

U T'aan Nukuch Máak
(‘Words of the Elders’):
Defining a Yucatec Maya ‘Speech’ Genre

U t'aan nukuch máak
(‘Palabras de los ancianos’):
*hacia la definición de un género
maya yucateco de ‘discurso’*

CRYSTAL SHEEDY

University of South Dakota

ORCID: 0000-0003-3116-4617 / crystal.sheedy@usd.edu

ABSTRACT: Yucatec Maya orality has been a popular topic of study of scholars from a wide array of disciplines. These studies often rely on academically generated categories of speech that have often been stylized in forms that descend from Western thought. The generated speech categories may overlook more performance-based forms that are more common of Indigenous knowledge systems. Most of the collected and analyzed Maya oral literature appears to be recounted by men, leaving women’s orality and their unique ways of interpreting the world largely under-documented. In this paper, I expand our understanding of Yucatec Maya women’s oral literature by providing a systematic documentation and description of *u t'aan nukuch máak*, words of the elders, a ‘speech’ genre that relies largely on performance. The performance of *u t'aan nukuch máak* are an embodiment of my female collaborators’ culture, as they occur in their daily routines. *U t'aan nukuch máak* are performed (or uttered) in the context of certain bodies, objects, times, and spaces that index concepts that reflect the strength of Maya cultural memory.

KEYWORDS: Yucatec Maya, Gender, Orality, Embodiment, Cultural Memory.

RESUMEN: La oralidad maya yucateca ha sido un tema popular de estudio entre los estudiosos de una amplia gama de disciplinas. Dichos estudios se basan con frecuencia en categorías de discurso generadas académicamente que a menudo han sido estilizadas en formas que se derivan del pensamiento occidental. Las categorías de discurso generadas pueden pasar por alto formas más basadas en el desempeño que son más comunes en los sistemas de conocimiento indígena. La mayor parte de la literatura oral maya recopilada y analizada parece ser narrada por hombres, lo que deja la oralidad de las mujeres y sus formas únicas de interpretar el mundo sub-documentadas en gran medida. En este artículo, amplió nuestra comprensión de la

literatura oral de las mujeres mayas yucatecas proporcionando una documentación y una descripción sistemáticas del *u t'aan nukuch máak*, las palabras de los ancianos, un género de 'discurso' que se basa en gran medida en la actuación. La ejecución del *u t'aan nukuch máak* es una encarnación de la cultura de mis colaboradoras, tal como ocurre en sus rutinas diarias. Las *u t'aan nukuch máak* se realizan (o se pronuncian) en el contexto de ciertos cuerpos, objetos, tiempos y espacios que indican conceptos que reflejan la fuerza de la memoria cultural maya.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Maya yucateco, género, oralidad, encarnación, memoria cultural.

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Yaan u ts'onikech!

As I sat inside a classroom in 2016 at the secondary school in Xocén, Yucatán, I listened to a group of young students' end of term presentation. A storm was on the horizon. Booms of thunder started to shake the room. Without hesitation, each young woman who had her hair resting upon her back and shoulders almost instinctively fixed her hair into a bun —lifting it off her shoulders and back. A couple young men made some joking remarks to the young women after they performed the behavior. In the moment, I said nothing, but I worried if I, too, needed to fix my hair into a bun —as it laid resting on my shoulders.

A few days later as my host family and I were eating a meal in their kitchen, I asked my two closest female collaborators, Zanita and Sierra, who were present in the classroom that day, why their friends tied their hair into a bun at the same time. At first, they were confused by my question, but as I detailed the sequence of events, I refreshed their memories. They responded with the above phrase, *Yaan u ts'onikech*, which loosely translates as: He/She/It will shoot you! Who will shoot me? I asked in shock. Sierra replied, *Cháak*, the rain deity. Sierra, ever-astute at noticing my confusion, further elaborated by stating that during a thunderstorm, if you do not tie your hair into a bun —and your hair rests upon your shoulders and back— *Cháak* could shoot you because *Cháak* sees you as *X-táabay*, which glosses as a demon seductress in English. Zanita continued, because your hair is falling onto your back like *X-táabay*, who has long, flowing hair. Regina chimed in by adding, when there is a thunderstorm, the *nukuch máak*, elders, believe that *Cháak* is hunting *k'aak'as ba'alo'ob*, which glosses as monsters in English. *X-táabay* is a *k'aak'as ba'al*, so *Cháak* may confuse you with *X-táabay* and shoot you if your hair is resting on your shoulders and back.

Although not my first encounter with this 'speech' genre, this brief exchange encapsulates one of many experiences I had with this genre during my stays in Xocén. To an outsider like me, the simple gesture of young women tying their hair into a bun as a storm approached evaded my perception. The only reason I

noticed the behavior was because the number of young women who tied their hair into a bun—and the comments made by the young men. Yet, to Sierra, Zanita, and Regina, this gesture meant the young women were following advice that had been passed down for generations by elders. Advice, as all my collaborators emphasized, that serves to protect oneself from harm.

Embedded in this advice are concepts that reveal a Maya way of perceiving and inhabiting the world. Some gestures, like the brief exchange I described above, can encode various layers of meaning that tie directly to concepts rooted to Maya cosmology—as evidenced by the example’s reference to Cháak and X-táabay.

My collaborators refer to this genre as *u t’aan nukuch máak*, the words of the elders. The gloss they provide for the name of this genre is *dichos* in Spanish, which translates as ‘proverbs’ in English. As I will discuss in more detail below, scholars of the Yucatán Peninsula have heard examples of this genre (Domínguez Aké, 1993; Bricker, Po’ot Yah, and Dzul de Po’ot, 1998; Callahan, 2005; Grube, 2008; Preuss, 2005; Muntsch, 1943). However, to my knowledge, this genre has never been systematically documented and described in the academic literature. A further note of importance is that although the findings I present in this paper represent women’s use and interpretations of this genre, the genre is not unique to women. All genders use this genre. Most of my experiences in Xocén connected me with women, as such the data and interpretations in this paper centers on women’s perspectives of this genre.

In this paper, I seek to expand our understanding of Yucatec Maya women’s oral literature by providing a systematic documentation and description of this under-documented ‘speech’ genre that relies largely on performance rather than overt speech. In the first two sections, I situate the theoretical underpinnings of this work and provide a short description of my methodology. As I consider one of the main goals of this paper is to offer a description of this genre, the next two sections describe this genre by weaving together my ethnographic findings with the existing categories of speech generated by other scholars. Then, I describe how this genre best suits the category of proverbs with some exceptions. In the fifth section, I offer concrete examples of this genre through an interpretive analysis of corn, a significant object that appears throughout time and space among Indigenous groups of Mesoamerica. This section demonstrates the generational transmission of the cultural knowledge held within this genre, which reflects the longevity of Maya cultural memory.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Over the years, ethnographers have captured countless narratives by Maya men throughout the Maya region, which extends across Guatemala, Belize, México, and northern Honduras. In these collected narratives, men recount a myriad of oral texts that interweaves concepts found within Maya cosmology, attesting to

men's intricate knowledge of their ways of knowing. In the Yucatán Peninsula of México, there is an abundance of scholarship on the oral literature of Yucatec Maya speakers (Burns, 1983; Park Redfield, 1935; Preuss, 2005; Worley, 2013). Yet, the same critique remains. Much of the analysis of these narratives solely focuses on the orality of men.

Although some scholars (Elmendorf, 1976; Park Redfield, 1935; Worley, 2013) have been able to collect oral narratives from Yucatec Maya women, women's orality is under-documented in the academic record. In the earlier years of my ethnographic fieldwork among Yucatec Maya women, I had much of the same difficulties that other scholars who seek to collect Indigenous women's oral narratives experienced (Raby, 2007; Rosenbaum, 1993). I was able to collect a few pieces of oral literature, namely *cuentos*, stories, as defined by Burns' categories (1983), from my female collaborators that were similar in form to men's oral literature. However, as my female collaborators shared their lives with me, I realized searching strictly for oral narratives that were similar in form to men's narratives and reflected their knowledge of their cosmological system would be a hopeless pursuit. Instead, many of women's 'oral' narratives that reflect their ways of knowing live in the performance of their daily lives.

For this paper, I take inspiration from Worley and Palacios' framework of *ts'iib* (2019). *Ts'iib* extends the analysis from the written and spoken word to other more performatic forms (Worley, 2013). Referencing Taylor (2003), Deriu (2020) writes that performatic styles reflect "embodied knowledge, a learning and a remembering through the body (by means of gestures, movement, singing, dancing, and so on), as well as a means of creating, preserving and transmitting knowledge." *Ts'iib* encompasses forms that reflect an Indigenous way of thinking about history and recording knowledge that has largely been overlooked by scholars (Worley and Palacios, 2019). For example, the knowledge and techniques utilized by Maya weavers from Guatemala and Chiapas have been passed down generationally through time. Additionally, woven or embroidered designs can signify deeply rooted concepts of Maya cosmology (Otzoy, 1992; Worley and Palacios, 2019). Although the practice of weaving has undoubtedly been modified to include modern materials and techniques, the performance of weaving demonstrates how contemporary weavers embody their ancestors by continuing and teaching the tradition to younger generations (2019).

Rather than solely through orality, Yucatec Maya women's knowledge is embodied in their everyday practices through the performance of their daily routines. In anthropological thought, embodiment initially stemmed from Csordas' proposition to consider humans as embodied beings, treating the mind and body as a unified entity (1990). He argued culture influences not just the mind, but also the body (1990). To provide an example of embodied culture, consider how an individual positions their body in a certain context, such as the proper distance to stand apart from a stranger when having a conversation. This distance varies depending upon the cultural background of the individual and is symbolic of their culture.

Because culture exists within a wider context than just the individual, Strathern and Stewart (2008) contended that the concept of embodiment must not be removed from the world as perceived by a cultural group. Embodiment needs to be situated within the dynamic and ever-changing cosmos (2008). They defined cosmos as “the whole world as inhabited by people and apprehended by them, including life-worlds of spirits and deities” (Strathern and Stewart, 2008: 69). Calling to mind Geertz’s “webs of significance,” an individual embodies their culture because culture is suspended in the cosmos (Geertz, 1973). Their embodiment becomes a direct reflection of their ontology and epistemology.

Performance, an embodied communicative act in itself, affords a window into understanding why certain embodied actions are significant and often reflects the cultural memory of a community (Assmann, 2011). Cultural memory is “galvanized in symbols, for they are represented in oral myths, conveyed in writings, and performed in feasts as they continually illuminate a changing present” (Assmann, 2011: 19). Often institutionalized, cultural memory is entrusted to trained specialists, such as shamans and priests, who devote years of their lives to become carriers of memory (Assmann, 2011). They learn how to perform the intricate rituals, dances, songs, and so forth in order to preserve their respective group’s cultural memory.

Although I agree with Assmann’s conclusion that trained specialists act as guardians of cultural memory, I contend that it may be too rigid. Similar to *ts’iib*, we must extend our definition of cultural memory beyond trained specialists and include non-specialists. We must examine how cultural memory becomes institutionalized through the intergenerational teaching of how to navigate in a world that is defined by a group’s culture, which is also suspended in their interpretation of the cosmos.

Several scholars (Gaskins, 1999, 2000, 2008; Kramer, 2005; Paradise and Rogoff, 2009) have examined the socialization process of young children within Maya communities. Younger children start to learn by observing their older relatives. Then, as the children grow older, they will receive more guidance from said relatives. This process is typically called experiential learning, which involves an individual partaking in a certain activity and the ‘talk’ surrounding this experience (Paradise and Rogoff, 2009). This ‘talk’ usually corrects the individual’s mistakes and explains the process (2009). It is in this process of learning that children often hear *u t’aan nukuch máak* —as their behavior is corrected to follow the advice held in this genre. Children internalize and follow this wisdom as they grow, which demonstrates how this cultural knowledge becomes embodied and represents a more performatic form that also expresses the strength and longevity of Maya cultural memory.

I argue the performance of *u t’aan nukuch máak* —whether that be behavioral or spoken— is an embodiment of my collaborators’ culture. Examples of the genre are institutionalized, as they appear in their daily routines. They perform (or utter) *u t’aan nukuch máak* in the context of certain bodies, objects, times,

and spaces that index concepts that are deeply rooted to their ways of knowing. As evidenced by this paper's opening vignette, my female collaborators have the potential to engage with elements of the sacred that are found in Maya cosmology by simply performing their daily tasks. This aspect calls to mind the powerful idea of the sacredness in everyday life that is often found in Maya thought throughout time (Sharer, 1994; Sheedy, 2019; Sosa, 1995). To demonstrate this connection, I will provide an analysis of a significant object that has been well-established as an essential and sacred aspect of many Mesoamerican cultures, corn.

Methodology and Ethnographic Context

Much of the ethnographic data in this paper draws on over ten years of my ethnographic fieldwork in Xocén. Xocén is located about twelve kilometers southeast of Valladolid in the Mexican state of Yucatán (Figure 1). Throughout the summers of 2010-2014, for nine months of 2016, and the summer of 2019, I lived with a Maya family. To collect my data, I relied on my linguistic capabilities in Yucatec Maya and several qualitative methods that are firmly embedded in cultural anthropology, such as participant observation and interviews, as well as a collaborative approach that is modeled after Lawless' reciprocal ethnography (2019). As stated above, I almost exclusively worked with Maya women. The data I collected comes from their lived experiences, narratives, and interpretations of *u t'aan nukuch máak*.

Utilizing a reciprocal ethnographic approach, I can build relationships according to the cultural values set forth by my collaborators. Instead of privileging my voice over theirs or their voices over mine, we took a truly collaborative approach in the process of producing knowledge about their culture. For the speech genre, I collected over 290 examples. I selected 10 of my closest female collaborators to conduct recorded systematic exegetical analyses that relied on this reciprocal approach. As my collaborators asked me to maintain their anonymity, I changed their names in this paper.

As our efforts integrate the interpretations of archaeological and ethnohistoric sources with my ethnographic findings, this paper more broadly focuses on the Maya cultural area. Yet, it is important to note, my collaborators' lives in Xocén are not mirror images of communities of other Mayan language groups throughout Mesoamerica nor of their own language group in the Yucatán Peninsula and parts of northern Belize. Furthermore, their lives are drastically different from those of their ancestors of the more distant past and even those of older generations who are still alive.

For my female collaborators, they actively embody their culture as they perform their daily routines and teach younger generations how to do daily tasks. The very performance of *u t'aan nukuch máak* indexes significant environments that are suspended in the cosmos and tied to Maya cultural memory. In the next

section, I describe and situate the genre by interweaving my findings of *u t'aan nukuch máak* with categories generated by other scholars of Yucatec Maya oral literature.

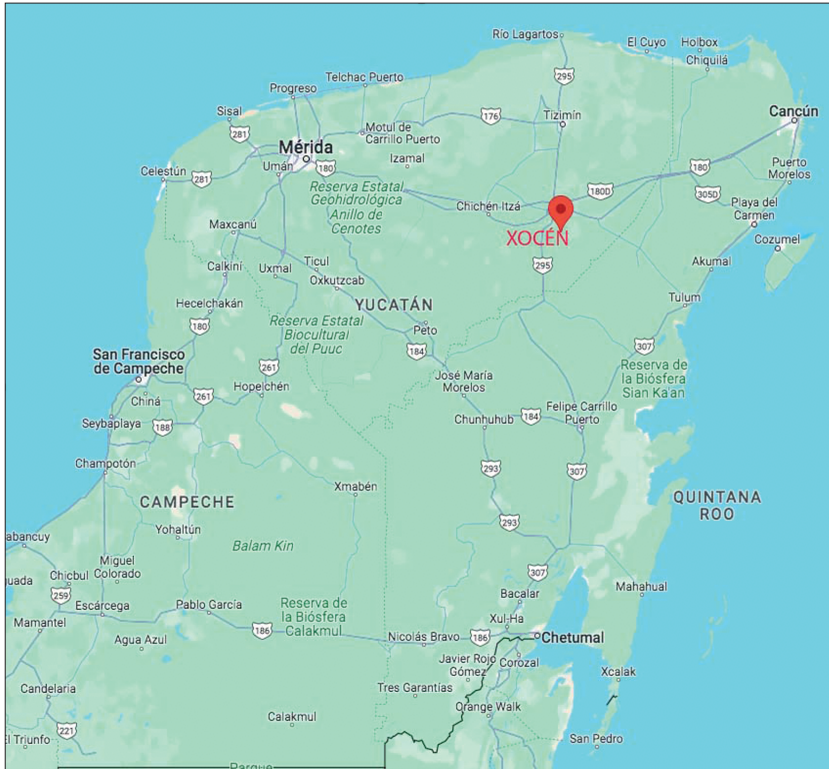


Figure 1. Location of Xocén, Yucatán (Image from Google Maps).

U T'aan Nukuch Máak: Situating the Genre

U t'aan nukuch máak are perplexing, as they seem to resist any successful categorization into a genre generated by other scholars. In practice, they are largely dependent upon the behavior performed by an individual in a certain environment. While speech may be uttered in some instances, their form varies depending on the context of the performance, which will be discussed in more detail below. Their ambiguous nature inherently makes them difficult to classify and leads an inquisitive mind to the question: Without overt speech, can they still be considered a speech genre or are they something else? To begin to delve into this conundrum, in this section I define the genre as revealed to me by my

collaborators. I also situate it into the existing academic scholarship of speech genres of Yucatec Maya.

U t'aan nukuch máak are used in daily speech and practice to mark environments of cultural significance in my collaborators' ways of knowing. I classify them as a speech genre because they take a particular style that my collaborators can separate from other forms of speech. This style is largely dependent upon the situational context in which each *u t'aan nukuch máak* occurs. The genre is widely recognized, accepted, and actively used by my collaborators.

Although Yucatec Maya has been encoded in various orthographic systems, the language has only recently begun to be standardized into a written form that is being utilized in bilingual education programs throughout the peninsula (Guerrettaz, 2019; Rhodes, 2020). Many of my older female collaborators do not know how to read. Instead, they rely upon oral transmission, and the many different categories of speech that Mayas use, to share their Indigenous knowledge. It is important to note that the categorization of *u t'aan nukuch máak* into existing genres of speech will not be precise, as I define *u t'aan nukuch máak* according to the parameters set forth by my collaborators.

Burns' (1983) work provided the most comprehensive account of the various speech genres used by Yucatec Maya speakers. Among his categories of *tsicbal*, conversation (Burns 1983: 21), which appears to be loosely based on categories created by Park Redfield (1935), *ejemplo* seems to be the closest in function to *u t'aan nukuch máak*. Burns paired *ejemplo* with *te'escunah*, and translated both as 'counsel' (Burns, 1983: 20). Park Redfield, providing a more descriptive assessment of *ejemplos* than Burns, defined the category as "old-fashioned stuff" that "fall into several groups, the most important... have to do with the relations between man and man or between man and god," while others "account for certain phenomena of nature" (Park Redfield, 1935: 6-7). In her understanding, *ejemplos* "functioned... as a reinforcement of moral and social attitudes" (Park Redfield, 1935: 6).

Although Park Redfield notes the supernatural themes of her collected *ejemplos*, they encompass a wide variety of topics that are passed down from generation to generation. Palmer (2019) observes that the genre's more quotidian nature reflects narratives written by Yucatec Maya female authors. Because of their applicability to everyday themes, they can be easily adapted to the lifestyles of contemporary generations of younger Mayas, who "regularly confront conflicting influences" (2019: 195). Further, as didactic narratives, *ejemplos* strengthen cultural values tied to Maya thought.

The *ejemplo* below, collected by Park Redfield, provides an example of the genre's form. Here Doña Ana and Doña Elvira remark on another woman's habitual behavior, which can be considered an event that encapsulates the more mundane aspects of life.

They say that Doña M. used to make fun of her sister-in-law's child, who was not right in her head. That is why she now has this child (feeble-minded). You should

not make fun of people. Once there was a girl who used to go by a place where sat a hunchback. She would always make fun of her. Later, when her child was born, it was a hunchback (Park Redfield, 1935: 26).

Because *ejemplos* can be viewed as didactic narratives, there tends to be a moral (Palmer, 2019). The moral of this *ejemplo* that aligns with Maya cultural values is that you should not ‘make fun of’ another person, otherwise the other person’s hardship may befall you. Doña M., in the above *ejemplo*, ‘made fun of’ a disabled child, and in consequence of her actions, she was ‘punished’ with a disabled child of her own.

Like *ejemplos*, *u t’aan nukuch máak* are didactic in nature. Their purpose is to instill cultural values that, if followed, serve to protect oneself from harm, whether from natural or supernatural sources. Thematically, they appear to cover the more quotidian aspects of life. It’s important to note, these aspects are also suspended in the Maya cosmos, although they presumably appear mundane to an outsider. As such, they index certain concepts that are deeply rooted to my collaborators’ ways of knowing.

The genre’s form differs from that of *ejemplos*, which leads to their ambiguity in classification within the existing genres of speech. Although they also carry moral lessons, the genre presents less of a narrative than *ejemplos* do. I documented three different forms of *u t’aan nukuch máak*. When elicited, the genre reflects its most complete form. A form that is similar to Dundes’ (1961) categorization of folk beliefs. When a woman is providing advice to another woman or in the case of our exegetical recordings, *u t’aan nukuch máak* appear in the compositional framework of ‘If...; then...’ Thus, each *u t’aan nukuch máak* includes two phrases, a “cause condition” and a “result.” My collaborators used the term *u yáalul* to denote the result, or consequence, of the cause condition. In environments with individuals who have reached adulthood and can still bear children, the form uttered of a *u t’aan nukuch máak* can include a single phrase, the result. An example of this type of phrase appears in the opening vignette of this paper (i.e., *Yaan u ts’onikech!*, ‘He/She/It will shoot you!’). In these instances, I argue they most closely resemble the category of proverbs. In environments where a mother or another woman is caring for a child, the *u t’aan nukuch máak* changes to a simple scold, such as *Ma’!*, *No!*. Whichever the utterance or lack thereof, *u t’aan nukuch máak* are largely in response to a person’s behavior, marking the behavior as a transgression of cultural values.

An ethnographic example that emphasizes all three variations occurred on one evening —as I tried to light a fire in the *k’óoben*, hearth, at the house where I stayed. On an evening when almost everyone in the household was busy tending to their nightly chores, I decided I wanted to start the fire to heat water for our evening baths. As I had never done it before, I relied upon what I had observed the women I lived with do —as well as my training from Girl Scouts. Realizing there were still lit embers from a previous fire, I figured I just needed to get some

paper and a candle to get a new flame started. I reasoned that the embers from the old fire would help to ignite the new fire.

When Regina came into the kitchen, she saw what I was trying to do and simply said *Ma'!*, 'No!', and told me that it was not the correct way to do it. Similar to the way children experientially learn how to perform their chores (Paradise and Rogoff, 2009), she demonstrated to me how to properly light the fire. She removed the candle and papers from the center of the hearth. I asked why my way of lighting a new fire was incorrect. She uttered just the result of a *u t'aan nukuch máak*, *A wíichame'*, *yaan u kaxtik u yaanal x-ch'uup*, Your husband will find another woman. I pressed for more explanation. She elaborated by stating the complete form of the *u t'aan nukuch máak*, which is below:

Cause Condition:

Wa' yaan a k'áak'e', *mix uts ka ka't'abik k'áak' te' a k'óobeno'...*

If you (already) have a fire (i.e., embers), it is not good for you to relight the flame there in your hearth because...

Result:

...(mix *kimikeche'*, *ba'ale'*) a *wíichame'*, *yaan u kaxtik u yaanal xch'uup*.

...(you will not be dead, but) your husband, he will find another woman.

As stated in this *u t'aan nukuch máak*, my behavior was scolded and corrected by Regina because if I lit a new fire with foreign objects (i.e., paper and a candle), then added new firewood on top of an old fire, my husband would have an affair with another woman. Regina explained that because there were already embers from a previous fire, introducing foreign objects to light a new fire is like introducing your husband to a new woman. If there are still lit embers from a previous fire, it is best to use those embers to light a fire because you do not want your husband to be unfaithful to you.

The form each *u t'aan nukuch máak* takes is governed by the age of the perpetrator or individual who is seeking counsel. In the past, the knowledge of the consequences of each *u t'aan nukuch máak* was restricted to adults. When my collaborators were children, their parents and older relatives seldom explained the result of their actions until they reached a marriageable age, presumably around puberty. If they did ask their relatives why, the response they received was it was just *k'eban*, sinful. The use of this specific term indexes the genre's didactic nature and connection to Maya cultural values.

Today, parents will often share the results of the *u t'aan nukuch máak* if their children ask why they should not do a certain action. This previously age restricted knowledge led some of my collaborators to not know the results of the various cause conditions. Yet, where the result remains unsaid, they typically understood the implicit meaning within the cause condition and were able to parse out a result. Thus, there always seems to be a result even if it is left unsaid or forgotten.

I collected a *u t'aan nukuch máak* with a similar theme to the above *ejemplo* collected by Park Redfield. During each of my recording sessions with my ten female collaborators, all knew of the consequence that would happen to a person if they “watched” a disabled person. The example I collected is below:

Cause Condition:

Mix uts ka cha'antik juntúul nuun máake' wa' ka cha'antike'...

It's not good for you to watch a disabled person, if you watch [this person] ...

Result:

... keen a síijs a paale' chan nuun wa' chan toot.

... when you have a child, [you will have] a little disabled [child] or a little mute [child].

Both the *ejemplo* and the *u t'aan nukuch máak* express a cultural value that the onlooker(s) seeks to instill to the perpetrator of the behavior.

Longer forms of oral narrative can attach onto the *u t'aan nukuch máak*. Often these longer forms are *ejemplos* or legends. For example, in the above *ejemplo* collected by Park Redfield, the characters in the *ejemplo* may have different names in each recounting to accommodate to the location and time of the telling. For the *u t'aan nukuch máak* above, my collaborators all knew of women in the village who had this consequence happen to them. Thus, they could all share a similar *ejemplo* that expresses the same cultural restriction. During one of our recorded exegetical sessions, for instance, sisters, María and Somona, named a woman in Xocén who had a child with a disability because —as they attested— this woman must have ‘watched’ a disabled person at some point in her life. Because of this woman’s sinful behavior, she, like Doña M. in Park Redfield’s *ejemplo*, was ‘punished’ with a disabled child of her own.

Trying to determine the categories of speech in Yucatec Maya calls to mind Bakhtin’s critiques of classifying speech genres (1986). In the case of *ejemplos* and *u t'aan nukuch máak*, it is clear the two genres are related as both are didactic in nature and cover a wide range of topics that encompass daily life. These two genres complement each other. To delve into academic curiosity, it could be worthwhile to ask which genre begot the other.

In my perspective, one possibility is that *u t'aan nukuch máak* could have descended from longer narratives, such as *ejemplos*, *cuENTOS*, and legends. Yet, as time wore on and memory faded, an abridged form of the longer narratives remains that has been encoded in practice and speech, the *u t'aan nukuch máak*. Worley (2013) documented a similar phenomenon when collecting stories from his collaborators. In two of the collected oral performances, recounted in Yucatec Maya, of the *cuENTO*, “The Dwarf of Uxmal”, his collaborators state the dwarf unearths musical instruments. His collaborators have forgotten the Yucatec Maya names of these instruments. Instead, both performers gesture how the dwarf interacted with the instruments in the story. These gestures demonstrate embodied knowledge of these instruments. Although the instruments’ names may have

been forgotten by the storytellers, the instruments, the *soot*, flute, and the *tunkul*, percussion instrument, “exist in Maya cultural memory through the physical gestures that indicate their being played” (Worley, 2013: 53). As embodied culture that is intergenerationally transmitted, *u t’aan nukuch máak*, like the gestures made by Worley’s storytellers, reflect the strength of Maya cultural memory as words and phrases may fade away with time, but the behavior that represents the adherence to the wisdom found within the genre remains encoded in practice.

Another possibility is that *u t’aan nukuch máak* acted as the kernel to which the longer narrative, the *ejemplo*, affixed itself. Although a true solution may never be reached, I contend *u t’aan nukuch máak* consist of their own genre of speech that is comparable in form to the genre of proverb. In the next section, I briefly explain the category of proverb as defined in the academic literature, then discuss how *u t’aan nukuch máak* fit this genre of speech—with some adjustments that reflect Indigenous ways of perceiving and interpreting the world.

A Proverb by Any Other Name?: Defining *U T’aan Nukuch Máak*

In the case of *u t’aan nukuch máak*, the best existing genre, to my understanding, that suits them in one of their forms is comparable to the genre of proverbs. Yet, I place them into this category with hesitation, as their variation in form reflects their inherent ambiguity. I surmise the parameters defining the genre of proverbs is broad enough to represent the ambiguity within *u t’aan nukuch máak*. In this section, I work to demonstrate how the genre of *u t’aan nukuch máak* are comparable to proverbs.

Paremiography, the collection of proverbs, and paremiology, the study of proverbs, have been longtime academic pursuits of scholars housed in a range of disciplines (Mieder, 2004). From historical and literary studies to linguistic analyses to how proverbs are used within a culture, each facet of proverbs has seemingly been meticulously examined (Arewa and Dundes, 1964; Dundes, 1994). Many of these aforementioned studies focus solely on the written form of a proverb, while others that concentrate on Indigenous groups’ orality center on the spoken form.

Despite the multitude of studies conducted, defining the parameters of the category of proverbs remains quite ambiguous. Within Mesoamerica, scholars use different terms to classify speech (or writing) that represent an ‘If...; then...’ construction. In written form, the appendix of Book 5 of the *Florentine Codex* contains some omens that reflect this framework (Sahagún, 1981), while Book 6 recounts “oral discourses known in Nahuatl as *huehuetlatolli* (speech of the elders) that are at once lofty in tone, replete with metaphorical language, and pragmatic in their social and political implications” (Peterson, 2021: 167). In the appendix, there is a collection of proverbs that reinforce these Nahua ideals (León-Portilla and Alva, 2001; Peterson, 2021). Then, the books of the *Chilam Balam*, prophecy

texts written by the Spokesman of the Jaguar from the Yucatec Maya region, contain proverbial phrases (Edmonson, 1982).

In oral form, some proverbial speech has been documented among contemporary speakers of the various Mayan language groups. In respect to speech that reflects a similar form and style to *u t'aan nukuch máak*, Stross (2006) displays a series of collected sayings from a variety of Mayan languages. Eberardo (1991) documented similar speech among the Mam-speaking Maya of Guatemala. Gossen (1973) had some success documenting proverbial speech among the Tzotzil-speaking Maya of Mexico. However, Gossen theorizes the overall absence of proverbial speech in the scholarship may be because of the genre's orality, ambiguous form, and unconventional performance. These aspects lead to their difficulty in their documentation by scholars who may not immediately recognize them as proverbs (Gossen, 1973). This ambiguity is a key trait of the category of speech. Gossen writes, "the more ambiguous [the proverb] remains to the ear of the audience the better for those who "get" it and greater shame for the social transgressor to whom it is usually addressed," which is a testament to their didactic quality (Gossen, 1973: 206).

To my knowledge, *u t'aan nukuch máak* has never been systematically documented in the academic record. Although various scholars of the region have heard the genre throughout the Yucatán Peninsula (Domínguez Aké, 1993; Bricker and Edmonson, 1985; Bricker, Po'ot Yah, and Dzul de Po'ot, 1998; Callahan, 2005; Grube, 2008; Preuss, 2005; Muntsch, 1943), most have not categorized these utterances as comparable to proverbs. Some renderings, but not all, share the complete 'If...; then...' form that *u t'aan nukuch máak* take when they are elicited.

Bricker and Edmonson (1985) noted the presence of proverbial speech in Yucatec Maya, which they referred to as *putzil t'an*, or 'measured words'. My collaborators did not refer to *u t'aan nukuch máak* as such. One example of *putzil t'an* from Bricker and Edmonson's findings is: "If there is money, even the ant will dance" (1985). Bricker, Po'ot Yah, and Dzul de Po'ot (1998) have documented various examples of *u t'aan nukuch máak* in their entries for their dictionary of the Yucatec Maya language, such as those attached to interacting with particular flora and faunae. For instance, for the entry *š-tú'u-šiknil*, morning glory: "If children play with flowers, their ears will rot" (1998: 258). Preuss has also documented a selection of beliefs that are similar to the genre, such as: "If a pregnant woman is scratched by something during a full moon, her child will have a birthmark. That mark indicates wisdom" (2005: 146). Santiago Domínguez Aké records various *tuukulo'ob*, thoughts, that his contributors, from various Maya villages throughout the region, believed would happen (Domínguez Aké, 1993). Domínguez Aké's collected *tuukulo'ob* all reflect the complete 'If...; then...' form.

Returning to the broad classification of proverbs of written and oral literature, a generally accepted and fluid definition of proverbs that emerges from the discipline of folklore is: "A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical,

fixed [or formulaic] and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation” (Mieder, 2004: 3).

When examining *u t'aan nukuch máak*, they do meet the minimal requirements set forth by this definition. I demonstrated in the above section the genre consists of didactic statements that when uttered can take the formulaic form of one phrase, the result, or two phrases, the cause condition and the result. An individual's behavior typically provokes the use of *u t'aan nukuch máak*, which appears to be a similar environment in which proverbs occur cross-culturally. The genre is known, understood, and used by my collaborators in a variety of contexts that reflect their metaphorical knowledge of their cultural values that have been passed down each generation. The knowledge embedded in each *u t'aan nukuch máak* index a wider cultural system that the person who utters the proverb or scolds the perpetrator seeks to transmit (Briggs, 1985). However, because they are not always spoken, their ambiguous form and occurrence make them difficult to recognize and document as a genre that is comparable to proverbs.

Taking inspiration from the concept of *ts'íib* (Worley and Palacios, 2019), *u t'aan nukuch máak* include performatic forms —largely based on performance— that cause their perceived ambiguity by outsiders. Nevertheless, their mostly quotidian themes are deeply rooted to and representative of Maya thought.

U t'aan nukuch máak represent the embodiment of my female collaborators' culture as they perform their daily routines. After a person learns a *u t'aan nukuch máak*, they do not need to be reminded to not perform the sinful behavior. Leosia and Rodas —in separate recording sessions— explained that *Jajal Dyoos*, the True God, pardons those who do not know certain *u t'aan nukuch máak*, but once a person learns of the advice, they will be held accountable for their behavior. As such, in the above example where I tried to light a new flame on old embers, because I have learned this *u t'aan nukuch máak*, if I were to perform this sinful behavior again, my husband will leave me for another woman.

In effect, the individual's adherence to the wisdom held in this genre is the embodiment of this cultural knowledge. As they follow the advice provided in this genre, they enact the prescriptive behavior that their ancestors performed before them in order to protect themselves and loved ones from harm.

Nevertheless, for those that do not know of these teachings, the genre's performatic quality serves as the vehicle for the *u t'aan nukuch máak*. Although quite ambiguous to an outsider, when *u t'aan nukuch máak* occur is dictated by their situational context. As established by the academically surmised definition of proverbs, in most situations, their needs to be an individual who transgresses Maya cultural values and at least one onlooker who seeks to correct the transgressor's behavior. This context marks the genre's didactic quality and signals their intergenerational transmission. However, the form they take, as described above, is determined by the age of the transgressor. The result can be considered a form of proverbial speech. If there is an associated *ejemplo*, it serves as the

longer narrative through which an outsider can recognize the didactic nature of the transgressor's behavior that is performed in a certain context.

The genre also tends to occur in and around important environments that can index the genre's sacred quality and wider importance to Maya cosmology. These environments do not have to be limited to physical locations. They can take many forms. Time can be an environment, such as a thunderstorm or other natural event or on culturally determined sacred days when religious rituals occur. Spaces, such as the *k'óoben* and *kool*, cornfield, are environments. Interactions with objects, such as corn, as we will see below, are environments that can warrant the condensation of several forms of the same *u t'aan nukuch máak*—varying only in the result that befalls an individual— or different *u t'aan nukuch máak*, which further underscores the objects' significance in Maya thought. Even the self and body can be environments. These categories may not be exclusive of one another. For instance, my female collaborators shared that a woman may be able to normally wash her husband's clothing with her clothing, but when she is menstruating, she must wash his clothes separate from her own, so as to not have him "lose his mind." In this context, the two most potent environments coalesce around time, menstruation, and self/body, a menstruating body.

These environments are embedded in Maya cultural memory. I argue they also signify the genre's chronotopic nature. Because *u t'aan nukuch máak* act as intergenerational teachings that instruct an individual on how to properly navigate in a world that is structured by Maya culture and cosmos, they represent institutionalized forms. The utterance of a *u t'aan nukuch máak* has the capacity to situate the perpetrator into the past. Like their ancestors before them, they need to follow the wisdom in the statement, which serves to protect oneself, loved ones, or unborn children from harm. Thus, through their adherence of the advice found within *u t'aan nukuch máak* and their performance, my collaborators embody not just their culture, but also their ancestors.

These environments also act as windows that allow an outsider, like myself or perhaps Mayas who have never been told why they should not perform a certain behavior like some of my female collaborators, to begin to decode their significance in Maya thought and practice through time. In the next section, I begin the interpretive analysis of corn by providing examples of two sets of *u t'aan nukuch máak* about corn and connect the behavior prescribed in these examples to an excerpt from the *Popol Wuj*, a K'iche' Maya text written before the arrival of Spanish conquerors in 1524 by individuals of K'iche'-Maya nobility, which recounts the creation of the current world (Christenson, 2007).

“You Will Become Poor!”: The Proper Handling of Corn

Maize, or corn, is an essential aspect of all contemporary Indigenous groups of Mesoamerica. Corn brings life. In practical use, the crop is integrated into a

variety of dishes that fortify and sustain a person for a long day of work or for recovering from a grueling day's labor. In Maya groups, for example, the life-giving and sustaining quality of corn is not simply a staple of their Indigenous diets, it is also conscripted as such in their ways of knowing. Corn is thought to have a soul or spirit that must be respected, or else harvests will be negatively affected (Bassie-Sweet, 2008). Although a comprehensive analysis of corn as a key object in Maya thought is well beyond the scope of this paper, in this section, I first establish the importance of corn in the daily routines of my female collaborators. Then, I offer an interpretive analysis of two *u t'aan nukuch máak* that deal specifically with the proper handling of corn in its dough and tortilla forms, where I interweave the explanations of my collaborators with an excerpt of the *Popol Wuj*.

Corn, *ixi'im* ('corn kernels') in Yucatec Maya, has been described to me by my collaborators as a sacred gift from *Jajal Dyoos*. Some of my collaborators consider the substance as the blood of the True God. In their speech, they codify this sacred aspect by qualifying the word with the term, *sáantoj*, 'sacred or holy'. *Sáantoj graasya*, 'sacred grace' [a gift from God], *sáantoj ixi'im*, 'sacred corn' [kernels], and *sáantoj waaj*, 'sacred tortilla', are all used to mark corn as a substance that demands their respect and reverence. As corn is a sacred substance to my collaborators, it is no wonder that there are many *u t'aan nukuch máak* attached to the handling of corn in all its various forms.

My female collaborators consider corn to be an essential substance for the fortification of a person's mind, body, and soul. A commonly held belief among the older generations that was shared with me by Regina, for example, is that a person must never count the number of tortillas eaten during a meal because an individual needs to consume enough tortillas to satisfy not just their hunger, but also their heart. With a full heart, they will uplift their spirit and be able to carry on with or recover from a full day's work. Thus, if a meal does not contain corn, it is not considered to be filling nor sustaining.

With the preference to consume corn, my female collaborators are tasked with turning the harvested product into an edible substance. Like ancient Maya women before them, they follow time-tested processes, such as nixtamalization, that yield a variety of delectable corn-based foods. Perhaps the most well-known of these foods is tortillas.

The practice of making tortillas is referred to as *pak'ach* in Yucatec Maya. Women devote morning, afternoon, and evening to this task. As women make tortillas, their hands often become covered in corn dough, appearing like the hands of the woman in Figure 2. When this happens, a woman must not rub her hands together to remove the corn dough. If she were to rub her hands together, she would be considered 'playing' with the dough. Because corn is sacred, an individual 'playing' with the substance is deemed both wasteful and disrespectful.



Figure 2. A woman with corn dough covered hands (Photo taken by author, Xocén, 2016).

The behavior of rubbing one's corn dough covered hands together warrants the occurrence of a *u t'aan nukuch máak*. As the action is deemed quite sinful, I collected five different results that could befall the perpetrator. When the *u t'aan nukuch máak* are fully elicited, they reflect the cause condition and five associated results that are listed below. The parentheses in the results indicate the context. This portion may be left unsaid. In alignment with the parameters I defined in the previous section, the portion of the result without parentheses indicates what may be solely uttered as the form closest to the category of proverb.

Cause Condition

Keen ts'o'okok a pak'ache' mix uts ka ja'ajaxtik le sakan ti' a k'abe' tumen wa' ka beetike'...

When you are finished making tortillas, it is not good to rub your corn dough-covered hands together because if you do...

Results

...yaan a otsiltal.

...you will become poor.

...(cheen bin kimikeche') xnook'olo'obe' ku bin u jáantikech.

...(when you die,) worms will eat you.

...(cheen yanak bin a champale') jach nojoch u chan poyon a champal.

...(when you have a child [male],) your child [male] will have a very big penis.

...(cheen yanak bin a champale') bek'ech u yook a champal.

...(when you have a child,) your child's legs will be skinny.

...(cheen bin yanak a champale') yaan u sakane' ich u tso'otsel u pool a champal.

...(when you have a child,) there will be "sakan" in your child's hair.

The most widely known and metaphorical result for this cause condition is (1): *Yaan a otsiltal*, ‘you will become poor’. A consequence many want to avoid, explanations by my female collaborators for this result ranged from loss of actual money to the loss of food itself. In either circumstance, a family will suffer a more impoverished lifestyle if a person were to ‘play’ with corn dough in this way.

Results (2), (3), (4), and (5) all contend with the product of what happens when a person rubs their dough covered hands together. Performing this action causes many small, cylindrical pieces of dough to form. These smaller pieces may form together to create a long, cylindrical piece of dough. These tangible pieces of corn dough have a similar shape and appearance to the physical condition that occurs, whether that be (2), worms appearing on a grave, or the consequence that happens to the child, as shown in results (3) through (5). Sympathetic magic, specifically imitative magic, appears to be the principle operating in this particular set of *u t’aan nukuch máak*.

While (1) can happen with more immediacy, (2) presents a much more delayed consequence that affects the body post-mortem, *xnook’olo’obe’ ku bin u jáantikech*, ‘worms will eat you’. Aesthetically, worms look much like the results of rubbing dough covered hands together. Although it is a morbid thought, my female collaborators mostly laughed at this result because worms will always consume the bodies of the deceased. However, as Leosia explained, if there are a noticeable number of worms covering the grave, it is a sign this person was a sinner because they did not follow the *u t’aan nukuch máak*.

Results (3), (4), and (5) all affect a woman’s children or future children. Although my female collaborators agreed that (3) and (4) could occur after a person rubs their corn dough covered hands together, these two also can occur when you knowingly ‘play’ with the material. The aftermath of this behavior creates a long, cylindrical piece of dough.

(3) or (4) represent a tangible outcome that befalls the child of a woman ‘playing’ with corn dough in this manner. For (3), *jach nojoch u chan poyon a champal*, ‘your child [male] will have a very big penis’, my female collaborators chuckled as they explained why this consequence was considered a negative attribute. In their reasoning if a man has a ‘very big penis’, he may not be able to ‘fit’ inside his future wife, leading to complications during intercourse and difficulties with conception. For (4), *bek’ech u yook a champal*, ‘your child’s legs will be skinny’, it can happen to a child of any gender. This result does not have any consequences that affect their physical health, but it is an undesirable aesthetic attribute for a person to possess.

(5), *yaan u sakane’ ich u tso’otsel u pool a champal*, ‘there will be *sakan* [corn dough] in your child’s hair’, is also a noticeable outcome that happens to a woman’s child, if she were to rub her dough covered hands together. The substance that appears in the child’s hair is unlike dandruff. Instead, it is “soft white [to cream-colored] nodules,” which is much like the consistency of *sakan* itself (Roshan, Janaki, and Parveen, 2009). After I showed Zanita an image of a person

afflicted with white piedra, which is a fungal infection, we concluded that this is the name of the condition in biomedical terminology.

For (5), I collected an *ejemplo* from two of my female collaborators. Instead of a longer narrative, like those collected by Park Redfield, this *ejemplo* centered on a woman in Xocén whose child suffered from this condition. In one of our recorded exegetical analyses, María and Somona stated the name of this woman and that her child had this condition because she decided to rub her dough covered hands together. They argued the potency of this *u t'aan nukuch máak* is that it *really* does happen to a woman who does not follow the advice of *u t'aan nukuch máak*, as they continued to describe how they purposely instructed their daughters not to perform this action.

Women teach their daughters this behavior at a young age, hoping to instill their cultural values in the next generation. For example, Carina, who was around the age of four in 2016, would always 'help' her mother and other female relatives make tortillas. Carefully, her older relatives policed her behavior, ensuring she did not 'play' with the dough in a disrespectful manner. When her hands became covered with dough, she naturally started to rub the substance off her hands. Quickly, her relatives would give her a bucket of water and instructed her to wash her hands.

As handling corn dough almost always results in a woman's hands becoming covered in the substance, the culturally prescribed way of removing this sacred material is by rinsing her hands with water that will be then given to her family's domesticated animals. In this way, this sacred gift, a life-sustaining resource, will not be wasted. Repurposing the corn dough as nutrients for the domesticated animals in their water means that a person acknowledges and respects this gift.

A further connection can be made to the behavior performed by *Xmucane* when she and *Xpiyacoc* created the first humans in the *Popol Wuj*. After a series of failed attempts, the first viable humans were fashioned from corn by the divine grandparents, *Xmucane* and *Xpiyacoc*. *Xpiyacoc* is a male creator deity, despite the feminine prefix marker (i.e., x-). His name has been translated to mean 'Grandmother of light', 'matchmaker', and 'Patriarch' (Christenson, 2007; Sachse, 2021; Tedlock, 1996). *Xmucane* is a female creator deity whose name has been translated to mean 'Grandmother of sun/day', 'Midwife', and 'She Who Buries or She Who Plants' (Christenson, 2007; Sachse, 2021; Tedlock, 1996). In an excerpt translated by Tedlock, this process unfolds as follows:

And then the yellow corn and white corn were ground, and Xmucane did the grinding nine times. Food was used, along with the water she rinsed her hands with, for the creation of grease; it became human fat when it was worked by the Bearer, Begetter, Sovereign Plumed Serpent, as they are called.

After that they put into words:

The making, the modeling of our first mother-father,
with yellow corn, white corn alone for the flesh,

food alone for the human legs and arms,
for our first fathers, the four human works.
It was staples alone that made up their flesh. (Tedlock, 1996: 146)

The processing of corn by *Xmucane* begins with the corn being ground nine times presumably on a grinding stone. Nine is symbolic of the gestational period for humans (Christenson, 2007). In Tedlock's translation, *Xmucane* rinses her corn-covered hands with water. This water mixture becomes part of the human form as fat. In practice, when water is added to the ground corn, a more malleable dough forms. With this corn dough, *Xmucane* and *Xpiyacoc* mold the first humans.

The divine act of creating the first humans mimics how my female collaborators interact with corn on a daily basis. In order to respect this sacred substance, my female collaborators rinse their corn dough covered hands with water and—traditionally—reuse the water for the enrichment of another living entity. Although an anachronistic interpretation, by performing this behavior, contemporary women are embodying their culture by 'becoming' *Xmucane* when she handled this sacred object (corn). Either way, washing one's corn dough covered hands with water becomes a sacred act because of its direct connection to the beliefs surrounding corn, which is a reflection of a world ordered by the cosmos. This behavior also serves a powerful testament to the survivance of Maya cultural memory.

Reverence for corn, in all its forms, is a common theme expressed in Maya thought and practice. Another *u t'aan nukuch máak* I collected that only has one result focuses on the proper treatment of tortillas—and corn dough. It particularly deals with savoring their smell. The *u t'aan nukuch máak* is as follows:

Cause Condition

Mix uts ka wúuts'bintik waaj [wa' sakan] tumen wa' ka beetike'...

It's not good for you to [savor the] smell of tortillas [or corn dough], because if you do...

Result

...(keen k'oja'anchajakech ti' champale,) mix ki' a wu'uyik waaj.

...(when you become pregnant,) you won't like the taste of tortillas.

As reflected in the result, developing a distaste for corn during one of the most precarious periods of a woman's life is a fate most of the women I spoke with want to avoid. Although none of my collaborators had this result personally happen to them, they all emphasized the danger of not being able to consume corn-based meals while pregnant.

A fate that is different than the dreaded morning-sickness that afflicts some pregnant women, this repulsion of corn is life-threatening. Norma described how the smell of corn dough or corn-based meals alone could cause nausea and—potentially—vomiting. Rosaria echoed these sentiments in her narrative by explaining how if a pregnant woman—who at one point in her life savored the

smell of corn dough or a corn-based meal— attempted to eat the tiniest piece of tortilla, she would immediately begin to vomit. As a further consequence of her vomiting, she would be unable to consume not just corn-based meals, but any type of food. Paloma —providing more detail— emphasized in her narrative the danger of not being able to consume corn-based meals while pregnant. If a pregnant woman is constantly nauseous and unable to eat without vomiting, she will not be able to get the necessary nutrients needed to build her strength. She will become weak. She could lose her child, if not her own life.

Naturally, if a pregnant woman cannot consume food, she will become weaker. However, what is telling from this *u t'aan nukuch máak* is that this consequence ties succinctly to the beliefs surrounding corn as a fortifying and life-sustaining substance in Maya thought. Additionally, although another anachronistic interpretation, there is a direct correlation of Maya women's bodies to the act of creation of humans from corn in the *Popol Wuj*. The result of this particular *u t'aan nukuch máak* afflicts a woman during pregnancy, a time in which she, too, is involved in the creation of a new human for nine months of her life, which is analogous to the nine times *Xmucane* ground corn. Thus, if a woman were to savor the smell of corn dough or tortillas as a child or adult, she is being disrespectful of this sacred substance because she is no longer treating it as a gift from the True God nor as the sole element that is used to create humans. To connect this process to the *Popol Wuj*, I contend that without corn in a pregnant woman's diet to fortify her body, how could she be able to create a human —as all humans are created from corn?

Similar to rubbing one's corn dough covered hands together, women teach their daughters not to savor the smell of corn dough and tortillas. In my experiences with my collaborators, I never witnessed them do this behavior. If a child did smell a tortilla for what my collaborators perceived as too long of time, my collaborators would quickly scold them. Yet, I recall a moment when a mutual friend from the United States visited the family I lived with in Xocén. Our friend was excited to eat handmade tortillas, as she had not eaten them in many years. She theatrically savored their smell to demonstrate to my collaborators her excitement. None of my collaborators stopped her or advised her not to perform this behavior, like they would have done with their children or me. When I inquired about their inconsistency of rectifying our friend's sinful act, they simply said that the True God would pardon our friend because she was unaware of the consequences of her behavior. Additionally, because our friend would only be sharing that meal with them, they did not want to be rude to her.

The very act of rubbing one's corn dough covered hands together, 'playing' with this sacred substance, or savoring the smell of corn dough or tortillas are the vehicles for the *u t'aan nukuch máak* to occur when the behavior is conducted in the appropriate situational context. At times, additional narratives, such as an *ejemplo* as demonstrated above, can also be shared to underscore the potency of the *u t'aan nukuch máak*. Yet, even when left unsaid, these sacrilegious actions performed by a transgressor and its subsequent correction by an onlooker solidi-

fies this genre's didactic quality and reliance on performativity rather than overt speech, leading to its ambiguous nature and—in my perspective— their lack of documentation in academic scholarship.

Conclusion

Yucatec Maya orality has been a popular topic of study of scholars from a wide array of disciplines. Yet, as I discussed in this paper, academically generated categories of speech that focus heavily on the spoken word may overlook more performance-based forms of Indigenous knowledge systems like *u t'aan nukuch máak*. With a high concentration of quotidian themes and three spoken forms in which the occurrence is dictated by the age of the perpetrator (i.e., the compositional framework of “If...; then...”, the result (proverb), and a scold), the genre can often be difficult to isolate.

U t'aan nukuch máak, like the concept of *ts'íib*, underscores the importance of examining beyond mere utterances to practice—as the performance of culture can demonstrate the embodiment of the cultural knowledge in this genre. Furthermore, even when the speech has been lost with time, the behavior can remain intact, which attests not only to the genre's embodied quality, but also its importance to the intergenerational transmission of Maya cultural values.

At its core, *u t'aan nukuch máak* is a didactic genre that encourages younger generations, and those who may not know certain cultural restrictions, to learn and adhere to Maya cultural values to protect themselves and their loved ones from harm. A simple scold given to a child who performs a sinful behavior, for example, does not have any overt speech. As I stated above, my collaborators often may not recall the result of a certain *u t'aan nukuch máak*. Yet, they do recognize the behavior as sinful and should not be performed. The continued adherence to these restrictions signals their significance to my collaborators' lives. Although the spoken form of *u t'aan nukuch máak* may be lost with time, like the storytellers in Worley's work who did not recall the names of the instruments, my collaborators' embodied practice of *u t'aan nukuch máak* indicates the persistence of an Indigenous knowledge system.

The embodiment of the advice found within *u t'aan nukuch máak* can mark certain environments that index concepts that are embedded in the cosmos. In early phases of my ethnographic fieldwork, my ability to recognize the embodiment of my collaborators' cultural knowledge often evaded my perception. It was not until I spent a longer time in Xocén in 2016 did I realize that some of these—what I perceived at the time as—commonplace behaviors, such as starting a fire or making tortillas, provided the vehicle for this genre to occur in a spoken form if a cultural restriction is not followed. These environments where the genre occurred enabled me to see the connections to Maya cultural memory—particularly through the isolation of key concepts found in Maya cosmology.

Isolating and analyzing certain concepts encoded in *u t'aan nukuch máak* provides a wonderful window into how long these cultural values have been maintained despite years of forced assimilation and modernization projects that have sought to dismantle Maya culture throughout the peninsula.

As much of Maya orality focuses on men's voices, my findings—with its reliance on my female collaborators' knowledge and interpretations of this genre—provides a strong testament to women's unique ways of perceiving and interpreting the world. Further, my findings move beyond orality and shifts focus to more performatic styles, which emphasizes how this knowledge does not always need to be expressed verbally but is embodied in practice.

A point worth mentioning again is that *u t'aan nukuch máak* are not unique to women. During my stays in Xocén, I was able to document 290 examples of this genre, but I expect there to be many more examples. Because all genders perform this genre, I suspect that scholars who have worked and/or lived in the Yucatán Peninsula among people of Maya descent have experienced this genre but may not immediately recognize it as a form of embodied culture. Future work—by myself and others—collecting more *u t'aan nukuch máak* from all genders will develop a larger corpus of this genre. The analysis of various themes that connect to Maya cosmology that emerge in this data will express the resiliency of these beliefs and the survivance of Maya ways of knowing.

A strong testament of a more modern lifestyle than their ancestors, my collaborators often expressed the foolishness of some of the advice held within this genre. Clearly, they are aware of the different lifestyles their children and prospective grandchildren will experience. Yet, I end this paper with a narrative recounted to me by Leosia, a woman who converted from Catholicism to a different religious faith that restricts their followers' participation in and adherence to Indigenous customs and beliefs. Leosia described in one narrative, the elders did not create this advice to be deceitful. Although younger generations, and even her, may consider some of the advice to be foolish and outdated, they must still learn it because if they do not, they will be placed at a disadvantage. She continued by underscoring the knowledge held within *u t'aan nukuch máak* serves a purpose: Protection. Leosia, like my other female collaborators, understand that younger generations have to face much hardship in their lives as they enter cross-cultural and cross-linguistic spaces, where they are marginalized by the dominant culture. Leosia posed the question, if *u t'aan nukuch máak* could help my children in any way to alleviate that hardship, why would I not share it with them?

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