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# Land, Neoliberalism, and Mennonite/Maya Interconnections

An Interview of Manuel May by Katerina Friesen

**KATERINA:** Manuel, what are some of the things you most love about where you come from? How would you describe your community (including the land) for readers? How has the land shaped you?

**MANUEL:** Regarding the Maya landscape, I think what has shaped my life mission is a living connection with sacred places, the sacred sites, or what some call archaeological sites. Walking in the middle of the jungle and finding buildings that were built over one thousand years ago by our ancestors has a powerful revitalizing effect on my connection to ancestral lands and my cultural roots. I enjoy walking through these ancestral lands and finding the special sites, considered sacred by our forefathers—for example, hills, caves, natural wells, and the abundant archaeological sites. Visiting these sites gives me a lot of inner strength. When I'm there in the community, I really enjoy visiting these places that are abundant in the

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*Katerina and Manuel first connected in 2018 when Manuel reached out to the Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Coalition about a dialogue his community hopes to initiate with the old colony Mennonites in Hopelchén, Campeche, Mexico.*

area. Sometimes we are not able to see them because of the colonial-based education we have received at school.

**KATERINA:** Are the sacred spaces known in the community, or did you have someone guide you or show you those spaces?

**MANUEL:** Most of these places are well known in the Maya region, especially by the elders in the community—the grandmothers and grandfathers. But not everyone knows about these sites, because of the cultural amnesia caused by colonial-based education. Especially the youth are more and more disconnected from the Maya territory. I also had to have some guidance, especially from the elders, to visit various sacred sites. They are keen to pass on this knowledge to us and to future generations, so I think I am lucky because I have them to teach me.

Back to your question about the Maya landscape . . . I love to walk under the forest, in the atmosphere darkened by the shade of the trees. Despite the intense heat and sunlight, it seems that we are immersed in another world, fresh with pure air and full of life. The contrast of this environment may be hard to imagine in such a warm tropical area, especially in the dry season when we have so much light and so much heat. But as soon as you enter the jungle, you enter a dark space, like a cave, created by the shadow of the trees. The birds and insects are singing; it's like entering into a different world. I love that. I enjoy the feeling that I am part of the whole, not as a superior being but, rather, equal to animals, plants, and insects.

I like to learn from the singing of birds, insects, etcetera. I enjoy seeing the hills on the horizon covered with jungle, the smell of morning dew, and the colors of the sky after a storm. To enjoy the trees of the jungle and learn their medicinal uses . . . Often, when I walk with my father and he teaches me which plant is useful for a particular sickness, I like to think that some wounds from colonization are healing. To me, recovering this knowledge and learning from the experience with him is a healing process in itself and helps me to walk the path of decolonization.

I really feel at peace in that environment, and I think one of the best memories I have is after a storm. When you walk through the jungle after a storm, you can identify a special sound in the birds' song. When they sing after the rain, it's like they're celebrating a party! I like being able to listen and learn from those differences. And I also enjoy watching the different

colors of the sky. I remember when I was a child, I loved to see the sky changing colors: blue, purple, pink, orange, red, etcetera.

**KATERINA:** Beautiful. Thank you, Manuel. I hear your deep love and intimacy with the place. Last year, you shared an article with me about the impact of the Mennonite communities' industrial farming practices on Maya beekeepers. It really impacted my heart to read it. For me, it highlighted the ongoing land degradation and disrespect for Indigenous sovereignty happening under settler colonialism. It echoes the stories of my German Russian Mennonite ancestors' displacement of Indigenous Peoples, where I live in what's now the United States as a settler (<https://www.national-geographic.com/environment/2019/04/unlikely-feud-beekeepers-mennonites-simmers-mexico/>). One of the quotes that impacted me was by the indigenous beekeeper Edi Alimi Sanchez about the Mennonite settler-colonists: "They're good people. It's just that they destroy nature."

How would you describe the Mennonite communities in Campeche? What do you see as the sources of their destruction of nature? What do you wish they might understand about Maya communities?

**MANUEL:** It is difficult to describe any community without falling into essentialism and prejudice. I'll do my best, but I apologize if I fall into generalizations. My impression of the Mennonite communities we are more connected with is that they maintain a very isolated way of life—more than others I've heard about. As a group or collective, they rarely make contact with the Maya communities in our area. They often hire Maya men to work as laborers in the fields. But, in general, there is almost no relationship with the Maya communities. That's sad on the one hand. But, on the other hand, some of them are getting involved in the environmental problems of the region and are open to begin discussions on these problems that affect us all at the same time.

I read some testimonies from Mennonites, and I was surprised to learn that in some communities there is no television, that the internet is forbidden in their communities, or that women are not allowed to talk to non-Mennonites. It seems that most men learn Spanish to communicate with people from other villages and to sell or buy products. I'm not sure to what extent this information is accurate; maybe some women speak Spanish too. But when I have visited a Mennonite community in the area, often stopping by to buy cheese, it is certainly difficult to talk to the women, for some reason. However, one of the things that surprised me the most is

that at school they learn their own language—German, or *Plattdütsch*, I think. And it is surprising, because we do not enjoy that right—the right to study in our own language. In the Maya communities, Spanish is the official language, and that’s what we learn at school.

KATERINA: Indigenous language is not taught in schools? You have to do your own language revitalization for your youth?

MANUEL: Yes.

KATERINA: Wow. I just want to emphasize that, because I think it’s a really important contrast. And I think it may have been one of the original agreements with the Mexican government when they settled there—to be able to teach their kids the language.

MANUEL: Yes. In regard to the language, I think it’s nice to have a diversity of languages spoken, and I also think it is important to criticize the lack of education in our own language in schools. Our stories are different. For example, we faced five centuries of colonization. But it would be wonderful if we could learn our language at school.

KATERINA: Yes, it seems like differing stories of privilege and oppression. The European descendants were able to preserve their language, but the language of the Indigenous descendants in your home place that was colonized is at risk because it is not officially recognized or given support.

MANUEL: Right! On the other hand, we are proud to say that language revitalization is on the agenda of some Indigenous organizations, such as *Ka’ Kuxtal*. *Ka’ Kuxtal* is an Indigenous organization formed by Maya elders and young people. And one of the points I’d like to emphasize is that the elders are able to speak and teach the language, which means it’s possible to create a multicultural, intercultural society or community if desired.

Going back to the Mennonite communities. . . . I have the impression that their current way of relating to the land has been shaped by the neoliberal movement in recent decades. This would not be uncommon because agricultural policies are guided by neoliberal agendas promoted by the Mexican state. In fact, this gives us an idea of the ideological impact of neoliberalism on the peoples of the world, particularly in Indigenous contexts. From the 1990s onward, Mennonites began to arrive in Hopelchén, just as Mexico was entering into NAFTA with the United States and Can-

ada. Hopelchén Mennonites began to produce grain (sorghum first, then genetically modified [GM] corn and soybeans) for international markets. At this time, the government began to give more support to the Mennonites for the purchase of agricultural machinery and to convert the jungle into large areas of cultivation. In need of land and fleeing the violence in the north of the country, Mennonites who settled in Hopelchén benefited from the neoliberal plan of the Mexican government in many ways.

In turn, the Maya communities have maintained a historical struggle against the marginalization and the dispossession of the territories by the Mexican State through colonial-based policies. The Maya were reluctant to accept any policy that would harm the territorial sovereignty of the communities. So, in my opinion, support for Mennonite communities had the political result of weakening resistance and creating division in Maya communities.

**KATERINA:** So that happened in the 90s? I didn't realize it was that recent.

Around the land title issues, was the land communally owned by the Maya before? How did the government transfer the land from the Maya to the Mennonites?

**MANUEL:** It is a long process that was reinforced by NAFTA-aligned policies and concrete changes in the law. After the Revolution, Indigenous communities obtained land to cultivate.<sup>1</sup> As a result, *ejidos* were created based on communal land ownership. But the *ejido* lands could be privatized if the assemblies so decided. That is why the 1992 constitutional reforms in Mexico promoted the subdivision of *ejido* lands as a necessary measure to be privatized after a careful legal procedure. This would allow land to be purchased, and, on the other hand, the government could use the expropriation of land to allocate it to Mennonites. Expropriation is a legal remedy based on the imposition of state dominion over the sovereignty of Maya peoples, very much in line with the Doctrine of Discovery.

With NAFTA, privatization was promoted. So, assemblies could sell off parts of the land. But, of course, the assembly members were also connected to the political parties, and through co-optation and corruption, certain leaders could be convinced to sell the land. It is also the case that

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<sup>1</sup> Following the Mexican Revolution, the Mexican government created a system of land reform for Indigenous and peasant communities based on the *ejido* system of Indigenous communal land tenure. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1991 effectively ended the *ejido* system.

individuals can sell their plots. For example, my father could obtain a plot of land to cultivate, and after some years of possession, he could ask for a change of use to sell it to private investors. Thus, the legal framework facilitates the dismantling of communal land tenure.

KATERINA: It sounds very intentional. It was created to dispossess or dismantle that communal system, like you said.

MANUEL: Right. But fortunately not all of the ejidos have been dismantled, and, in Hopelchén, some communities still keep land in common use and also develop different programs to protect it. In this sense, the Indigenous organization *Ka' Kuxtal* collaborates and supports several programs to protect and defend the territory in the region. The problem with the state's neoliberal policies is that they ignore the resistance of Maya communities to the practice of such a massive crop due to cultural and religious reasons. Cultivation in the Indigenous tradition is often carried out with great respect for Mother Earth. For example, before planting, ceremonies are held to ask permission from the spiritual protectors of the land and nature (*Yíumtsilo'ob*). So the very idea of clearing the forest to produce industrial and genetically modified corn goes against some basic principles of the relationship between the Mayas and the land.

But such respect is not easy to understand for people who come from other regions and have no spiritual connection to the earth. So, in my opinion, this was an advantage for the state that allowed it to channel Mennonite communities into industrial exploitation of the land.

KATERINA: Was it an advantage because the Mennonites were disconnected from the land, so they could be used almost as a tool to cultivate in an industrial way and take land in a way that the government wanted?

MANUEL: Yes, definitely. That was an advantage, and, besides, these communities were migrants trying to escape violence, which makes it easier for them to be instrumentalized and made dependent on the system.

KATERINA: It's a whole other conversation, but there are parallels between them [the Mennonites] escaping violence in Russia to come to Mexico,

Canada, the United States, or Paraguay. And that violence, maybe sometimes trauma, can blind us to the violence that we create.<sup>2</sup>

MANUEL: Yes, I think you're right. I hadn't seen it that way. . . . On the other hand, the government promotes certain violence by creating communities dependent on state money. All of a sudden, we have marginalized communities that seemingly become rich communities because of the resources that the state provides to buy machinery and new technologies for industrial cultivation.

KATERINA: So they started out marginalized and then became wealthy, partly because of the governments and the grants along the way for machinery and the land transactions.

MANUEL: Yes, I am certainly generalizing after talking to some people and reading a little more about the economic changes in Mexico in our region, and, of course, I also heard that there are problems mainly because the money granted is not free but works as a loan. Eventually, if there is a storm or a hurricane and crops are lost, everything is lost—even machinery, because it is bought with bank loans. This problem affects both Maya and Mennonites.

KATERINA: And would some people from the Maya communities—because of colonization—were they farming in similar ways? Had some people drifted away from the more, like you said, traditional practices of small cultivation and doing so in a more sacred way?

MANUEL: Yes. And I think it's all connected. For example, when people have lost their crops due to some natural phenomenon and need money, they can get loans and resources from the state, but sometimes these supports are provided for the cultivation of modified corn and soybeans. In several communities, the elders are reluctant to plant soybeans because some of the production is for self-consumption, so it is better to plant corn. But, in any case, genetically modified corn is sold, while native corn is preserved for consumption.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on intergenerational Russian Mennonite trauma as a barrier to Indigenous solidarity, see Elaine Enns, "Trauma and Memory: Challenges to Settler Solidarity," *Consensus* 37, no. 1 (2016), article 5; and "Facing History with Courage: Towards 'Restorative Solidarity' with Our Indigenous Neighbors," *Canadian Mennonite* 10, no. 5 (March 2, 2015): 4–9.

On the other hand, we have seen in the past decade that Mennonite communities began to create wealth, and you can see some young people with new trucks, nice and luxurious cars, and other machines. So imagine the young Maya looking at that! It's easy to be convinced to plant soybeans, for example, or modified corn. This creates another problem: the division within the Maya communities because some people want to switch to industrial cultivation. Of course, in the short term it seems to be better, or more profitable, but the elders—those who have more experience and have gone through several crises—are reluctant. They say that this improvement is temporary; it won't last forever.

In that sense, I think Mennonite communities have also begun to reflect. Because these problems affect us all in general. Regarding wealth, it is true that farmers get more money today because of the industrial way of farming. But it's not that much, to be honest, because nice cars, luxury cars, and machines are mostly bought on credit. When they cannot pay, they lose these goods, and, at the end of the day, people—whether they are Maya or Mennonite—are producing to benefit others.

I would also like to point out that many politicians are also businessmen in Mexico. Not only do they deal with changes in the law to allow massive industrial cultivation of GMOs but they also benefit directly from owning or partnering with companies that export soybeans, maize, or animals that feed on these grains to supply the world market. For example, the pigs and chickens that are sent to Asia, basically to China and other countries, are produced in the Yucatán Peninsula. Pigs and chickens feed on soybean products and modified maize. So, basically, the people who are getting really rich are not the Mennonites or the Maya who grow GMOs. In my opinion, they are one of the last links in the chain to benefit from the neoliberal system. And above them are the businessmen who make the most profit by feeding the global market.

**KATERINA:** What do you wish the Mennonites understood about the Maya community?

**MANUEL:** As I was thinking about that question, I was also doing a little self-reflection. Now there are Maya who are more in favor of industrial agrobusiness because they have seen the economic “success” of the Mennonite community. So, I would like *all of us* to go back to the ancestral teachings and to the forms of respect and gratitude toward Mother Earth, Mother Nature. This is not to romanticize or idealize, because I would say that much of this knowledge has been lost due to colonization or has



been transformed. But we can still identify ideas, especially in the words of grandmothers and grandfathers—basic ideas or principles about how to relate to Mother Earth. So, I wish that together with the Mennonite communities and the Maya younger generation, we can *listen* and learn from the grandmothers and grandfathers.

**KATERINA:** I think that opens up the next question, which is about your desire to start a dialogue with Mennonite settlers—around Maya teachings and spirituality, Doctrine of Discovery, and your common interests—that you’ve described as neighbors, as links in this chain together. Maybe creating a different chain! What would be some of your hopes for this dialogue, and what might a repaired relationship look like if you can imagine it for your and our communities (linking myself to those communities as well)?

**MANUEL:** Honestly, when we talked last time, I had clearer ideas about how to respond. But when I was thinking about the nuances, I realized that there are complexities to think about. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to go deeper. In terms of the way our elders related to nature and the way we do it now and the way Mennonite communities do it in a more industrial way, I think we should start rethinking our relationships as a community, not just restricted to Indigenous people but also including Mennonites. As I said, the effects of industrialized crops are more evident now. We are getting sicker because of the use of chemicals like glyphosate, which is used to kill other plants for the benefit of GM crops. Now, it is more evident that after a few years with this type of farming, nature is destroyed in a dramatic way.

A few weeks ago, during tropical storm Cristobal, many Maya villages were flooded due to the way the terrain has been modified. The natural water courses that filled the natural wells were modified and blocked in the process of industrial cultivation. This resulted in flooding of neighboring communities and crops. It is clear that this way of relating to nature is harmful to all of us, and I think it is time for us to reflect deeply on how to treat nature more respectfully and with gratitude.

With respect to young Maya, I would say that it is urgent to discuss the historical roots that place us in the situation of oppression and injustice that we live in, and to reflect on the colonial process and the ideologies that support it, such as, for example, the Doctrine of Discovery. This is a

necessary topic of discussion because many Protestant churches still perpetuate these ideologies.

**KATERINA:** In what ways do you see them perpetuating these ideologies?

**MANUEL:** For example, ancestral ceremonies for the cultivation of maize that, in fact, transmit values based on respect and gratitude toward nature are being demonized by the contemporary Protestant movement. I honestly don't know the position of the Mennonite church, but the Protestant churches in Maya communities qualify the ceremonies as acts of witchcraft, along with perpetuating the idea that land can be owned, dominated, and colonized. So, we need to examine the roots of these colonial ideologies and at the same time reclaim the ancestral Indigenous forms of respect and gratitude to Mother Earth.

**KATERINA:** Thank you for that. This seems like a big part of the work, as we've talked about in previous conversations, for Christians to undo the relationship between their spirituality and capitalism, and rediscover some of the roots in the Bible and in their own tradition that have a different relationship. Or, different stories for them to connect to the land rather than dominate the land.

**MANUEL:** Yes, in that sense, we haven't had that discussion yet [within the Maya community]. I was happy to know that there are Mennonite communities like the one you belong to that are developing this conversation in alliance and solidarity with Indigenous people in the United States. I was excited to share this with my community in Hopelchén, and they were also excited. To be honest, we were inspired by this initiative [the Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Coalition].

I think it is important that both Maya and Mennonites, who share the fruits of Mother Earth, have a conversation about the historical conditions and ideologies that have led us to this moment and to this particular situation of oppression, dependency, and injustice, where both Maya and Mennonites are immersed.

It would be important to discuss the colonial ideologies and strategies of demonization that were used by the colonizers to dominate Indigenous Peoples and that continue to be used by the different economic and political powers to maintain the oppression of entire peoples, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous.

As we know, the Doctrine of Discovery has been discussed in United Nations forums, and various Indigenous Peoples around the world advocate its dismantling and the scrutiny of national laws that are influenced by such invalid principles—“racist, scientifically false, legally invalid, morally condemnable and socially unjust” (UNDRIP). We have also seen a beacon of hope in the conversations Mennonites are having with Indigenous Peoples in the United States and with society at large (for example, the coalition of which you are a part). Yet, these conversations do not exist between the Maya and Mennonites in Hopelchén and throughout the peninsula. For example, there are similar issues in Quintana Roo with the Maya and Mennonite communities as well.

The questions we’d like to start the conversation with are: How does the Doctrine of Discovery affect the formation of Mexico as a country? How does it perpetuate racist, scientifically false, legally invalid, morally condemnable, and socially unjust ideologies in the policies of the State?

Perhaps in the past I had doubts. But now, I think it is possible to start a dialogue with the Mennonite communities of Hopelchén, and we could start with the communities that are most willing to do so. I remember you once mentioned that there are people who interpret the teachings of Jesus from a capitalist current of thought but that there are other ways of understanding the teachings of the Bible, right? I agree with you, and, in that sense, I am convinced that Maya communities can contribute from Indigenous thought.

I wanted to emphasize that our ancestors and elders, during the colonization process, knew how to develop a profound theological and hermeneutical reflection on the teachings of the Bible. To give an example, in the ceremonies of the rain, we often see Jesus there, in the center of the altar. And, while taking part in the ceremony, while listening to the sacred messages, I realized that our elders—even in the most dramatic time of the colonial period—managed to capture the messages of God and the sacredness of God from Christianity. They reinterpreted and integrated these messages into Indigenous ceremonies such as the rain ceremony and had no problem doing so. Whereas, for the Christian colonizers of that time, using any Indigenous symbol was an offense and a reason for punishment. In that sense, I think our ancestors also gave that way of interpreting the teachings of Jesus as a legacy and I think that would be a good topic of conversation with Mennonite communities and Maya youth. Some Protestant churches could also learn from that experience.

I believe that when we deepen theological reflection and go beyond material symbolism, ideological barriers are removed, and that facilitates conversations. I think this benefits all of us in the region.

**KATERINA:** My final question is something that I'm open to you answering however you'd like, because I'm aware of the ways that white people or those of European descent have sometimes tried to appropriate Indigenous spirituality for themselves rather than being respectful. What do you think that Christians can learn, especially those from European descent, from Maya traditional practices?

**MANUEL:** I don't know if I'm the right person to answer that, but I can share what I've learned from our elders. When I was a teenager, I started to question some ideas, particularly because I belong to a family that is Protestant. But after being a child who often went to the Protestant church, I began to explore our ancestral spirituality. In the process, I learned that there is much damage in the colonial process that is perpetuated at school and the Protestant churches. I learned about human centrism [from the Protestant school and churches]. But the very idea that humans can control and dominate Mother Earth is very contradictory and goes against Maya spirituality. Moreover, in this anthropocentrism, the male role dominates, and this does not go unnoticed by Maya grandmothers and grandfathers. For example, I remember that in a ceremony in Guatemala, I was assisting a *ChuchAlcal-MamAlcal* couple—a Maya grandmother and grandfather—while in the distance we were listening to the service of the Protestant church. And through the speakers, the pastor often repeated, “God our Father. . .” on several occasions, until the grandmother said, “This pastor often forgets our Mother. God is both Mother and Father.”

**KATERINA:** I agree with her!

**MANUEL:** Me too! And these messages are intrinsic to the ceremonies. For example, when you offer food or drinks, you offer for both mother and father. The Father is in Heaven, the Mother is Earth. Mother/Father is all of nature together. Due to the colonial education we receive, we often do not listen properly, but often our elders express profound messages clearly. We just have to learn how to listen better.

And we must also question the anthropocentric gaze. For example, when we attend ceremonies requesting permission from nature, from Mother Earth, to collect medicinal plants, a message of humility is trans-

mitted to us. We are not superior to that little plant. We cannot assume ourselves as superior when we receive health and nutrition from plants. The same works for animals, from whom we also learn about medicine. As we see, the messages make it clear that we are not above the work of the Creators and Shapers, Mother-Father. And I wish this would be discussed in our communities, and that Protestant churches in the Maya region would join in the conversation.

KATERINA: Is there anything else you'd like to share that you didn't get a chance to share as we've talked today?

MANUEL: I would like to extend an invitation to all interested parties to join this conversation. The way we are treating Mother Earth affects all of humanity in the short term. The thirst for the accumulation of wealth is leading us to an environmental catastrophe, and Indigenous territories are the target of the capitalist system right now, precisely because they contain the last reserves of biodiversity on the planet. However, the accumulation of material wealth impoverishes the spirit. And I don't think Jesus was in favor of that.

KATERINA: I couldn't agree more. Yes. There's a verse in the book of Romans that talks about how all Creation is groaning for the liberation of humans. I think of that now—Mother Earth groaning. We can hear her groans. Thank you for bringing this full circle—that this conversation is not only healing for us humans but also for Earth. Thank you for your time today.

MANUEL: Thank you, Katerina, and thanks to the Mennonite Coalition for starting this conversation. We look forward to continuing to walk together. *Jáach Nib óolal!* (Many thanks!)