have been an iron celt (see Figure 6). Celts were ceremonial axe heads, often composed of rare materials such as greenstone, bronze, or iron. Objects of similar size and shape in Contact period (C.E. 1525–1565) deposits in the southeastern United States were in such demand that indigenous North Americans cut and modified Spanish-produced eyed axes into multiple celts (Smith 1987:34–35, 119–120). The second piece of iron at Zacpetén was cached in line with the central stair of the temple but on the opposite side of the plaza (see Figure 5). Its placement does not appear to have been happenstance, because two small pieces of gold foil, mentioned above, were cached in the same alignment. Furthermore, bronze

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**FIGURE 4.** Distribution of long-distance artifacts in Group 719, Zacpetén.

Key
- cow mandible
- bronze/copper bell
- bronze/copper axe
foil rested in the temple’s central cache—also in the same line. Hence, gold and bronze foil had significance similar to iron to the people of Zacpetén. “Primary-axis caches” are common in the Maya region and likely consecrated and activated the path toward the temple, creating contact with the divine (Pendergast 1998:61–62). A third iron fragment rested in a refuse deposit behind Structure 615 adjacent to the indigenous bronze bell, noted above. European and indigenous metals were treated similarly even in “death.”

A kaolin pipe-stem fragment also lay in the refuse deposit behind Structure 615, several meters south of the pieces of metal (see Figures 5 and 7). The stem’s bore diameter of 2.9 millimeters suggests a production date between C.E. 1600 and 1680, although a single representative cannot accurately define chronology (Deetz 1996:26–29; Hume 1969:296–297). English and Dutch colonists began smoking tobacco with kaolin pipes in the late 16th century when they adopted pipe use from indigenous North Americans. Spanish colonial pipe use was “extremely rare” before...
the 18th century, as the Spaniards appropriated Caribbean and Mesoamerican practices—cigars and snuff (Deagan 2002:310). The Kowoj likely obtained the pipe from English pirates, loggers, or slave traders. English pirates off the coast of Belize raided Spanish ships for various prizes including logwood (*Haematoxylon campechianum*), used to produce a dye for the English textile industry. These pirates gradually shifted from stealing to logging their own wood along the Belizean coast and elsewhere (Everitt 1986:78–89). The logwood industry grew such that labor was in short supply and the English employed Miskito “slave raiders” from Honduras. Such slave raiders attacked Tipú in 1707 prompting the Spaniards to reduce its occupants to the north shore of Lake Petén Itzá in the same year (Jones 1998:408). The pipe could have been obtained from the English or brought to Petén by the former occupants of Tipú, although the latter seems unlikely because the Spaniards probably had reduced Zacpetén by that time (Jones 1998:390–409).

The doubly hybrid pipe stem flowed from indigenous North American and European practices into a Kowoj context. Cigars were common offerings, and tobacco had a plethora of medicinal and other ritual uses (Thompson 1970:103–123). We do not know how the Kowoj used the pipe, but its context suggests that it played a role in rituals of the central ceremonial area. Its ultimate deposition followed a Maya pattern, as it was ritually smashed and deposited with other shattered inalienable objects, including effigy censers as well as indigenous and colonial metals.

Group C, a ceremonial group forming a temple assemblage with a layout nearly identical to the eastern half of Group A (see Figure 8), contained two European objects: a piece of unidentified iron and a lead musket ball. The iron fragment was cached in a small platform directly in front of the temple. Like the iron and copper artifacts in Group A, it rested along the primary axis. The lead ball had been fired and distorted by impact. It rested at the base of the temple stair on the south side of long ceremonial platform. The ball was associated with a spindle whorl, a hematite mirror fragment, and a quartz crystal. Modern Yucatec healers use quartz crystals to locate harmful spirits (Hanks 1990:339–340). Hematite mirrors placed into bowls of water or liquor were divination instruments (Taube 1983:112–119). Spindle whorls are weights on thread spindles, but Quiché ritual practitioners use discarded spindle whorls as divinatory objects (Brown 2000:330). The Kowoj may have likewise used the musket ball for divination.

The medial shrine in the front room of the elite residence in Group 719 held a complete deity effigy censer and a shot glass–like offering cup. To the north of the censer (see Figure 4) lay the mandible of a domestic cow (*Bos taurus*; Susan DeFrance, personal communication, August 1, 2006). The mandible (see Figure 9) had been modified into a vaguely triangular form. Although other animal mandibles and teeth were found as offerings at Zacpetén, none were similarly modified or associated with effigy censers. The fauna analysis at Zacpetén is incomplete and future analyses will likely discern additional specimens of European origin.

Cattle were rare in the Petén Lakes region before the conquest. The object may have been acquired from the trade node Bacalar, which participated in cattle ranching in the early 17th century (Farriss 1984:33) or the Guatemalan highlands (Grant Jones, personal communication, March 2008). Spanish *estancias* (ranches) in the Americas provided...
the primary colonial source of meat and produced hides that were in heavy demand in Europe (Bishko 1952:514). Estancias in the Maya region were not very productive and did not require large numbers of local workers, yet they became the primary consumers of land (Alexander 2003:214; Farriss 1984:33–34). Some Colonial-period Maya owned cattle, and cofradías (religious organizations usually focused on Christ, the Virgin, or a particular saint) often had ranches that supplied cattle for feasts and during times of food shortage (Alexander 2003:203–204; Farriss 1984:321–322).

Cattle are large creatures and were obviously foreign to the Maya when first encountered. In Colonial-period Yucatán, families retained the skin or bones of tapirs as heirlooms. Killing these animals was “an act of great bravery,” one to be commemorated (Landa 1941:203). Indigenous mammals, both large and small, tend to be found in high status and ceremonial contexts during the Late Postclassic period (Masson 1999:115–116). The Maya incorporated European domesticated animals into this preexisting pattern, although with even greater containment. At Cozumel, the remains of sheep, horses, and cattle were restricted to ceremonial buildings and burials (Hamblin 1984:142–143). The importance of European fauna is puzzling considering that the Maya would have certainly associated ranching with the Spaniards and colonialism.

Zacpetén’s “European” objects, including those composed of iron, could have been produced in the Americas (Deagan 2002:31–33; Erdman Cornavaca 2003:121–177), although not in Petén. Spain could not meet the commodity demands of its colonies and was experiencing an economic depression and political turmoil. Furthermore, Dutch, English, and French power increased steadily in the Caribbean (Deagan 2002:24–34). Pirates hindered travel along the coasts, necessitating a land route between Yucatán and Guatemala and thereby hastening the conquest of the Petén Itzá. This relocation likely resulted in the abandonment of Zacpetén around 1704. Missionization not only produced Maya-Spanish hybridity but also melded Kowoj and Itzá cultural traditions, gradually washing away an independent Kowoj identity.

CONCLUSION

Louis Montrose recognized contrariety in European proto-colonial discourse about the Americas when he wrote of the “oscillation between fascination and repulsion … desires to destroy and assimilate the Other” (1991:6). The Maya of Petén and other areas likewise possessed contradictory sentiments toward Europeans and their objects. As in Montrose’s (1991) analysis, Kowoj reactions exhibited complexity greater than periodic moments of xenophobia and xenophilia: in fact, the two coexisted. The Kowoj elite clearly detested the Spaniards, and European objects were restricted–taboo to everyday spaces of the nonelite. Nevertheless, they consecrated the central axes of sacred spaces at Zacpetén. No evidence at Zacpetén documents that European goods “trickled down” to nonelites at the site; the goods appear to have been restricted to public ceremony and elite power play. The Kowoj likely last constructed and ensouled the ceremonial groups with such inalienable objects in the mid–17th century before the Spaniards intensified the flow of goods into Petén (Grant Jones, personal communication, March 2008).

The Spanish continued to use their movement across the ocean as political capital well into the Colonial period. The Maya thought the distant east was powerful. Many Spaniards believed places far from Jerusalem and Rome were degenerate (Fabian 1983:26–27). Both schemata placed the Spaniards in a superior position. The Maya cycled political authority, and the Spaniards appropriated this perspective to argue that it was their time to dominate. Yet the Spaniards considered salvation–domination of the “savage” a linear progression (Fabian 1983:26) and the permanent outcome of “divine intervention” (Restall 2003:65). Many Maya expected the Spaniards to eventually leave and that there would then be a return to Precolumbian cultural practices (Scholes and Roys 1938:607), and some took action to achieve this goal—often through actions on Spanish objects and practices. Jacinto Uk appropriated the ocean-crossing dogma but substituted the “corrupting” Spanish with their rivals, the English, to allege an alliance with the latter. Apparently, his goal was to force the Spaniards into the sea (Bricker 1981:71), reversing the circumstances of their arrival in the Maya world. In 1704, Kulut Kowoj, son of AjKowoj, sought to overthrow the Spaniards by seizing the galeota, the ship the Spaniards used to attack Nojpeten. He thought it was the key to rebellion as it was the primary instrument of conquest and control of the lake, but he failed and was executed (Jones 1998:399–401). At times, some Maya considered Spanish objects polluting. As is evident in the resistance events of 1546–47 and Petén resistance to Spanish expansion, they implicated Spanish material culture in their subjugation and understood the alterity of the objects.

Colonial metal, fauna, and pipes entered the Maya world with new meanings. All such objects identified at Zacpetén rested in ceremonial contexts or deposits of terminated ritual objects. Nevertheless, the Kowoj did not place the colonial objects in ceremonial contexts simply because they were mysterious. Novel items are often initially understood as subtypes, special forms “of something which is already known” (Thomas 1991:103–106). The correlation between the use of colonial iron objects and indigenous copper and gold objects at Zacpetén indicates a similar pattern: iron was interpreted as a subtype of ta’-k’in. However, Kowoj practices indicate that they appreciated varieties of ta’-k’in: they restricted gold and iron to ceremonial groups, while copper-alloy objects rested in both ceremonial groups and elite residential complexes.
The Kowoj cached bronze, gold, and iron objects as well as a number of other imported objects as positive contagion to activate and consecrate ritual spaces. Like the metal alloys of creation, these materials were animating. Their allure emerged from their singularity in addition to their origin from beyond the Maya world. Given the placement of all varieties of ta’-k’in—copper, gold, and iron along the east–west axial path—the metals likely affected both forward and reverse positive contagion. The former derived from the appropriation of solar power through its excrement and the latter through the manipulation of these excretions to ensure the proper movement of the sun on its east to west path. Metals that had completed their “service” were ritually killed and became taboo.

Not only was ta’-k’in excreted from the “wholly other” (sensu Csordas 2004)—the sun—but it also was associated with the colonial other: the Europeans. In many colonial situations, powerful foreigners become subtypes of gods. Although this was not the case in the Spanish interaction with the Maya, they did become a subtype of the legendary Itza—depraved intruders from the east, possessing knowledge (Chuchiai 2007:77–83; Clendinnen 1980:384). Nevertheless, some Maya considered the Spaniards “three times” worse than the Itza and argued that the Spaniards were the source of decimating biological contagions (Edmonson 1986:149). The Kowoj likely thought the Spaniards, who came from the direction of sunrise and possessed large quantities of metal, brokered the sun’s precious excrement. As mentioned, an overabundance of solar excrement can result in a negative valence. Hence, Spanish possession and desire of metal objects added to their wealth and power but may have spiritually corrupted them.

Of the various European trade goods, iron was the most desired by the Maya, especially machetes and axes (Clendinnen 1980:387). In many colonial situations, iron objects from nails to axes became ceremonial objects. People without knowledge of iron production initially relied on Europeans for these items. Europeans generally interacted with indigenous elites who controlled the objects’ distributions (Sahlins 1981:43–46). Metal was certainly restricted at Zacpetén. This trend extended beyond the Maya world into North America, where European copper and iron is rarely encountered outside of mortuary contexts (Smith 1987:119–120; Turgeon 1997:17), and the Pacific, where iron was the most desired trade good (Sahlins 1981:35; Thomas 1991:93). Iron may not have had the same status among the Petén Itza, who likely used iron axes in an attack on a mission settlement in 1698 (Jones 1998:348). However, this postconquest event may reflect that the value of iron changed over the initial period of entanglement because of increased availability. Even before the conquest, Itza elite may have controlled trade routes with the exterior, limiting Kowoj access to colonial objects. The archaeological deposits at Zacpetén indicate that iron was likely initially avoided by or restricted from most Kowoj (negative contagion) but highly desired (positive contagion) for civic-ceremonial areas.

During the resistance of 1546–47, the Yucatec attempted to ritually extract the Spaniards and their pollution by ridding themselves of Spanish objects, which they had previously greatly desired. Their struggle failed, and many elite Maya recognized that to adapt to their subordinate position and possibly eventually regain control, they had to appropriate Spanish knowledge (Clendinnen 1980:384). The Quisteil Rebellion of 1761 only targeted certain items. Hence, later attacks on “Spanishness” indicate that many objects and practices had been completely appropriated and were no longer associated with the colonial other.

The Petén Maya also struggled to avoid inundation by the Spaniards and their culture, yet they appropriated bits and pieces into controlled contexts. The elite of Zacpetén likely sought to harness the Spanish power by incorporating their objects and, therefore, their essence into public rituals in central locations. If Kowoj elite exchanges resembled those of the Pacific, they would have sought objects that told stories, as the item’s history composed a substantial part of its value (Thomas 1991:103). We will never know the detail of Kowoj reflections on these border fetishes, but they would have, at the very least, told a story of a world beyond the sea, the Spaniards, and the deluge of colonialism. Many of these inalienable objects helped consecrate civic-ceremonial spaces, the microcosms and symbolic foundations of Kowoj society. Consequently, the Kowoj of Zacpetén revitalized themselves and their world through the contagion of alterity.

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NOTES

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1. The Petén Itza had historical ties with the “legendary” Itza of Yucatán: the latter may have originated in Petén. Here, I distinguish the two, because a complete analysis of their relationship is beyond the scope of this article.

2. The Ajaw Kan Ek’ of 1525 and that of 1696 were members of the same ruling dynasty. Ajaw signified “lord.” Kan and Ek’ were the dynasty matronym and patronym, respectively (Jones 1998:80).

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