San Simón or Maximón is a controversial popular saint,1 whose cult has developed exponentially in Guatemala in the last few decades. This complicated character inspired authors such as Miguel Angel Asturias, awarded the Nobel prize for Literature, who wrote Maximón, divinidad de agua dulce (Maximón, Divinity of Sweet Water) in the nineteen forties, and the poet Hugo Carrillo, whose play Las orgias sagradas de Maximón (The Sacred Orgies of Maximón) was performed in several countries of Latin America. Today he has considerable importance nationally. Maximón is exhibited in museums, in offices of the Guatemala Institute of Tourism, in tourist leaflets, on postcards and stamps, and is recommended as the object of excursions. The indigenous figure of Maximón appears as an element of the Guatemalan national identity, and at the same time as a symbol of Mayan traditions. But his cult is not limited to this emblematic dimension. There is popular fervor around the Saint, and even more, around the mestizo figure of his character (San Simón). Thus, as with many ‘traditional’ religions,2 the cult of Maximón/San Simón, which was identified just a few decades ago with a single territory, a culture, even an ethnic group—the Tzutujil Mayans—, entered a process of translocalization and of transnationalization.

I shall try in this chapter to examine the process of translocalization of this cult and its current inscription into California in the U.S.A. First I shall explain the principal elements that make it possible to understand the particularity of the San Simón cult in Guatemala. Then I shall analyze its transformation and

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1 The history of the Saint is marked by episodes of conflict with the Catholic hierarchy. In Santiago Atitlán, where Maximón originated, the earliest ethnographic observations were made in the nineteen twenties by S.K. Lothrop, who reported that when a Catholic bishop arrived in 1915 to celebrate Easter he was horrified to see that his congregation worshipped this figure. He tried to burn it but the natives of the village rejected him violently (Lothrop, 1929: 23). A similar episode, this time with repercussions at national level—even the president of the country intervened—occurred in 1951 (see Mendelson, 1965; Tarn and Prechtel, 1997; and Pédron Colombani, 2005).

2 For more on this subject, see Argyriadis, De la Torre, Gutiérrez Zúñiga and Aguilar Ros, 2008.
resignifying in the context of the city of Los Angeles. We shall see how the cult is relocalized and resignified, on the basis of networks of Guatemalan migrants and the very special world of folk remedy stores (*botánicas*), in order to enter into new spiritual circuits of a New Age or, more precisely, of a Neo-esoterical, type—using here the distinction established by Renée De la Torre (De la Torre, 2006),³ in an attempt to see to what extent the cult has integrated the logic of these circuits into itself.

The Figure of Maximón in Guatemala

Maximón is a many-sided character, half saint and half god, originally from Santiago Atitlán, a pueblo in the mountains in the West of Guatemala that is on the edge of Lake Atitlán and whose inhabitants are mostly Tzutujil-Mayan descendants.⁴ He was born on the periphery of popular Catholicism, in the system of guilds. In the mind of the indigenous people, belief in Maximón is almost an inseparable part of the Catholic religion that they learned from the Spaniards. At the same time, many of them insist on the Mayan heritage woven into this cult.

In fact, Maximón is a deity that transfigures itself. Among his many personalities there are Catholic saints like Saint Peter the first Apostle, Saint Andrew, and the archangel Saint Michael. But another of his characters is Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus.⁵ Another of his personalities is that of Mam,

³ As Renée De la Torre notes in her article on the mass media circuits of Neo-esoteric merchandise in Guadalajara, we can make a distinction between the New Age type of services on offer and the Neo-esoteric, which form two distinct circuits with differentiated contents and are directed at separate publics and consumers. Neo-esotericism is more linked to a massive reformulation of popular beliefs and practices related to traditional magical beliefs: herbalism, magic, healing, popular Catholicism and witchcraft; and not so much to the offer of a new or alternative lifestyle, which is what the New Age provides. What Neo-esotericism offers is magical solutions to problems (De la Torre, 2006: 38–39).

⁴ The principal language today of the inhabitants of Atitlán is still Tzutujil, which is closely related to Cakchiquel, Quiché, Rabinal and Uspanteca. Together these form the Quiché group of Mayan languages.

⁵ In some pueblos where we can find figures of Maximón, he looks very like a realistic image of Judas Iscariot. For example, in the guild of Saint George of the Lake—another pueblo on the edge of Lake Atitlán—just Maximón’s head is guarded in a special place and annually there is a ‘dressing’ ceremony. What happens is, that after the celebrations of Holy Week have been completed, the Saint’s body is taken to pieces so the head can go back to being locked in a special trunk belonging to the guild. The head is a mask like those used by the indigenous people in their Moorish dances; it has moustaches and a distinctly funereal expression, as its