# Introduction

## Mesoamerican Cosmologies and Social Theory

Cosmology, which has been defined as 'the theory of the cosmos as an ordered whole' (Howell 2012: 157), is considered a classic topic both in anthropology in general and in the anthropology of Indigenous groups of 'Mesoamerican' tradition both past and present,[1] because of their complex and not wholly understood ideas regarding notions such as space, time, personhood and the relationship of those notions with social life, history and power. In recent years, however, cosmology as a topic in social anthropology has been viewed with an increasing 'weariness' (Abramson and Holbraad 2014: 2), and has entered what could be considered a deep crisis, a crisis that could probably mean none other than the definitive decline of the topic in the discipline; such a crisis, of course, has also impacted the debate on Mesoamerican cosmologies, with an increasing number of scholars calling us to rethink established assumptions of all kinds (Díaz 2020). Thus, despite what the title of this book may suggest, the purpose of this ethnography is not to offer yet another ethnological depiction of the cosmology of a particular group, the K'iche' Maya of Momostenango, Guatemala, a topic that has been the subject of a number of classic ethnographies.[2] Rather, the purpose of this book is to address the problem of cosmology in anthropology from the perspective of my ethnographic encounter with the many people that this book will endeavour to portray. The important question of this book is not *how* the cosmology of the K'iche' is, even if in some of its pages the reader will indeed find a summary of the topic and even new insights and information about it; rather, the questions of this book are:

How does this cosmology and other cosmologies *work*? Why do people enter into contact with them or 'turn to them' in order to solve problems in their lives? Why are cosmologies in general 'efficient'? And, finally: How can we reconceptualize or redeploy the concept of cosmology in anthropology itself? Is there a possible 'shape' behind 'non-Western' cosmological thinking? However, before I start my ethnographic account and introduce the possible new theoretical avenues suggested by it, it is necessary to contextualize and examine two things more deeply: the current crisis of cosmology in anthropology as such, and the debate regarding Indigenous cosmologies in Mesoamerican anthropology, with a particular emphasis on the Guatemalan context.

## The Cosmological Crisis in Anthropology

As stated by Allen Abramson and Martin Holbraad in the prologue of a collective volume dedicated to the topic (2014), the crisis of cosmology in anthropology is both the crisis of its relevance within the anthropology of the contemporary world, and the crisis of its conceptualization within classical anthropological theories. Regarding its relevance, in recent years many scholars have questioned that the sort of unified, totalizing, closed systems of thought that classic anthropologists used to depict as characteristic of non-Western groups, as well as the social isomorphisms supposedly necessary to their working, are even extant nowadays, given the consequences of colonialism and urbanization in the developing world, which have fragmented both our cosmos and that of the 'others' of anthropology (Abramson and Holbraad 2014: 1–2). In the case of Guatemala, for example, the old paradigm that considered Indigenous people as living in 'closed corporate peasant communities' (Wolf 1957) has been continuously discussed, redefined or redeployed in modern ethnographies due to ever increasing social changes that have challenged that paradigm in various ways (Brintnall 1979; Carlsen 2011; MacKenzie 2016; Watanabe 1992; Wilson 1995), changes that naturally have had an impact on how the cosmologies of Indigenous societies have been portrayed in recent years.

Deeply linked to this historical crisis is the crisis of the classic ways in which anthropology depicted Indigenous cosmologies throughout the world. Indeed, in the aforementioned piece, both Abramson and Holbraad present a series of criticisms to the notions that underlie the treatment of cosmology as a subject in classical social anthropology, notions that were problematic to begin with, and that have conditioned the recent decline of the subject in the discipline. Thus, the holistic,

static, totalizing and organic cosmologies depicted in classical anthropology were somewhat a reflection of the hierarchical, ethnocentric way in which anthropological theory was constructed during the twentieth century, a theory that could be characterized itself as 'anthropology's cosmology of the social' (Abramson and Holbraad 2014: 7). In general, during the twentieth century, anthropological theories of all kinds tended to coincide in the notion that 'Indigenous cosmologies' were more or less holistic totalities that could be mapped into the social, in the assessment that they were scientifically *false*, and in that they were mere reflections of the more important and 'more rational' underlying principles uncovered by the theoretical activity of social scientists:

> ... basic human needs (functionalism), moral and socio-political order and reproduction (structural-functionalism), ecological adaptation (cultural materialism), individual agency (methodological individualism), the expression of underlying social values (interpretivism, symbolism), situated social relations (practice theory) or of a gestalt personality (culture and personality school), ideology and false consciousness (Marxism): all of these classic anthropological positions were posited as competing explanations as to why societies the world over set such great store in imagining the totality of the world in ways that have to be recognised as false. (Abramson and Holbraad 2014: 8)

Thus, what anthropologists traditionally sought to do was to try to subordinate Indigenous cosmologies to their own cosmologies of the social, while conceptualizing them as false, ideological or 'primitive'. However, as soon as these classical anthropological perspectives entered in a succession of crises and the pre-globalization conditions from which they arose started to fade, the topic of cosmology went into a continuous decline, from which perhaps it has not really escaped.

Naturally, the aforementioned succession of classical anthropological theories and their nowadays increasingly questioned assumptions are to be found in the history of the ethnology of Indigenous Maya communities in Mexico and Guatemala. Thus, the initial ideas of Robert Redfield and his collaborators regarding the 'little community', its social structures and practices, and what he called its 'primitive worldview' (Adams 1952; Guiteras Holmes 1961; Redfield 1941, 1952; Tax 1941), ideas partially inspired by the work of Marcel Griaule (1948), eventually led to the establishment of a functional-structuralist school that considered native cosmologies mostly as means of social control (Hermitte 1970; Holland 1961, 1964; Villa Rojas 1963, 1978). In turn, this functionalist school was consolidated by the monumental work of the Harvard Chiapas Project led by Evon Vogt and his collaborators (1969), which

collected an impressive amount of information regarding such cosmologies and used it to create a normative model that sought to find isomorphisms between said Indigenous cosmologies and social hierarchies (Cancian 1976; Korsbaek 1990, 2017), as well as the archaeological past (Vogt 1964). Similarly, and despite Tax's own pioneering economic-anthropological study of Indigenous forms of capitalism (1963), Eric Wolf's ideas on 'closed corporate peasant communities' (1957) were generally accepted at that time as the dominant paradigm that described Indigenous societies, past and present. Similar models were endorsed by functionaries of the *indigenista* political movement in Mexico (Caso 1958) and Guatemala (Gobaud Carrera 1964), which sought the cultural assimilation of Indigenous communities to national states, and that considered Indigenous people as living in 'refuge zones', buffer zones that were more or less isolated from the influence of Western society, which had to partake of an inevitable 'acculturation process' facilitated and even enforced by the state (Aguirre Beltrán 1967).

Continuing earlier trends and applying them to the whole of Guatemalan society, with the works of Richard Adams (1952, 1968), a strong and even more decisive presence of American anthropology began to develop in Guatemala. This has been called 'the anthropology of occupation' by Guatemalan anthropologists and, in general lines, it developed along an 'ahistorical, structural functionalist' line (Pérez de Lara 1993: 19). Due to the deep political crises of Guatemala, which eventually led to the prolonged 'internal armed conflict' or civil war (1960–1996), the discipline entered into a crisis; thus, 'until 1974 the formation of human resources in anthropology was practically non-extant at the University of San Carlos', the most important of the country (Pérez de Lara 1993: 20). Thus, a void in Guatemalan local ethnography began, which only ended in the mid-eighties.

In Mexico, among a decade of political turmoil during the seventies, many critiques were levelled against the ahistorical, static assumptions of the functionalist school, the most prominent being those issued by Marxist anthropologists, who noticed that Indigenous communities were never really closed and were always in many different kinds of relationship with other communities, with Indigenous and colonial empires, and later with the national state (Albores Zárate 1978; Pozas Arciniegas 1974; Warman et al. 1969), a critique later endorsed by ethnohistorians (Viqueira Albán 2002), and even by former functionalists, given the dramatic changes undergone by the societies they studied in their youth (Cancian 1994). Similarly, later anthropologists working in Guatemala and other Indigenous communities of Mesoamerican tradition found that 'the cultural patterns described in … classic anthropological works

[were] no longer typical' (Brintnall 1979: 1), that modern Indigenous life was full of 'empty centres' (Watanabe 1992: 225), that communities underwent complex processes of ethnic reconstitution and dramatic confrontations with colonialism and the state (Wilson 1995), that 'closed corporate communities' had 'opened' (Carlsen 2011: 123), or had become transnational (MacKenzie 2016). On the other hand, politically, in a parallel manner to what happened in the rest of the world (cfr. Banaji 1970), the complicity between certain functionalist anthropologists with colonialism or, in the specific case of Latin America, with the policies of assimilation to national states, determined what was called in Mexico the 'political bankruptcy' of the theory (García Mora and Medina 1986), a bankruptcy that was ultimately symbolized by the seizing of the *indigenista* Coordinating Centre in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, by the Zapatista National Liberation Army in 1994 (Lewis 2018: 1).

In Mexico, these crises, both theorical and political, paved the way for the emergence of the model that would dominate the latter part of the twentieth century in local ethnology, the historicist-symbolic model of Alfredo López Austin (1988). This model, called *teoría de la cosmovisión* (literally 'world view theory'), harked back to the earlier efforts of Redfield and Guiteras on the field of worldview studies and synthesized them with the historical ideas of the French Annals school, especially Braudel's conception of *longue durée* (1958), applied to the continuity of Mesoamerican conceptions, while asserting the ultimately 'ideological' character of Indigenous ideas.[3] In recent years, however, the model found itself in a crisis, brought by the onset of postmodernist, Deleuzian approaches to classical cosmological topics such as personhood (Pitarch 2010, 2013), critical calls to re-examine the traditional, essentialist assumptions of past anthropology (Neurath 2008) and, finally, the introduction of ideas of the so-called ontological turn in Mesoamerican ethnology (Lamrani 2008; MacKenzie 2016; Millán 2015, 2019; Zamora Corona 2020), as well the emergence of new contemporary orientations within the discipline such as cosmopolitics and the ecological crises of the present (Questa Rebolledo 2017, 2023).

However, despite the fact that the ontological turn has called anthropologists to take the ideas of the others seriously, and despite the fact that it has explicitly called to reject ethnocentrism, essentialism, exoticization and top-down explanations (cfr. Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: 5–6), a certain sense of continuity of the 'cosmological crisis' pervades the anthropology of Indigenous communities of Mesoamerican tradition, even after the arrival of the ontological turn, which, while asserting itself as more of a particular and more of a heuristic methodology than a repertoire of paradigmatic concepts that seeks to explain 'reality as

such', somewhat ended up creating a set of concepts resembling such a repertoire. Indeed, for example, certain key topics introduced by its proponents, such as predation (Viveiros de Castro 1992), perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 1998), affinity (Viveiros de Castro 2018), reciprocity (Descola 1986) and the different instances of the relationship between nature and culture (Descola 2013), to name a few, while of undeniable importance, have started to become more and more akin to common places among some of its followers. In this sense, a certain dissatisfaction with the history and current state of 'Mesoamerican' anthropology has been recently expressed by Maya ethnologist Pedro Pitarch in a recent volume dedicated to theory and ethnography in Mesoamerica, in which it is noted that the complexity of the ideas of Mesoamerican peoples 'has not found its place within the anthropological repertoire of the peoples of the world' (2020: 10), contrasting it with the rich conceptual tradition found within the anthropology of Melanesia and the Amazon. Thus, while the aforementioned volume suggests new avenues of enquiry and conceptualization, the overall impression is that a new impasse has been reached, an impasse whose causes have been addressed by those who are critical *within* the ontological turn, rather than merely *against* it.

As the Mexican anthropologist Carlos Mondragón, a specialist in Melanesia, remarked in a critical intervention at the Institute of Anthropological Research of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (2015), the danger of a sort of 'Kuhnian' substitution of a paradigm for another has been present in the reception of the ontological turn in Mexico, as well as a certain disdain for ethnography. Thus, for him, new engagements with ethnography within the ontological turn are needed, rather than the enthusiastic adoption of pre-existing topics; similarly, a more pronounced emphasis in processes is needed; that is, to study 'the daily conditions of reality that make possible the creation of the world at a local level'. To his very pertinent observations, I would add that the point of the ontological turn is not to 'verify' a 'new paradigm' by merely 'mapping' its emerging models into ethnographic data, nor to seek new ways to characterize 'Mesoamerican Indigenous peoples', but rather to attempt to engage with anthropological problems through the possibilities of an ontological approach in conjunction with new ethnography. Thus, this book ascribes itself to the ontological turn but will not pay that much attention to its now 'traditional' topics (which, nonetheless, are easy to identify in my ethnography), but rather will use the ontological outlook in order to address a more general, anthropological problem, that of cosmology itself.

In this sense, as a chart or guideline for future fructiferous engagements, Abramson and Holbraad have suggested that we should be wary

of holistic schemes and totalizing pretentions (2014: 3), and have insisted that cosmology should stop being assumed as a 'baseline' for a cultural kind of explanation of people's lives, nor serve as a departure for totalizing and exotic discourses; instead, cosmology should be engaged with a spirit of ethnographical experimentation and imbrication with other dimensions of people's lives, taking the ethnographic contingency seriously (2014: 15). However, one wonders: if we are critical of the totalizing ideas of old-school social anthropology, and even more of the idea of totality itself, is cosmology still valid as a topic? Is *κόσμος* (and its modern calques along with it) not a word that conveys the idea of order and even totality?[4] If this has become problematic, why not abandon the term at all? Is cosmology not the activity of 'imagining the totality of the world' (Abramson and Holbraad 2014: 8)? Why not disperse, then, *cosmology* into some of its sub-topics like personhood, temporality or spirits, to name a few? Is it possible to even study cosmology by itself in a way that does not fall into the reductionist conundrums of former theory? How to talk about the totality par excellence, the *cosmos*, in a non-totalizing way? However, before assailing this topic, it is necessary to make some further clarifications in order to position this book in regards to some specific aspects of the ethnological tradition of Guatemala, both past and present.

## Some Critical Clarifications

Besides dealing with cosmology in general, this book deals, in particular, with some of the cosmological ideas found in the K'iche' Maya town of Momostenango or Chwa Tzak, located in Totonicapán, in the Highlands of Guatemala. Perhaps some readers will notice that this book will distance itself from certain salient topics of the ethnographic tradition of the Highlands of Chiapas and Guatemala, which has been one of the 'most ethnographically studied regions in the world' (Carlsen 2011: 47), and that, as such, has developed an ethnographic tradition with many strongly established features that are inevitable to comment upon before trying to advance the idea of cosmology that this work deals with. Three of the topics that this book takes a critical and perhaps unusual distance, given the aforementioned regional ethnographic tradition, are the following: 1) the Wolfian idea of community, 2) the idea of religion, 3) the overwhelming importance of historical contexts and explanations. What I am referring to with 'taking a distance' does not mean an outright denial, but rather a cautious approach to the totalizing character that those ideas have had in regional models, something anticipated in the preceding account of traditional interpretations of cosmology in anthropology.

In general, ethnographies dealing with Guatemalan Indigenous peoples have been 'community' oriented (Brintnall 1979; Carlsen 2011; Cook 2000; La Farge 1947; La Farge and Byers 1931; MacKenzie 2016; Mendelson 1957, 1965; Saler 1960; Tax 1953; Tedlock 1992; Wagley 1949; Watanabe 1992; Wilson 1995). Specifically after Wolf's seminal work (1957), most regional ethnographies have repeatedly discussed the meaning, implications, relevance and even what we could call the 'afterlife' of the term 'community', in the specific Wolfian sense of a 'closed corporate and peasant' community. The continued regional acceptance of the model contrasts with its aforementioned crisis in Mexico, and with the critical re-examinations of its validity in Asia, where authors like Terry Rambo convincingly argued that 'attempting to classify all peasant societies in terms of their position on any single *continuum*, whether it be one that runs from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*, folk to urban, or closed to open, is not likely to be a fruitful exercise' (Rambo 1977: 187). Therefore, this ethnography will dispense with the concept as an interpretive framework, and merely conserve 'community' as a descriptive label, without any further assumptions.[5] Similarly, while this book will be centred in the K'iche' Maya town of Momostenango, it will not be the study of a community per se, in the sense of a presentation of an abstract collective that holds a number of 'beliefs'. Instead, it will focus on more personal narratives and show their engagements or intersections, as members of society, with the cosmos. Thus, this will imply abandoning the equalization or flattening of cosmological 'data' regarding 'beliefs' that is characteristic of traditional Mesoamerican ethnography, and returning to more individual portraits that show the concrete lives of people and their ideas in their actual contexts, without abandoning, of course, a certain general sense of social validity to them.

A second notion or topic that this book will distance itself from is religion. Religious change and revivals, as well as interreligious conflict, have been crucial topics in ethnographies of Indigenous Guatemalan communities past and present (Brintnall 1979; Hoenes del Pinal 2022; Mendelson 1957; Wilson 1995), especially given the rise of Protestantism in the country during the twentieth century (Stoll 1991). However, while Catholicism and Protestantism (the two most important religions in Guatemala) are indeed religions, the cosmological conceptions and practices that this book will refer to, called *costumbre* by Indigenous people, do not really constitute a 'religion' in the Western sense, since they do not refer to the 'supernatural', another concept that is conspicuously absent in Indigenous cosmologies (Hallowell 1964; Saler 1977, 1993). This important idea has been recently emphasized in the pioneering work of James MacKenzie in the K'iche' town of San Andrés

Xecul, who, following Viveiros de Castro's ideas (1998), preferred to construe *costumbre* as an animistic and shamanistic ontology in his work (2016: 64). Following MacKenzie's appreciation, and since this book is centred in *costumbre*, the religious-centric perspective of past works will be discarded here, and my analysis will not operate from a 'religious logic', nor privilege religion as an explicative tool. In general, I agree with the observations of Daniel Dubuisson (2019), which argue that religion is a concept that was imposed on non-Western people through European colonial projects, and has been ostensibly used as a tool of colonialism, as well as with the opinion of Timothy Fitzgerald, who argues that the category cannot be an epistemological tool, but rather should be an object of critical analysis itself (2000: 106).

Finally, this book will also, in general, forego ethnohistorical chapters and explanations, and mostly bypass the importance accrued to pre-Hispanic symbols in the interpretation of current Maya rituals in certain prominent works,[6] even if, as the reader will see, the sixth chapter of this book is actually devoted to a historical topic. On one hand, the prominence of ethnohistorical overviews in many ethnographies (Carlsen 2011: 71–120; MacKenzie 2016: 34–42; cfr. Tedlock 1992: 13–22) in the region is natural and even desirable, since many Maya communities are still missing detailed ethnohistorical studies. However, in the case of Momostenango, the monumental work of Robert Carmack (1995), one of the most important representatives of the ethnohistorical discipline itself (1972, 1981), makes this endeavour somewhat redundant. But there is something more to this than the issue of the availability of studies and materials, and that is more related, perhaps, to the traditional 'conflict' between history and anthropology (Bayly 2018).

Indeed, recent ethnographies have criticized the overwhelming place accrued to historical precedents in Mesoamerican ethnology, as Alessandro Questa has done in regards to the *masewal* people of Tepetzintla, Puebla (2017, 2023), questioning the way in which the colonial image of Aztec religion, transmitted by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún and continued by authors like Alfredo López Austin and his followers, has overdetermined our vision of Indigenous cosmologies, annulling ethnographic engagements in a desire for standardization and canonization along rigid historical lines (Questa 2017: 182). Indeed, while ethnohistory was originally born out of a desire to give prominence to Indigenous voices and agency in order to defy Western projects of extractivism and dispossession (cfr. MacMillen 2009), in later times the tendency of ethnography in the region has been to understand Indigenous communities as 'subjects' of myriad historical processes beyond their control or, at most, to characterize them as people

who 'resist' history, or constantly 'adapt' to it, be it in regards to the Spanish conquest and colonization, the national states or globalization (Watanabe and Fischer 2004). In this regard, this book will emphasize, in Chapter 6, the Indigenous notion of history, which is not deterministic, is cosmologically centred, is active and in which Indigenous agents take the centre stage. Thus, I consider it important for this work to portray this specific idea of history, in order to avoid the inherent deterministic nature of the Western idea of history as applied to non-Western societies, which the ethnohistorical model dominant in regional ethnography has contributed to canonize and perpetuate.

## The Idea of Cosmology in This Book

Returning to the main topic of this book, it is possible to ask: What is the vision of cosmology that this book tries to reflect upon? How does it contrast with the aforementioned dominant conceptions in local ethnology? While a complete answer cannot be offered at this point, perhaps an indication could be made through a particularly rich quote by Edmund Leach. Reflecting on the difference between cosmology as conceptualized in Western tradition and Western science vis-à-vis the cosmologies that anthropologists often find in the field, Leach makes a poignant and evocative observation that is worth quoting in full:

> The traditional (religious cosmology) of Western civilization has become frozen by its literary form into a pattern which is wholly anachronistic. A deity which is the 'King of kings, the only ruler of princes' made sense in the days of the Emperor Constantine and even in the England of the sixteenth century, but in a world cluttered with formulae about the equality of man and institutions such as the United Nations Assembly, the imagery of God as a Supreme Emperor has no place at all. Alternatively, the modern (scientific) cosmology of the astrophysicists, with its fables of the beginning of time in a Big Bang and a universe filled with inconceivable numbers of entities spaced at inconceivable distances of time and space, leads us to think that the cosmos is, in all respects, vast, so that the 'other world' if there were such a place, would certainly be a very long way away.
>
> But the cosmologies encountered by anthropologists in the field are quite of a different kind. It was Vico who observed that, for the Greeks, the Underworld was no more distant that the bottom of a plough furrow, while the abode of the gods on Mount Olympus was at the top of a visible mountain of quite moderate size. In the course of my Kachin fieldwork I was told of a procedure whereby a spirit medium, in a state of trance, would ascend a ladder into the sky to consult personally with the sky deities (*mu nat*); the rungs of the ladder were sword blades with the sharp edge upwards. When

> I came to witness the actual performance of this miraculous event I found it something of an anti-climax. The medium ascended on to a platform about twenty feet on the ground and, although the rungs of the ladder did include one upturned sword blade, I noticed that the medium took good care no to step on it! (Leach 1982: 213–14)

In this quote, we can see the main dilemma of cosmology as understood by social anthropology, laid before our eyes. Out account of Western medieval cosmology, which is actually somewhat still the mould of many of our accounts of 'traditional' cosmologies (the aforementioned treatment of Indigenous cosmologies of Mexico and Guatemala being a prominent example) is wholly 'conventional' and 'frozen'; in contrast, the modern image of cosmology conveyed by Western science is less centralized and rigid, but still completely representational. It talks about the totality of the cosmos as a map of a faraway place that remains somewhat alien to us, despite ourselves being actually there. To introduce a third possibility, Leach mentions Giambattista Vico's depiction of actual Greek cosmology, not that of philologists or historians, but that of ancient Greeks *themselves*: for them, Hades was a place that was a bit further down the plough of a farmer, while Mount Olympus was a real mountain to be found within the borders of Thessaly and Macedon. Following this example, but introducing a further complexity that takes us closer to the dilemma, Leach offers a quaint image of Kachin cosmology, presenting almost before our eyes not another instance of a frozen, erudite cosmology, but the cosmology that he found *in the field*: he offers a vision of the Kachin cosmos as it emerges in the theatrical performance of a seer. In this performance, the cosmological ladder that leads to the sky, filled with sword blades placed as rungs, is an actual ladder built on a platform located in the village: the sky itself (*mu*), which is the supreme dimension of the universe in which the gods who are the ancestors of the Kachin clans live, is simply that space that is at the top of this seemingly all-too-mundane platform standing on our earth (*ga*).

That a celestial stairway is somewhat identical to an old ladder is a situation similar to the problem that this book will strive to explain: in summary, the cosmology that we find in the field, not our many models of cosmology. Thus, the questions that this book deals with are the following: 1) Why do people in so many societies often say that their actions proceed not from themselves, but from ancestors, gods and other cosmological entities? 2) Can a non-reductionist understanding of cosmology be proposed for social anthropology? 3) How to engage with cosmology while avoiding the classical understanding of the cosmologies of others as being subordinated to the theoretical activity or the cosmologies of the anthropologists? While my proposal cannot be fully

brought forward now, something can be advanced here. Unlike in most of the traditional perspectives reviewed in this chapter, cosmology is not considered here merely as a 'mental product'. It is not a mental representation, a map of the cosmos, nor the 'product of a mentality'. Instead, it is a configuration that emerges when the idea of an 'image of the world' undergoes certain processes that attempt precisely to overcome the difference between totality and representation. It is not a product of society; it is where society takes place. It is not an ideological superstructure in the Marxist sense; it is more akin to a thinking machine. Cosmology is not 'mental', rather, it is 'mind-like' in the sense of Douglas Hofstadter (1979, 2007); that is, a 'strange loop' where the world is twisted back unto itself in order to be able to think about itself.

## Summary of the Chapters of This Book

As it often happens in the field, where at first the anthropologist is lonelier and is struggling to find acquaintances and his own place within the community where his work takes place, the nature of the writing of this book will change from an initial ethnography where the voice and preoccupations of the author are more prominent, to an ethnography where other voices become more dominant, to finally approach the more 'objective' or collective topic of historical memory. In the first chapter, I will present some findings and ideas regarding the nature of the sacred altars of the K'iche' Maya, which, as I endeavour to show, are a true nexus for Maya cosmology and whose real meaning was not completely understood in past ethnographies. In Chapter 2, the focus will be on the life of a K'iche' patrilineage, the Ramos family, and their relationship with ancestors and society. Chapter 3 will be dedicated to the celebration of the patron saint of the town, Santiago, but in reality this celebration is framed in a rather complex ritual involving paradoxes related to time. Chapter 4 will be dedicated to different testimonies regarding sorcery and 'witchcraft', which, as I will argue, constitute a sort of 'anticosmology', an alternative idea of causality. Chapter 5 will be dedicated to the portrayal of an Indigenous political activist, Miguel Ángel Pelicó, and his struggle against mining companies and extractivism in the town. Finally, Chapter 6 is dedicated to narrating and understanding the local vision of a historical event: the war of 1903 between Guatemala and El Salvador, in which troops from Momostenango played a vital role, but also in which the cosmological ideas of the K'iche' had an unexpected agency. Finally, the conclusion will reflect on how the

cosmological engagements of this book can help us rethink the idea of cosmology in anthropology itself.

## Notes

1. The term 'Mesoamerica', originally proposed by the ethnologist Paul Kirchhoff (1943), refers to a historical 'cultural area' comprising part of the territories of the current nations of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. The pertinence of the usage of the term to refer to Indigenous peoples of the post-Conquest period has been debated (cfr. López Austin 1990: 32–35), as well as the general utility of the concept itself, since it tends to create a reified, static image that has become problematic in recent years (cfr. Neurath 2023: 9–16); however, I will use this term instead of referring to current national boundaries as identifiers because not only many of the particular aspects of the cosmological conceptions discussed in this book are shared by communities of both Guatemala and Mexico (and within Mexico, the state of Chiapas in particular), but also because the term plays a key part in the debate regarding local Indigenous cosmologies past and present.
2. The most important among them being those of Leonhart Schultze-Jena, who mainly dealt with cosmology, mythology and language in both Chichicastenango and Momostenango (1933); the Guatemalan ethnologist Antonio Gobaud Carrera, who dedicated a brief article to the main Indigenous festival of the town, Wajxaqib' B'atz' (1937); Robert Carmack, who dedicated an authoritative volume to the ethnohistory and the evolution of the sociopolitical organization of the town (1995), as well as an important article to its 'traditional cosmology' (1998); and Carmack's disciples, Barbara Tedlock, who dealt with calendrics and divination (1978, 1992), and Garrett Cook, who dealt with cosmology (1981) and dances (2000). More recent efforts such as that of Thomas Hart (2008) and Paul van der Akker (2018) have continued to increase the ethnographic information available on Momostenango.
3. For a definition of worldview within the Mexican school, see López Austin 2018; for the Mesoamerican worldview as an ideological complex, see López Austin 1988: 16–20.
4. 'κόσμος, *ὁ*: order … IV. Philos.: world-order, universe (Liddell and Scott [1901] 1996: 983).
5. Similarly, it is my impression that the idea of a 'death' or 'decline of the community' such as that described by Carlsen in Santiago Atitlan (2011) or by Cancian in Zinacantan (1994) simply masks the reality that the concept, with all the characteristics devised by Wolf, never really existed in its 'ideal' form in the first place.
6. For example, Cook 2000, in which the continuities between contemporary dances and pre-Hispanic imagery is constantly emphasized.