

# THE CHICKEN AND THE QUETZAL



Incommensurate Ontologies and Portable  
Values in Guatemala's Cloud Forest

PAUL KOCKELMAN

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For Mia, Zeno, and Lara



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I first began working with speakers of Q'eqchi' in 1996, focusing my early efforts on the collection and use of a tree sap (*copal*) by recent immigrants to the tropical lowlands of northern Guatemala, who were making a living in and around the Biosfera Maya. This early research led to a three-year graduate research fellowship from the Environmental Protection Agency (1997–2000) for a project entitled “Commons Management among the Q'eqchi'-Maya,” with a particular focus on the cognitive and political ecology of tropical rain forests in relation to migration and dispossession. This fellowship paid for most of graduate school at the University of Chicago and, with its generous research funds, almost all my early fieldwork. (That said, I actually applied for the fellowship while I was a student at the University of Michigan, having just taken an inspiring core course in cultural anthropology that was team-taught by Tom Fricke and Roy Rappaport, and where I was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation, under the auspices of the Culture and Cognition program.) So thank you EPA, NSF, and UMich.

At the University of Chicago I was steeped not just in linguistic anthropology (taking classes with Norman McQuown, Bill Hanks, and Paul Friedrich, and having as my advisors John Lucy and Michael Silverstein), but also in “political economy” in a variety of manifestations. In part, this was because the first courses I took were with John Kelly and Moishe Postone, with their often maximally complementary concerns; and, in part,

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## Introduction

### ENCLOSURE AND DISCLOSURE

#### **A Strange Form of Sovereignty**

In 1537, after the Spanish crown had failed to conquer the indigenous peoples living in what is now Alta Verapaz, Guatemala, the Dominican Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas was permitted to “pacify” the area through religious methods. As he seemed—or at least claimed—to have succeeded, the name of the region was changed from Tezulutlan (a Nahuatl word, meaning “Land of War”) to Verapaz (a Spanish word, meaning “True Peace”). The governor of Guatemala granted the Dominicans full control over the area—banning secular immigration, removing remaining military colonies, and nullifying previous land grants. For almost three hundred years, it remained an apparently isolated enclave, somewhat protected by the paternalism of the church, at least in comparison to other parts of Guatemala. This isolation ended abruptly in the late 1800s, with the advent of coffee growing, liberal reforms, and the immigration of Europeans. Divested of their land, and forced to work on coffee plantations, indigenous speakers of Q’eqchi’ began migrating north. Within the last fifty years, this migration intensified, fueled by the civil war that ravaged the countryside, with the Q’eqchi’ fleeing not only scarce resources and labor quotas, but also government forces and paramilitary. In this way, the last century has seen the Q’eqchi’ population spread from Alta Verapaz, to the Petén, and

finally to Belize, Mexico, and the United States. Indeed, not just the second largest of some thirty Mayan languages (with upward of one million speakers), Q'eqchi' now has the largest percentage of monolinguals, and the fastest growing and geographically most extensive population of any ethnic group in Guatemala.<sup>1</sup>

Peace accords were signed in 1996, bringing to a ceremonial end a civil war that lasted almost forty years, claimed upward of 200,000 lives, upended communities and institutions throughout the country, and culminated in charges of genocide against one of its former heads of state. In the war's aftermath, hundreds of nongovernmental organizations were established, attempting to meet the often stated challenges of post-civil war society. These included overpopulation, deforestation, illiteracy, illness, poverty, damaged infrastructure, nonexistent democracy, and—as evinced in an explosion of vigilante justice in rural villages—a growing sense not only of state illegitimacy but of state impotence.

One of these organizations was Proyecto Eco-Quetzal (PEQ), which was founded in 1990 by German ecologists with the goal of protecting the numerous bird species that reside in Guatemala's remaining cloud forests. PEQ grew and diversified considerably over the years, its stated goals coming to include the promotion of alternative crafts, biomonitoring, intensive farming, soil conservation, sustainable development, disaster preparedness, literacy, health care, and conflict resolution. In other words, as it expanded and transformed, its functions extended into domains the state could not reach—a sphere that continually seemed to grow rather than shrink.

At the center of PEQ's interventions was the village of Chicacnab, itself located outside of Coban, the capital of Alta Verapaz. Given its relatively high altitude and remote location, and as per the NGO's initial goals, this village was surrounded by cloud forest. The cloud forest provided the perfect environment for a high density of endangered avifauna—in particular, the resplendent quetzal (*Pharomachrus mocinno*), which is also the national bird of Guatemala, the name of its currency, and an important figure in Mayan histories of the conquest.

Approximately eighty families lived in Chicacnab in 2000, each with an average number of six children, amounting to a total population of around six hundred people. Although some men, who had served time in the army or worked as itinerant traders, spoke fluent Spanish, the majority

of villagers were monolingual speakers of Q'eqchi'. While all villagers engaged in corn-based or milpa agriculture, very few had enough land to meet all their subsistence needs. Most men in the village thus engaged in seasonal labor on plantations (often up to five months a year). Women dedicated their time to poultry husbandry. And many families engaged in itinerant trade (women weaving baskets and textiles for the men to sell).

To preserve the cloud forest that surrounded this community, and to protect it from "slash-and-burn" agriculture, Proyecto Eco-Quetzal initiated an ecotourism project. Its goal was to provide alternative sources of income to community members. In its efforts to promote global biodiversity and protect local key species, the main strategy of this NGO was to add value to local products (by marketing them internationally) and to add value-creating ability to local villagers (by educating and training them to recognize and produce such value), so that community members would be motivated in a way that was beneficial for both themselves and the cloud forest. In short, while the NGO began with the goal of protecting birds, it ended up not just creating new kinds of values, but creating new kinds of evaluating agents.

This book is about the relationship between meaning, measurement, materiality, and money. It develops an analytic framework for understanding the entanglement of what at first appear to be distinct values—use value (function), exchange value (price), semantic value (meaning), and deontic value (morality). It foregrounds the relation between enclosure and disclosure, showing the ways in which processes that create, interpret, and reveal values are concomitant with processes that capture, carry, and reify them. It examines the conditions and consequences of making valued entities and evaluating agents seem relatively portable, in the sense of being widely applicable, contextually independent, and scale-free. This analytic lens is used to offer a cultural history of a Mayan village in the early twenty-first century—a community surrounded by vigilante violence and opened to ecotourists, situated at the end of civil war and the onset of neoliberal reforms, and standing at the edge of the Guatemalan state and the center of a strange form of sovereignty.

### **Enclosure and Disclosure**

In certain historical and ethnographic contexts, scholars such as Marx (1967) and Evans-Pritchard (1940) used what at first appeared to be simple



objects to disclose ensembles of meaningful relations: the commodity in modern capitalist society, or cattle among the Nuer. Around such “objects”—understood as ensembles of social relations, semiotic practices, and material processes—these scholars elucidated modes of perceiving and acting, thinking and feeling, categorizing and evaluating. Indeed, so extensive was the reach of such objects that the ensembles they disclosed constituted the grounds of collective existence insofar as they mediated space and time, substance and form, quality and quantity, ontology and cosmology. Moreover, in the hands of these devoted scholars, such relational ensembles were epistemologically immanent, that is, simultaneously objects to be interpreted and methods of interpretation. Finally, at least in the work of Marx, such modes of *disclosure*—such techniques of revealing, opening, unfolding, and elucidating—were tightly coupled with modes of knowledge and power. To paraphrase Francis Bacon, and taking the term *nature* to include “second nature” (and “*n*th-natures” more generally), if the task of knowledge is to find for a given nature the source of its coming-to-be, the task of power is to superinduce on a given body a new nature (Bacon [1620] 2000: 102; Kockelman 2012b).

Ethnography—and critical theory more generally—is not only a mode of disclosure but also a mode of enclosure. Enclosure has many inter-related meanings, but prototypically involves processes of objectification, formatting, stabilization, dispossession, and containment. For example, there are enclosures in the everyday sense: not only zoos, cages, museums, and jails, but also biological reserves, clean rooms, and chicken coops (Bacon [1627] 2002). There is enclosure as aestheticization: to give intelligibility, form, and permanence to things that are otherwise distant, murky, and fleeting (Bakhtin 1990). There is enclosure as *bios*: biography as a kind of interpretive frame that gives a human life meaning, coherence, and closure (Arendt 1998). There is enclosure in the sense of physical objectivity: being continuously present to the senses, surrounded by a medium, detachable from context, and transportable across contexts (Gibson 1986). There is enclosure as the extension of a network: creating the conditions for scientific objects to reproduce their effects outside the laboratory (Latour 1988). There is enclosure as *interreusement*: incorporating and regimenting possible relations among agents, and thus the identities of agents, through definitions and interventions that problematize them in particular ways (Callon 1986). There is enclosure in the sense

of scientific objectivity: a form of knowledge that is spatially and temporally portable, so far as it holds good independently of the process of its production (Porter 1995). There is enclosure as articulation: conferring propositional content on an experience, and hence the possibility of truth value, by means of making an assertion. There is enclosure as deontization: the process of creating, articulating, rationalizing, and enforcing norms, and thereby constituting laws (Maine [1866] 2002). There is enclosure as entextualization (Silverstein and Urban 1996): the process of making multiple signs cohere as “text,” and thereby seem amenable to cross contextual interpretation. There is enclosure as commodification: on the one hand, the conditions by which something is alienated, unitized, quantified, standardized, and priced; and on the other hand, the conditions by which something is produced, circulated, and consumed. Following Whorf (1956), there is the enclosure of formless substances with substanceless forms, as evinced in any set of measures: for example, pats of butter, bolts of cloth, square meters of space, hours of time, and bricks of gold. There is enclosure as productive labor: making products that last beyond the production process itself, such that they may be more widely circulated, and ultimately more highly valued, before being consumed (Smith [1776] 1976). There is polis-ization (Fustel de Coulanges [1873] 1955): the art of making a wall, be it symbolic or material, that encloses a body politic, such that values on the inside of the wall, in confrontation with those on the outside, seem relatively shared—a language, a morality, an economy, a technology, a system of weights and measures, a structure of feelings, a sovereignty. And finally, following scholars like Marx, Polanyi, and Foucault, there is the historical phenomenon of enclosure: on the one hand, that process whereby common lands were turned into private property, and peasants became proletariat; and on the other hand, that process whereby such doubly “freed” persons—from both masters and means of production—were brought into disciplinary institutions, from the workhouse to the asylum.

Crucially, there are also the limit figures that seem to escape from, or at least reside at the edges of, such enclosures (Kockelman 2013b, 2015). This book is, in part, about such figures—perhaps best understood as figurations (Deleuze 2003).

With all these processes (and potentials) in mind, two overarching claims of this book are as follows: Various modes of enclosure are both

the condition and consequence of disclosure. That is, knowledge of and power over (and profit from) any given domain is both facilitated by, and productive of, various forms of enclosure. And, in this vein, anthropology has a relatively precarious position: on the one hand, it seeks to interpret local modes of enclosure and disclosure; and, on the other hand, its interpretations at once enclose and disclose.

### **The Portability of Value**

Most of the things that surround us may be interpreted in a variety of ways and thereby construed in terms of different kinds of value. For example (and to radically simplify for the sake of explication), this assemblage of metal, plastic, and ink that I hold in my hand can be wielded as an instrument (used to write a letter). It can be exchanged as a commodity (sold for \$5). And it can be represented with an utterance (referred to as a “pen”). Loosely speaking, it is simultaneously caught up in use value (function), exchange value (price), truth value (semantic meaning), and many other kinds of value besides. One contribution of this book is to argue that such seemingly distinct kinds of value are best understood from a common theoretical framework. This aspect of the book thereby stands at the intersection of studies of material culture, political economy, and linguistic anthropology.

Evaluated things are bound to evaluating people. Whoever wields, exchanges, and refers can be framed as an agent (e.g., capable of flexibly wielding means toward ends). They can be framed as a subject (e.g., capable of holding mental states and expressing speech acts). They can be framed as a self (e.g., capable of being the means and ends of their own actions, or the object of their own private and public representations). And they can be framed as a person (e.g., capable of bearing sociopolitical rights and responsibilities). Loosely speaking, they are simultaneously a locus of causation, representation, reflexivity, and accountability (Kockelman 2013a). Another contribution of this book is to show concretely how such value-oriented capacities are themselves both mediated by, and mediating of, ontologies, infrastructure, and interaction.

As shown in the previous section, hand in hand with the disclosure of value is the enclosure of value. For example, for people to attain power over, gain knowledge about, or profit from a given practice may involve aestheticization as much as objectification, commoditization as much as en-

textualization, *interreusement* as much as dispossession. That is, processes that create, interpret, and reveal value are concomitant with processes that capture, carry, and reify value. A third contribution of this book is to analyze the conflicts and contradictions that arise when evaluating people and evaluated things are subject to processes of enclosure and disclosure. This aspect of the book develops a relatively open-ended and multidimensional framework to characterize a series of complex, interrelated processes that are usually lumped together, if not elided altogether, under rubrics such as “quantification,” “objectification,” “commensuration,” and “abstraction” (themselves often taken to be the essential quality of some “modern condition”). In particular, it examines the conditions and consequences of making value (and thus both valued entities and evaluating agents) seem relatively *portable* (Kockelman and Bernstein 2013), in the sense of being widely applicable, contextually independent, or scale-free.

More carefully, portability might be best understood as a way of characterizing the degree to which the meaningfulness and means-ends-fullness of a medium is, *or at least seems to be*, applicable to many contents and applicable in many contexts (at various degrees of scale). For example, and in a relatively abstract sense, the different and diverse forms of enclosure detailed above all contribute to the relative portability of a given medium. Crucially, to be applicable in many contexts does not so much mean that a medium is independent of context, but rather that the context the medium is dependent on can be recovered from the medium, transported with it, or established wherever it is found. Relatedly, to be applicable to many contents does not so much mean that a medium is preternaturally primed for the contents of any domain it should encounter, but rather that it has the capacity to assimilate such contents to itself, or accommodate itself to such contents, on the fly or after the fact. Such a focus is inherently reflexive, as the conceptual framing I develop in this book is designed to be relatively portable—simultaneously able to do justice to the vicissitudes of village life and the analytic categories of a particular kind of critical ethnography.

### Summary of Chapters

This monograph tells a small story of a village and an NGO, the microhistory of each around the turn of the century, and the ethnographic details of their encounter. While speakers of Q’eqchi’ are the most obvious pro-

tagonists, the NGO and ecotourists, biologists and anthropologists, cloud forests and conservation movements, and even chickens and quetzals, also play large roles. In telling this ethnographic story, I also attempt to tell a small analytic story—about meaning and value, quality and quantity, materiality and objectivity, utility and modality, commensuration and governance, ephemerality and portability, and ontologies in transformation.

Chapters 1 and 4 concern the relation between the village and the NGO, with a particular focus on the genealogy of the project's various interventions and the impact of ecotourism on village institutions. Chapters 2 and 3 treat the logic and history of village-specific practices that played a key role in mediating this village-NGO relation: poultry husbandry as an understudied mode of production and reproduction, and replacement and grading as poorly understood modes of replenishment and measurement. Such chapters thereby offer a sociocultural history of the semiotic entanglement of actors evaluating (ostensibly) overlapping worlds by (seemingly) incommensurate ontologies.

In chapter 1, "NGOs, Ecotourists and Endangered Avifauna," I detail the history of the NGO's interventions in the village of Chicacnab, paying particular attention to its fostering of the ecotourism project as a means to promote conservation of the cloud forest. I foreground the tense relation between immaterial labor (qua commodified interactions between villagers and tourists), intersubjective intentions (qua shared goals underlying joint activities), and incommensurable values (qua disparate evaluative standards grounding practical reasoning). The first part of this chapter discusses the rationale of the NGO's attempts to govern the behavior of villagers, while simultaneously detailing the range of its interventions, for example, biomonitoring and disaster preparedness, candle making and organic agriculture, language teaching and environmental awareness, traditional crafts and ecotourism. Building on this analysis, the second part of the chapter turns from the strategic and practical impulse of the project's interventions to the limits of its achievement. By way of an ethnographic description of a group of ecotourists, and the day-to-day workings of the NGO itself, I show the discrepancy and overlap between the project's portrayal of a standardized ecotour and ecotourists' actual experiences, demonstrating how different kinds of values (such as morality and money) and distinct forms of personhood (such as villagers and tourists) were and