

Annual Meeting Research Network RITMO2 4-5 October 2024
Organized by the Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University, and the Department for the
Anthropology of the Americas, University of Bonn.

FLEXIBLE RELATIONS: EXPERIMENTATION AND INNOVATION IN HUMAN-ENVIRONMENTAL LINKS ACROSS THE AMERICAS

Conference Program

Friday, 04.10.2024. (For presenters and registered listeners)

9.00-9.10 **Eduardo Herrera Malatesta, Dita Auziņa:** Housekeeping and welcome
9.10-9.30 **Alexander Geurds, Nikolai Grube:** *Temporalities across Middle America: Present
and futures of the RITMO network*

1st part, moderated by Alexander Geurds

9.30-9.45 **M. Charlotte Arnauld:** Seasons, sedentarity, and politics
9.45-10.00 **Guo Peng Chen 陈国鹏:** Freedom and Resilience of Lamanai during the Terminal
Classic Period
10.00-10.15 **Lydie Dussol, Jérémy Höhne, Boris Vannière, Chloé Andrieu:** Climate change,
ecological trajectory, and social innovations in the tropical forests of the Maya
highland-lowland interface: paleoenvironmental research of the Raxruha-Cancuén
archaeological project
10.15.-10.30 **Karen Holmberg:** The Revolt of Objects and Earth (or what to do when things go
wrong again and again

10.30-11.00 Coffee break
11.00-12.00 Moderated discussion in groups
12.00-12.30 Wrap-up discussions

12.30-13.30 Lunch

2nd part, moderated by Nikolai Grube

13.30-13.45 **Daniel Grana-Behrens:** The Earth as a Living Entity in Mesoamerica – What do
Ecological and Other Challenges Mean for Ontology?
13.45-14.00 **Núria Feliu Beltrán:** Adaptabilidad y resiliencia. La caza en época prehispánica y su
continuidad en la actualidad en el área maya, un enfoque desde el arte, la arqueología
y la etnografía
14.00-14.15 **Cristiano Tallè:** El papalote y la turbina: los ikoots de San Mateo del Mar (Oaxaca)
entre crisis eco-climáticas, innovaciones tecnológicas y conexiones eólicas con el
mundo
14.15-14.30 **Francisca Zalaquett Rock, Alice Balsanelli, Rodrigo Petatillo Chan, Fernando
González-García, Miguel García Cruz:** Los cantos de las aves en las percepciones,
vivencias y mitos de los Lacandones de Nahá y Metzabok, Chiapas

14.30-15.00 Coffee break
15.30-16.00 Moderated discussion in groups
16.00-16.30 Wrap-up discussions

16.30-17.00 A Keynote Lecture by **Rosemary A. Joyce** and **Russell N. Sheptak** “Fluid relations: Lenca understandings of human-environment relationships in long-term perspective”

At 18.30 Conference dinner for speakers and organizers

Saturday, 05.10.2024. (For presenters and invited participants)

10.00-17.00. Open Space Technology, moderated by Eduardo Herrera Malatesta (with coffee breaks and lunches)

Hosted by Leiden University at Wereldmuseum Leiden (Steenstraat 1, Leiden)

Please register for the conference before September 27th, by sending an e-mail to d.auzina@arch.leidenuniv.nl .

Abstracts

Conference abstract by Alexander Geurds, Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University, and Nikolai Grube, the Department for the Anthropology of the Americas, University of Bonn.

Flexible relations: Experimentation and innovation in human-environmental links across the Americas

This meeting will focus on the archaeological and ethnographic recognition of balancing human-environmental relationships across the Americas, with particular emphasis on Mesoamerica, the Isthmo-Colombian Area and parts of South America, and links directly to the theme of repetition and emergency, including transition, rupture, and innovation (Project RITMO2, Subtheme 4).

Beginning around 1500 BC, social landscapes emerge across these macro-areas, developing differential trajectories of community development and concomitant material practices. Rather than viewing the ways in which these communities relate to the surrounding world as codified, this symposium proposes to explore the idea of flexibility, made possible through a willingness to experiment and driven by an ability to innovate when so prompted.

Papers at this meeting will present archaeological and ethnographic case studies of how communities freely deal with shifts in climatic patterns and short-term events, including drastic changes that tested or even ruptured pre-existing ways of doing things. Such changes can include, for example, ENSO variability, ITCZ shifts, soil erosion, and volcanic eruption.

A central aim will be to probe the extent of fluidity in human arrangements with surrounding ecologies. Such an approach will connect with Amerindian understandings of the world as capricious, requiring a broad and diverse set of practices. From a world archaeology perspective, this flexibility may be particularly pertinent for indigenous societies in the Americas, given the emphasis on timekeeping and monumentally modifying landscapes, with an initial purpose of, for example, tracking seasonal, climatic, and celestial cycles, and themselves also providing references to deep time.

1st part

1. M. Charlotte Arnauld, directrice de recherche (retraîtée), CNRS UMR 8096 Archéologie des Amériques

Seasons, sedentarity and politics

To explore cultural flexibility and fluidity among the Classic Maya as assets for rapid innovation in times of environmental crisis, we propose to study a few examples of drastic changes that occurred in urban settings in the 9-11th centuries (Transition and Prediction Project, Terminal Classic Mayas Cities). Faced with the hazards of prolonged droughts (830-870, 1000-1150 AD), Maya lowland societies reconfigured temporalities, those of the past-future, of the exercise of power, and of their mobility in space, a space in which the technical

was not separated from the ritual, nor the urban from the rural, nor the human from the "environment".

2. Guo Peng Chen 陈国鹏, University of Oxford

Freedom and Resilience of Lamanai during the Terminal Classic Period

Communities at Lamanai, Belize remained resilient during the so-called “Maya collapse”, a period of drastic ecological, social and political transformations. This paper investigates the role of freedom and flexibility in the resilience of Lamanai. It raises two questions. A theoretical question: What does freedom mean for past societies? An empirical question: To what extent did communities at Lamanai during the Terminal Classic have freedom as per the answers to the theoretical question? Theoretically, this paper proposes a process theory of freedom. In *The Dawn of Everything*, Graeber and Wengrow (2021) suggest three primordial freedoms: the freedom to move, the freedom to disobey and the freedom to create or transform social relationships. I add to this list another freedom of becoming. It recognises individuals (humans and things alike) as processes rather than static entities. This is not the freedom to express a fixed and unchanging nature but the freedom to continually become, to experiment with new ways of living, and to transform oneself in interaction with other humans and things. Empirically, to evaluate the first three interconnected forms of freedom at Lamanai, I summarise the results of ceramic petrography and isotope analysis to show the freedom of movement and transformation of social relations. To evaluate the freedom of becoming, I discuss indigenous Maya philosophy that emphasises metamorphism and fluid metaphysics. I discuss artistic motifs on ceramics and carvings on the stone structures that illustrate the freedom to become someone or something different. The freedom to move, disobey, change relations, and become allowed communities at Lamanai to remain flexible and promote resilience when facing major changes in ecological and social lives.

3. Lydie Dussol¹, Jérémy Höhne¹, Boris Vannière², Chloé Andrieu³

¹ Université Côte d’Azur, CEPAM

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Climate change, ecological trajectory and social innovations in the tropical forests of the Maya highland-lowland interface: paleoenvironmental research of the Raxruha-Cancuén archaeological project

At the transition between the Maya lowlands and the highlands, the northern Alta Verapaz experimented major population movements following the abandonment of several cities as early as the 8th century onwards. This marked the start of what was referred to as the "Maya collapse", which would later extend to the entire lowlands until the 13th century. As this region is currently the wettest in the Maya area, its particular history complicates the common parallel between deforestation, drought and the abandonment of Maya cities at the end of the Classic period (AD 250-950). Moreover, several archaeological data converge on the fact that highland cities show a longer occupation than lowland ones, suggesting population movements towards the mountains following the abandonment of lowland cities. As part of the regional Raxruha-Cancuén archaeological project (MEAE, CNRS, Vanderbilt University, IDAEH), new paleoenvironmental research combines the excavation of several sites, anthracology

(identification of archaeological wood charcoal) and lake paleolimnology, in order to question the role of droughts and deforestation in the early abandonment of this region. It also examines the nature of interactions between Maya societies and forests, their environmental impact and their adaptation to new ecological environments in a context of migration and societal change. This paper will present this new program, its objectives, the work that has already been completed and our research prospects.

4. Karen Holmberg, New York University

The Revolt of Objects and Earth (or what to do when things go wrong again and again)

An Amerindian myth, The Revolt of Objects, recounts the ‘violation of categories due to extraordinary circumstances’ (Quilter 1990: 60). Stories from the Moche entail animated pottery vessels growing arms and attacking humans. Accounts from the Huarochiri region describe the death of the sun for five days before rocks began to bang against one another. In Maya examples of the story, manos and metates grind people rather than being used by people and caves shut their mouths so that people trying to flee into them die or are turned into monkeys.

The stories vary in detail but each one entails a blurring and transgression of boundaries between species, bodies, and taxonomies. In this paper, I query the relationship between these narratives with frequent retellings over wide portions of the Americas and the instability of the Earth represented by low-frequency but high-magnitude events such as volcanic eruptions.

In contexts such as the highland Chiriquí area of the Volcán Barú in Panamá, the volcano as a ‘thing’ is normally a stable and durable component of the landscape. This normal order reverses when its quiet stability turns to disquieted unpredictability. Volcanic eruptions certainly were not the only unpredictable forces in prehistory as earthquakes, debris avalanches, and floods were and are also important natural events. Rather than suggest that volcanic eruption is the sole source of the Revolt of Objects myth, or even that ethnohistoric stories necessarily have direct material or phenomenal correlations, I wish to query how volcanic events could have been easily adapted to the myth or vice versa throughout the many incidences of volcanic activity throughout the Americas and retellings of the story. My main interest in the Revolt of the Objects is the metaphor it provides through which the volcano can be repositioned as a subjectified object and eruption as a graphic case of the object (or Nature) in revolt.

If contemporary western landscapes and pre-Columbian landscapes have any parallels, I suggest that a commonality in perceptions of the natural environment could stem from a discomfort inherent to reversals of familiar orders or the balance of the wild and socialized continuum. While the widely shared Amerindian myth invokes the revolt of objects, the shared uneasiness between past and present is derived from the revolt of Earth.

References

Quilter, Jeffrey. 1990. “The Moche Revolt of the Objects.” *Latin American Antiquity* 1 (1): 42–65. <https://doi.org/10.2307/971709>.

2nd part

5. Daniel Grana-Behrens, University of Bonn, Department of Anthropology of

the Americas

The Earth as a Living Entity in Mesoamerica – What do Ecological and Other Challenges Mean for Ontology?

As far as the Americas are concerned, it has long been known that the people who lived or still live there regard the earth and other things as independent entities that go far beyond the status of deities in the religious sense. They are regarded as living beings and not as objects in the Western sense. While in most cases the earth is a local entity associated with a particular culture, as in the case of the Aztecs in pre-Hispanic central Mexico or the Nahuatl in present-day Mexico, Pachamama, mother-earth in Quechua or allpa mama in Kichwa, has more recently been granted "natural rights", i.e. rights of her own in the national constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador.

The cultural practice and understanding of the earth as a living being will be taken a step further here by examining how in Mesoamerica and particularly among the Maya over time and beginning in the Preclassic (500 BC) to the present, ontology not only provides the foreground for engaging with the world, but perhaps also responds to everyday and ecological challenges (drought, water supply, rainstorms, invasion of habitat, etc.).

The presentation raises the question of whether earth beings or Earth Lords are nothing more than reflecting an fossilized ontology. In addition to regional differences, a shift from artificial to natural caves and from built structures to natural mountains can be recognized. In addition to such a materialized ontological shift, however, changes could also be a response to ecological challenges, both those closely related to climatic conditions (droughts, water shortages, crop failures, etc.) and cultural changes (forest loss, land loss) that affect Maya ecological engagement and their relationship with the world. In a second consideration, the changes are linked to known challenges, even though they may vary regionally. What happened at the end of the Terminal Classic (900-1000 CE), when a drought in the Maya lowlands might be responsible, at least in part, for the so-called collapse? What happened to the Earth Lords after the Spanish conquest when a new asymmetric relation challenged the Maya and their local environment? Is the current climate change already having an impact on people's thinking about what the Earth Lords mean to them today, and can we already observe new practices compared to what is ethnographically known about these Earth Lords from the 20th century?

6. Núria Feliu Beltrán, Universidad de Valencia

Adaptabilidad y resiliencia. La caza en época prehispánica y su continuidad en la actualidad en el área maya, un enfoque desde el arte, la arqueología y la etnografía

La caza en época prehispánica no solo se percibe como una actividad económica, sino también como una práctica culturalmente significativa, enraizada en conocimientos ecológicos profundos; una forma de interacción dinámica con el entorno y la comunidad.

Esta contribución explorará cómo las comunidades han adaptado sus técnicas de caza, práctica fundamental para la subsistencia, en respuesta a los cambios drásticos en su entorno y cómo estas adaptaciones se reflejan en sus prácticas actuales.

A través del análisis de fuentes visuales prehispánicas, vestigios arqueológicos, así como registros etnográficos contemporáneos, se indagará, tanto en las relaciones humanas con su

entorno, como en la diversidad de prácticas que éstas conllevan, destacando la adaptabilidad de las comunidades frente a los cambios ambientales y sociales, esencial para su supervivencia y resiliencia.

En definitiva, esta presentación explora, sobre todo a través del arte, la continuidad y variación de las prácticas de caza prehispánicas, ofreciendo una visión diacrónica de cómo las comunidades indígenas de Mesoamérica han manejado y siguen manejando la relación con su entorno.

7. Cristiano Tallè, Dipartimento di Storia, Scienze dell'Uomo e della Formazione Università degli studi di Sassari

El papalote y la turbina: los ikoots de San Mateo del Mar (Oaxaca) entre crisis eco-climáticas, innovaciones tecnológicas y conexiones eólicas con el mundo

En esta relación tomaré en cuenta una innovación reciente en las técnicas de pesca entre los ikoots de San Mateo del Mar, un pueblo de pescadores asentado en un amplio sistema lagunar frente al océano Pacífico, en el Istmo de Tehuantepec (Oaxaca, México). Se trata de la pesca con papalote, un “invento” que se remonta (según parece) a los años setenta del siglo pasado, expresión de un saber-hacer *metis* (Scott 1998) frente a la imprevisibilidad, mutabilidad y riesgos de un medioambiente en que los flujos de agua y viento determinan la abundancia y la escasez del producto. Después de describir esta técnica de pesca “mar adentro” y su mecánica en relación con la “agentividad” del viento y las corrientes oceánicas, se comparará con otras innovaciones exógenas que han revolucionado el panorama tecnológico de la región en el marco de los varios proyectos de desarrollo que han afectado al Istmo en los últimos 50 años: la lancha motora y la turbina eólica, por ejemplo. ¿Cómo “se corresponden” (Ingold 2021) estas innovaciones exógenas con las corrientes de agua y de viento? ¿En qué sentido ambas “innovan” la relación de los ikoots con el medioambiente lagunar y con sus agentes geometeóricos? ¿Por qué la primera fue un “invención” aceptada que ha pasado a formar parte del repertorio técnico local, mientras que las otras han generado recelo y resistencia a diferentes niveles, hasta ser parcial o totalmente rechazadas?

En el intento de contestar a estas preguntas a nivel etnográfico, se esbozará a nivel teórico la posibilidad de concebir al objeto técnico (y a la innovación técnica) como un “dispositivo de conexión” que, más allá de explotar, transformar y controlar un medioambiente circundante preexistente, explora y crea las posibilidades de respuesta de un entorno que le corresponde (Ingold cit.); es decir, la innovación técnica como “exploradora” y “activadora” de una cosmología, un orden de las cosas/entes, una “*mondiation*” (Descola 2014). A través de la relación con el viento que incorporan a su mecánica ¿en qué medida y de qué maneras diferentes conectan las cometas y las turbinas a los ikoots con el mundo y a qué mundos diferentes los conectan?

Referencias bibliográficas

Descola, P., 2014, *Modes of Being and Forms of Predication*, «HAU. Journal of Ethnographic Theory», 4, 1: 271-280.

Ingold, T., 2021, *Correspondences*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Scott, J. C., 1998, *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London.

8. Francisca Zalaquett Rock¹, Alice Balsanelli¹, Rodrigo Petatillo Chan², Fernando González-García³, Miguel García Cruz⁴ · Los cantos de las aves en las percepciones, vivencias y mitos de los Lacandones de Nahá y Metzabok, Chiapas.

1. Centro de Estudios Mayas, Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
2. Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, Ciudad de México.
3. Red Biología y Conservación de Vertebrados. Instituto de Ecología, A.C., Xalapa, Veracruz, México.
4. Áreas de Protección de Flora y Fauna Nahá y Metzabok. Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas (CONANP), Ocosingo, Chiapas.

Los cantos de las aves en las percepciones, vivencias y mitos de los Lacandones de Nahá y Metzabok, Chiapas

Los cantos de las aves se han estudiado desde las disciplinas biológicas y a la vez han adquirido un rol muy importante mediante su interacción con las personas. Por esta razón, se ha avanzado mucho en estudios interdisciplinarios para entender su complejidad. En este trabajo se presentan los avances de nuestra investigación sobre la percepción de las expresiones sonoras de algunas aves en los Lacandones de las comunidades de Nahá y Metzabok, Chiapas. Se documentaron distintas modalidades, así como aspectos auditivos relacionados con su cosmovisión, ciclos estacionales, onomatopeyas, algunos ideófonos, relatos y experiencias cotidianas, donde las aves forman parte esencial, al considerarlas comunicadoras entre distintos entornos o mundos, tanto humanos como no humanos. Por sus cantos y comportamientos, las aves pueden anunciar peligros, traer mensajes de seres sobrenaturales, y ser portadoras de augurios positivos y negativos. Se exponen algunos ejemplos de este diálogo continuo para dar cuenta de la importancia de situar al sonido como comunicación, siendo parte de la memoria, conocimiento, experiencia y emociones de los lacandones de Nahá y Metzabok, ya que todos estos elementos están condicionados por medio de los sentidos y son particulares para cada grupo humano.

Key Note

9. Rosemary A. Joyce, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley and Russell N. Sheptak, Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, University of California, Berkeley.

Fluid relations: Lenca understandings of human-environment relationships in long-term perspective

Rooted in indigenous testimonies from Honduran Lenca people, this paper addresses the question of how we might understand humans *in relation* to nonhumans without beginning with an assumption that a dichotomy of human and environment is universally apparent or useful. Lenca people historically describe humans as embedded or entangled in a universe full of liveliness, a characterization that distributes agential capacity across a wide range of entities, including ancestral spirits, spirits sometimes described as "owners" of materials, nonhuman animals and things. In a world described from this ontological position, there is no obvious cut that defines a stable boundary between humans and their "environment". Instead, relationships of humans with a variety of nonhuman forces, notably including rivers, forests, and mountains, have shaped and continue to shape Lenca activities of caring for the nonhumans on which humans are dependent. Using the long-term perspective provided by combining archaeological, documentary, and ethnographic evidence, this paper examines how this indigenous philosophy

of relations that emerge in action underwrote what we might see as resilience in response to ruptures in life caused by environmental and geomorphological activity. Rather than frame this history in the language of resilience of humans in the face of changing environments, we trace a Lenca vocabulary of mutual care, debt, and repayment that, while periodic, can be punctuated by unexpected events occurring at multiple temporalities.