

THE FLOWERING OF THE DEAD: AN INTERPRETATION OF HIGHLAND MAYA CULTURE

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This article considers important yet unresolved questions concerning the relationship of ancient with contemporary Maya culture. Following a review of the relevant literature, data are discussed from three sources: (a) the contemporary Tzutujil Maya of Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala; (b) the ancient Maya text *Popol Vuh*, and (c) the Maya Classic period site of Palenque, Mexico. It is argued that although salient aspects of contemporary Tzutujil culture derive from the incorporation of non-Maya elements, they have nevertheless been incorporated according to characteristically Maya paradigms. The resultant changes reflect Tzutujil adaptations to an open environment, adaptations that have allowed both cultural stability and continuity.

A survey of the anthropological literature demonstrates the twentieth-century Maya of the highlands of Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico, to be among the most studied ethnic groups in the world. These studies range from Oliver La Farge's accounts of his 1920s investigations in the Cuchumatán Mountains (La Farge & Byers 1931; La Farge 1947), through the work by Sol Tax in the Lake Atitlan area (1937; 1941; 1953), to the impressive list of publications that grew out of the Harvard Chiapas Project (too numerous to be cited). Even in recent years, despite Guatemala's revolution and the difficulty of working in that country, several important studies have been published (e.g. Sexton 1981; Tedlock 1982).¹ Yet despite this formidable corpus of research, and the passage of nearly sixty years since La Farge first stepped into Jacaltenango, a scholarly consensus on certain of the most fundamental aspects of highland Maya culture has yet to be forged. This article is an attempt to remedy this situation.

Following Wolf's seminal study of 'closed corporate communities' (1957), numerous scholars have argued that during the decades and centuries which followed the Conquest, the culture of the indigenous inhabitants of the Maya highlands was formed into something of an artefact of the Spanish-dominated colonial society (e.g. W. Smith 1977; Wasserstrom 1983; Annis 1987). According to Wolf, the closed corporate peasant configuration, which he identified (1957: 7) as a 'creature of the Spanish Conquest', represented the indigenous adaptation to Hispanic culture. This interpretation continues to find support among scholars (e.g. Warren 1989; C. Smith 1984). Analyzing how the process of post-Conquest culture change may have occurred, Hawkins (1984: 80) states that the Indian world

view has become 'the inverse, a negative transformation, of the Spanish ideology or world view'. Perhaps the most radical proponent of this position is Martínez Pelaez (1971), who claims that the Spanish *conquistadores* never even encountered Indians in Mesoamerica. Instead, he writes that upon their arrival in the New World the Spanish found 'aborigines'; the category 'Indian' resulting from a gradual process of Hispanic acculturation.

Where Wolf's position recognizes that the huge indigenous population had a role in the determination of post-Conquest Indian culture, a number of scholars consider the Indians' input to have been virtually nil (e.g. Harris 1964). Exemplifying this position, Friedlander (1981: 139) argues that the region's indigenous population has been made to 'play Indian' for others, and thus to 'serve as accomplice in [its] own oppression'. Much as the impact of one billiard ball determines the projection of another ball (the metaphor is Gregory Bateson's [1972: 229]), this type of position posits the Mesoamericans as having been firmly and irreparably booted by European contact from their pre-Columbian cultural bases. With the Indians thought to be 'total victims' of the Spanish and utterly powerless to influence their own destinies, elements such as adaptation, self-determination and subversion are deemed irrelevant, and are therefore ignored.

Theories which posit an abrupt discontinuity between pre- and post-Conquest cultures have, however, been increasingly confronted with significant historical anomalies (e.g. Mendelson 1965; Vogt 1969; Gossen 1974a; Carmack 1981). Two recent works present arguments which we feel are particularly noteworthy in this respect. First, Barbara Tedlock's *Time and the highland Maya* (1982) demonstrates remarkable continuities in ancient Maya calendrics and their conception of time. And Hill and Monaghan's *Continuities in highland Maya social organization* (1987) presents a strong case that the 'closed corporate community', a cornerstone of most arguments for Maya cultural discontinuity, was actually a basic unit of pre-Conquest highland Maya society. In short, the accumulation of anomalies seems to indicate that, despite Spanish efforts, Maya culture has been far more resilient and self-directed than many scholars have believed. Evidently the conquest of a people requires more than military subjugation. Perhaps aware of this, upon completing their Mesoamerican military campaigns the Spanish began to 'put an end to everything indigenous, especially in the realm of ideas, even so far as to leave no sign of them' (Garibay, in Anderson 1960). It was their intention that this process should culminate in what Ricard (1966) has called the 'spiritual conquest' of the Indians. However, studies have shown that this Spanish hegemonic ambition was ill-fated (e.g. Gossen 1974b; Colby 1976; Earle & Snow 1985). As Dennis Tedlock (1985: 19) notes, it is now evident that the ' "spiritual conquest" [of the Maya] has in fact never taken place '.

This observation is of paramount importance for the reconstruction of Maya post-Conquest history. We are prepared to argue that continuity of ideas, religious or otherwise, is essential to cultural stability and continuity. Returning to an earlier metaphor, it is the influence of ideas that makes the path of cultural development quite unlike that of a mere progression of billiard balls. With billiards, the collision of the first ball determines the course of a second. According to Bateson (in Yowell 1986: 52), 'in that world, there is not information, there are no metaphors. It's just bump'. However, when living things are involved, the process is considerably

more complicated. Contrasting billiard balls to dogs, Bateson notes that a kicked dog may turn and run, but then again, it is just as likely to turn and bite. Where the billiard ball cannot stabilize its situation, entities which have the capacity to process information can do so.

Unlike mindless billiard balls, the newly 'conquered' Maya possessed that element necessary to stabilize the 'Contact' experience. Just as ideas and information affect social organization, with the Maya we would argue that this complex has affected social reorganization, ultimately leading to what has been called 'reconstituted Indian culture' (MacLeod 1973: 230). Describing this culture for the lowland Maya, Farriss states that 'it is not the preservation of an unmodified cultural system under a veneer of Spanish customs, but the preservation of a central core of concepts and principles, serving as a framework within which modifications could be made and providing a distinctive shape to the new patterns that emerged' (1984: 8). She adds that the cultural configuration which did emerge 'remained, for all the transformations, distinctively and identifiably Maya'. We intend to demonstrate that Farriss's observations apply equally to numerous highland Maya.

Based on data from the contemporary Tzutujil Maya of Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala, this article considers a formalized normative construct called *Jalok-K'exoj*, which we argue has functioned to guide the transformations of the local Maya culture configuration. It is proposed that *Jalok-K'exoj*, a Mayan conceptualization of observed processes and patterns in the natural environment, particularly of agricultural production, is a central paradigm of the local culture. After defining *Jalok-K'exoj* as it exists in contemporary Santiago, data from the ancient text the *Popol Vuh* and from the archaeological site of Palenque, Mexico, dating from the Maya Classic period (c. A.D. 300-900), are used to argue that some form of this paradigm, including its socially integrative functioning, has been central to Maya culture since long before the Spanish Conquest. We argue that the survival of *Jalok-K'exoj* demonstrates an area of significant cultural continuity, moreover that this paradigm helps to explain the cultural patterns which emerged from the Conquest period.

Flowering Mountain Earth: the contemporary context

Lying at the juncture of three volcanoes and the crystal blue water of Lake Atitlan, Santiago Atitlan is a place of rare beauty. From the town's edge a chequerboard of maize fields rises up the steep volcanic escarpments. Only near the summits do these fields give way to expanses of cloud-producing rainforest: hints of the area's former appearance. Despite the inevitable presence of tourists lured by this beauty, the dogged efforts of missionaries (there are currently nineteen Protestant missions in the town), as well as the effects of a rapidly changing ecology, a significant number of Atitecos continue to embrace the 'old religion', the *costumbres*. (Atiteco is the common name for the people of Santiago Atitlan.) To *Costumbristas*, 'followers of the old customs', religion provides a self-evident background to which the world conforms. In fact, most components of Atiteco culture are in some way informed by the underlying principles of this religion (see our discussion of the relation of Atiteco religion to weaving and cosmos in Prechtel & Carlsen 1988). In this regard, the religion is pervasive: its meaning is known to some extent by

most Atitecos. It would be incorrect, however, to assume that all Atitecos have equal religious knowledge.

In recent years deviation from the traditional religion has been growing. Whereas until a few decades ago it would have been virtually correct to state that to be Atiteco was to be a *Costumbrista*, there are now significant competing claims to identity. Approximately 35 per cent. of the town's nearly 19,000 inhabitants are now Protestant, with the rest divided among Catholics and *Costumbristas*. Even among *Costumbristas* people differ in their knowledge of the traditional religion. Each level of initiation in the *Costumbrista* religious sodalities, the *cofradías*, allows increased access to the religion.² Our discussion of Atiteco religion in this article is restricted to general principles about which all *Costumbristas* are aware. Except for some concluding notes on change in Atiteco culture, we shall limit our discussion to *Costumbristas*. The term 'Atiteco' is used below to signify that group.

The central concept underlying Atiteco religion is contained in the term *Jalok-K'exoj*. As will be shown, myth, standardized prayers and discussion among *Costumbristas* assume a didactic function in the transmission of *Jalok-K'exoj*. The term itself is derived from two words, *jal* and *k'ex*, both of which denote types of change. *Jal* is the change manifested by a thing as it evolves through its individual life cycle. Traditionally, Mayans have believed that life arises from death. Consistent with this belief, beginning in death, *jal* is the change manifested in the transition to life through birth, through youth and old age, and finally back into death. Symbolically, *jal* is change on the outside, at the 'husk'. By contrast, *k'ex* occurs at the 'seed', and refers to generational change. While maintaining a distinct concern with ancestral origin, *k'ex* relates to the transfer, hence the continuity, of life, and may account for anthropological observations of Maya 'ancestor worship' (e.g. Wasserstrom 1983: 77). Moreover, it relates to what might best be described as a form of reincarnation, an integral aspect of Maya religion which has by and large been excluded from scholarly consideration (Ruz 1973; Mondloch 1980; and Coggins 1989 are among the exceptions). *K'ex* is a process of making the new out of the old. At the same time, just as a single plant produces multiple offspring, *k'ex* is change from one into many. Together *jal* and *k'ex* form a concentric system of change within change, a single system of transformation and renewal.

Although the process of *Jalok-K'exoj* has not been discussed in the literature, aspects of *k'ex* have been. The earliest reference that we have found comes from c. 1700 when the friar Francisco Ximenez, best known for his translation of the *Popol Vuh*, defined *k'ex* (*quex*) as 'to change one thing for another', and 'to transform' (1985: 483). Much more recently, Mondloch (1980) has written a paper about the relationship of *k'ex* to Quiche Maya naming patterns, particularly as it involves naming a grandchild with his or her grandparent's name. Importantly, he concludes that *k'ex* is a 'social mechanism for replacing the ancestors', as well as 'a way for obtaining personal immortality' (1980: 9). Two years before the publication of Mondloch's study, Warren, although not using the term and apparently not aware of its *K'exoj* context, cited various key components of *k'ex*. For instance, she states (1989: 57) that the naming of a grandson with his grandfather's name acts as a 'form of transmission' to make these two people the same. Where Warren focused on the Cakchiquel community of San Andres Semetebaj, Mondloch's observations were for the Quiche towns of Nahuala, and Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan.

In addition he mentions evidence of *k'ex* in Momostenango and Jacaltenango. Pellizzi (pers. comm. 1986) has observed aspects of *k'ex* among the Maya of Chiapas, Mexico. Interestingly, citing the similarity between the Maya *k'ex* and the Nahuatl *tocaitl*, Mondloch (1980: 21) speculates that at one time *k'ex* may even have extended beyond the Maya area.

Perhaps the best way to approach the understanding of *Jaloj-K'exoj* is as Atitecos themselves often do – through myth. The late historian of religions Mircea Eliade stated that religions have a 'center' a 'central conception which informs the entire corpus of myths, rituals and beliefs' (1969: 10). With Atitecos, *Jaloj-K'exoj* is this centre. However, beyond its conceptual centrality, *Jaloj-K'exoj* takes form as a symbolic physical centre, what Eliade termed the '*axis mundi*'. Atitecos call this aspect *Kotsej Juyu Ruchiliew* or 'Flowering Mountain Earth'. Although this element will be approached through agricultural metaphor, the imagery is multidimensional and refers to more than vegetation. 'Flowering Mountain Earth' is a unifying concept, inextricably linking vegetation, the human life cycle, kinship, modes of production, religious and political hierarchy, conceptions of time and even of celestial movement.

In Atiteco religion, 'Flowering Mountain Earth' is a place at the world's centre whose primary manifestation is a maize plant or tree. In this, Atiteco belief conforms to a widespread myth among contemporary Mayans. For instance, Leon-Portilla (1988) discusses the symbolic centrality of the 'World Tree' for the Tzotzil Maya of Chiapas, Mexico. In Atiteco myth, before there was a world (what we would call the 'universe'), a solitary deified tree was at the centre of all that was. As the world's creation approached, this deity became pregnant with potential life; its branches grew one of all things in the form of fruit. Not only were there gross physical objects like rocks, maize and deer hanging from the branches, there were also such elements as types of lightning, and even individual segments of time. Eventually this abundance became too much for the tree to support, and the fruit fell. Smashing open, the fruit scattered their seeds; and soon there were numerous seedlings at the foot of the old tree. The great tree provided shelter for the young 'plants', nurturing them, until finally it was crowded out by the new. Since then, this tree has existed as a stump at the centre of the world. This stump is what remains of the original 'Father/Mother' (*Ti Tie Ti Tixel*), the source and endpoint of life.

The focus of Atiteco religion is, in one way or another, oriented backward, to the Father/Mother, the original tree. This tree, if properly maintained, renews and regenerates the world. As 'Flowering Mountain Earth', it is given graphic representation in the main altar of Santiago Atitlan's Catholic church. This altar, constructed when the church was without a resident priest and under full *cofradia* control, is dominated by a mountain carved in wood. To either side of the mountain are carvings of *cofradia* members, complete with their staffs of office and shown ascending the mountain. Atop the mountain is a World Tree in the form of a sprouting maize plant. Atitecos believe that as long as the primal ancestral element, as 'Flowering Mountain Earth', is 'fed', it will continue to provide sustenance. In Atiteco religion, this 'feeding' can be literal. For example, some Atitecos will have an actual hole on their land through which offerings are given to the ancestor. In the Tzutujil dialect, this hole is called *r'muxux* ('umbilicus'). More commonly,

'feeding' is accomplished through ritual, the *costumbres*. For instance, dancing sacred bundles, burning copal incense, or praying can feed the ancestral form (see Mendelson 1958 for descriptions of Atiteco rituals). By way of example, the following prayer, one of the most common standard prayers in Santiago Atitlan, is appropriate for this type of activity. This beautiful poetic text also synthesizes various of the concepts explicated above.

What was said, lives.
It has become a jewel,
and it flowers.

But it is something now lost,
Something relegated to death.
Lost in dust, lost in earth.

It holds us like a baby.
It guards us like a child.
It trusses the World at the edges, like a house.
It holds up the sky³.

Giver of life.
Giver of food.
Giver of water.

You who are the great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers,
We are your flowers, we are your sprouts.
We are the ones who fall off the trees,
We are the ones who fall off the vines.

For many Atitecos, the logic which informs their religion is constantly reified in daily existence. Let us consider the maize field, that fundamental element of Atiteco livelihood which not only validates *Jalaj-K'exoj* but also replicates the primal myth. The first step in the life cycle of the maize plant is as a seed planted in the ground. Demonstrating how this process originates in death, Atitecos often refer to maize seeds which are to be planted as *muk*, meaning 'interred ones', or sometimes as *jolooma*, which signifies 'little skulls' (Tarn & Prechtel 1981). With proper care the seeds will sprout, eventually to become small plants. These plants are addressed by Atitecos as *tak ai'*, which means 'little ones' (children).⁴ As the plants mature, flowers form, and eventually ears of maize are produced. Next the plants, with husks still attached, dry up and die. The steps in this process represent *jal*, or transformation on an individual level. It is noteworthy that the stage of maize, as dried ears with the husk attached, is itself called *jal*. Finally, the death of the individual maize plant results in numerous seeds. In turn these seeds, the 'little skulls', are returned to the earth, ultimately resulting in many plants all in the image of their ancestor. In this process, life has sprung from death and there has occurred a recycling of the ancestral form. *Jalaj-K'exoj* is demonstrated.

As is indicated in the anthropomorphized references to maize seeds and plants cited above, Atitecos perceive a likeness between the life cycles of plants and humans. This likeness is founded in a perception of the universality of *Jalaj-K'exoj*. The Tzutujil language testifies to the priority of the native conception. In Tzutujil, the sprouting of a plant is spoken of as *xlexa*, which means 'his face came out'. When an infant is born it can be said 'he (or she) sprouted', or sometimes 'he returned' (*x'ula*). As with maize, it is believed that after death a person's life essence is regenerated in his or her descendants, specifically in grandchildren. This explains the aforementioned custom of naming a grandchild with the grandparent's name.

Accordingly, in Santiago Atitlan a grandparent's namesake is referred to as *k'exel* (from *k'ex*), which means 'my replacement'. Importantly, the *k'exel*, as the grandparent's 'replacement', becomes the symbolic parent of the biological parent. Consequently, one's child is sometimes actually addressed as 'parent', and males always address their fathers as *nuk'jol*, or 'my son'. Likewise, a woman will often call her father *wal*, which translates as 'child'. As 'replacements' are necessary for the grandparents' regeneration, the *k'ex* naming pattern has more than superficial significance. Upon the death of a *k'exel*, the oldest surviving sibling is sometimes even re-named with the deceased's, hence the grandparent's, name. Additionally, because of high infant mortality, until recently it was common in Santiago for parents to name numerous of their children with the same (grandparent's) name, thus insuring a *k'exel* to pass on the ancestral life form. For this reason, it is common in Santiago to encounter a nuclear family with various siblings all with the same name.

To return to our discussion of the link between children and vegetation, Atitecos perceive of their children as fruit, flowers and leaves. *Xochie* is a word for 'leaves', which to Atitecos represent fingers. In Atiteco society only when a person has children is that person considered 'complete'. Lacking 'completion', there is no *k'exel* through which to maintain the vital ancestral link. To Atitecos the figure 10, the number of fingers, signifies a 'complete' being. The Tzutujil word for 20 is *winok*, which also means 'person'. According to Atiteco symbolism, half of 20 lives in the hands, the other half exists at the roots, the time and place of the ancestor from where the living receive their sustenance. When the fruit, the children, eventually drop to the ground splitting open to form new sprouts, these are the grandchildren. Significantly, grandparents will often call their grandchildren *tzej jutae*, which means 'sprout'. As the grandparents become older, they symbolically assume the position of the old tree. In fact, old people will sometimes be addressed as *Nim Chie Nim Kam*, or 'Big Tree Big Vine', perhaps the most respectful title that can be given to an Atiteco.

To articulate their beliefs, Atitecos often rely on symbolically consonant aspects of their language. For instance in Tzutujil, the space beneath a person is *r'xie*, 'at a person's root'. The space in front of a person is *chuech*, or 'at its fruit'. Behind a person is *tz'rij*, or 'at its bark'. A person's feet are called *r'kan* or 'trunk'. In Tzutujil the word for 'hand' is *r'ka*, which also means 'branch'. The word for 'face' and 'fruit' is the same, *uech*, this word having the double meaning of 'children'.

Incorporating these concepts, a most important aspect of *Jaloj-K'exoj* in Santiago Atitlan is to be found in the town's *cofradia* system. More than any other mechanism, *cofradia* ritual serves to renew and to regenerate the community and the world. Consistent with the logic that permeates Atiteco culture, this *cofradia* function is expressed in vegetational symbolism. This is immediately evident in conversations between *Costumbristas*, or in *cofradia* prayers. For example, *cofradia* prayers often begin with the statement 'We are the sprouts at your hands and feet. We are the branches at your trunk. We come in front of trees and stones. We are at your bark, at your fruit. We are your flowers. We are your tendrils. We are the ones who need your shade'. Underlying these words is an Atiteco belief that the people of Santiago are the fruits and flowers of the village; each *cofradia* is a branch; the trunk is the *principales* (elders); and the roots are the ancestors, the dead. This

understanding is commonly expressed in *cofradía* meetings where a participant wanting to make an important point might address the leader of the town's *cofradía* system with the words 'Hey Trunk'. To which 'Trunk', depending on whether the conversants are *cofradía* members or unaffiliated, might respond 'Oh you branches', or 'You flowers and sprouts'.

Finally, related to the above is a very important temporal consideration. To the Maya, as to all people, the sun is the primary element in defining time. We have explained elsewhere that basic to Atiteco *cofradía* ritual is the attempt to help move the sun across the sky (Prechtel & Carlsen 1988). This movement is effected by a series of solar deaths and births ('dawnings'). Significantly, Santiago's individual *cofradías* are often called 'dawn houses'. At dawn, Atitecos often say *xlexa k'dta*, or 'our father was born'. The dawning of the sun, the sprouting of a seed, and the birthing of a child are expressed using *xlexa*, from the verb *lexic*, which means 'to be derived from'. (At times the related term *x'ela*, 'it worked', is used to express these same phenomena.) All these uses of *xlexa* represent the same process, and all reflect *K'exoj*, regeneration and renewal in the form of the original.

These various aspects come together in 'Flowering Mountain Earth', the World Tree. As a dry stump, the tree is associated with death. The time of death takes form both as the night and as the period from the autumnal equinox until the spring equinox. In deified form, the tree during these times is sometimes named Gourd Head (*Tzimai Awa*) and is symbolically represented as a skull. At the spring equinox the world is inseminated. This is a delicate time: the much celebrated five 'delicate' days of the Mayan calendar. At this point, if the world has been properly cared for, if the *costumbres* have been correctly performed, the world springs into life. Simultaneously the dry stump, as gourd/skull, flowers into new growth, the maize sprouts, the sun dawns (is born), and time itself is regenerated. It has 'worked'.

Grinding bones under Grandmother's house: the pre-Conquest context

So far we have been concerned with the definition of *Jaloj-K'exoj*. We have explained that it constitutes a process of transformation, renewal in an ancestral form, and that it is founded on an observational understanding of the vegetational cycle. Moreover we have shown that it symbolically permeates the local Maya culture, informing the operation of multiple phenomena. Having defined *Jaloj-K'exoj* in its contemporary context, it remains to be demonstrated that some form of the process was of vital importance to the pre-Columbian Maya. Drawing on data from two texts, the book *Popol Vuh*, and carved stone monuments from the archaeological site of Palenque, dating from the Late Classic Period (c. A.D. 600–900), we continue by demonstrating the salience of the paradigm for the ancient Maya. We shall show that both texts conform to the principles of *Jaloj-K'exoj*, as set out above. In the course of our discussion, data from contemporary Santiago Atitlan will be included where they help explain the significance of the ancient texts. It should be noted that although many scholars believe that the living Maya have no recollection of the *Popol Vuh*, Atitecos retain considerable knowledge of that text. In fact, a version of the *Popol Vuh* (which in Tzutujil is called *R'xin Tuj*, or 'Of the Sweat Bath' [Tarn & Prechtel: translation in preparation]) is alive

and well in Atiteco oral tradition. There is no doubt that a primary reason for this is that in the *Popol Vuh* can be found the seeds of their religion.

Our discussion of the ancient Maya texts begins with the descent of the *Popol Vuh*'s 'lead characters', the Hero Twins, into the underworld, where they die.⁵ In the state of death, one of the twins, in the form of a skull in a tree, impregnates a woman named Blood Woman by spitting into her hand.⁶ Upon impregnation, she ventures to the earth's surface, and gives birth to twins – namesakes of the ancestral twins.⁷ This section is of primary importance in the *Popol Vuh*, as well as for our arguments about *Jaloj-K'exoj*, and requires careful examination.

In his translation of the *Popol Vuh*, Edmonson (1971: 76) speaks of this section as a 'rare excursion into explicit philosophy, which makes it clear that in Quiche theory to participate in the chain of reproduction is to...attain immortality'. The fact is that the ancient author(s) of this section of the *Popol Vuh*, in the discussion of spittle (which is said to be 'like one's essence'), not only talks about *K'exoj* but also alludes to it by name. Of particular importance is the Quiche word for 'spittle', *k'axaj*. This word (*k'exaj* in Tzutujil) is derived from the same root as is *K'exoj*; the *Popol Vuh* plays on the meanings inherent in this term. The intent of this section is made absolutely clear in the next line in which the twin as skull explains that henceforth, 'The father does not disappear, but goes on being fulfilled' (Tedlock 1985: 114). Moreover, in specifying that this 'fulfilment' applies to the 'son of a lord or the son of a craftsman, an orator', the text asserts that this immortality applies to all people. It should be mentioned that to this day, at the time when the 'little skulls' of maize are sown, Atitecos have a ceremony in which a maize drink called *maatz*, which to the Tzutujil represents semen, is drunk from a gourd, representing a skull. This ceremony is carried out in anticipation of the time of the year when death flowers into new life.

The *Popol Vuh*'s 'rare excursion into explicit philosophy' clearly attests to the importance of what Atitecos call *Jaloj-K'exoj* to the ancient Quiche Maya. The *Popol Vuh* is also clear that this process guides the transformation and renewal of more than just anthropomorphized deities and humans. This is apparent from the beginning of the text when the creator deities ponder 'How should it [the world] be sown, How should it dawn?' (Tedlock 1985: 73), a question whose implications surface throughout the *Popol Vuh*. Likening the terms 'dawning' and 'sowing' to a moebius strip, in his recent translation of this text D. Tedlock (1985: 251) explains

If we start with the literal meaning of sowing in the present context, the reference is to the beginning of plants; but if we trace that idea over to the other side of our strip, the sprouting of those same plants is expressed metaphorically as 'dawning'. If on the other hand, we start from the literal meaning of 'dawning', the present reference is to the first of all dawns; but if we trace the idea back to the other side of the strip, the origin of that dawning is expressed as a 'sowing'.

Tedlock explains that in Quiche, the sowing/dawning combination can have human connotations. The interpretation offered by Tedlock for sowing, dawning, death and birth is remarkably similar to that given by the Atitecos. However, according to the Atitecos sowing/dying or dawning/birthing might not be viewed simply as singular events. Rather, they can be understood as simultaneous expressions, each driven by the same process, by what Atitecos call *Jaloj-K'exoj*. Further analysis indicates that this was the understanding of the ancient Quiche as well. This interpretation is given support by the performance of the Hero Twins, who

while primarily deities, also incorporate such diverse aspects as segments of time (Cohodas 1976: 160), celestial bodies (Tedlock 1985: 159–60), and, perhaps most importantly, they are maize. These diverse aspects are simultaneously represented in an exemplary episode of the *Popol Vuh*, an episode referred to here as ‘Grinding bones under Grandmother’s house’.⁸

At the end of their stay on the earth, and realizing that they are about to descend back into the underworld, the Hero Twins sow maize in the house of Grandmother, a character who to Atitecos is the divine embodiment of the female principle. To Grandmother they say, ‘When the corn dries up this will be a sign of our death: “Perhaps they died”, you’ll say, when it dries up. And when the sprouting comes: “Perhaps they live”, you’ll say’ (D. Tedlock 1985: 133). (As maize deities, this act of ‘sowing’ by the Hero Twins is a metaphorical act of self-burial, indicating their own deaths.) At this point the boys descend into the underworld. Imagery of *Jaloj-K’exoj* is evident again around what the *Popol Vuh* refers to as ‘the epitaph’ of the Hero Twins.

Near the time of their deaths in the underworld, the twins devise a plan by which their bones are to be ground on stone, ‘just as corn is refined into flour’ (D. Tedlock 1985: 148). Upon their death by jumping headfirst into an oven, this plan is carried out. The ground bones of the twins are subsequently cast into a river. On the *fifth* day, after having ‘germinated’ in the water, the twins are regenerated. (This certainly refers to the five-day ‘delicate’ period of the Mayan calendar, which, as noted, to Atitecos prefigures the world’s flowering from death.) At this, the corn which had been planted in Grandmother’s house sprouts. Coupled with the ‘sprouting’ of the maize in the middle of Grandmother’s house is a ‘dawning’. The *Popol Vuh* declares, ‘the boys ascended this way, here into the middle of the light, and they ascended straight into the sky, and the sun belongs to one and the moon to the other’ (D. Tedlock 1985: 159–60). Dramatically, the *Popol Vuh* answers its own question ‘How should it be sown, how should it dawn?’

It is significant that throughout the Guatemalan Highlands, maize is not ground into flour. Instead, maize is ground wet into *soa*, or dough. There is, however, an important exception. In Santiago Atitlan, at the time of ‘sowing’, maize is ground into flour in preparation of the ceremonial drink *maatx* (as mentioned above). In this process, the maize seed is ground after having been toasted in an oven. Described in this section of the *Popol Vuh* is a veritable recipe for the making of *maatx*, this in preparation for the subsequent regeneration from death of the multiple aspects of the Hero Twins.

The *Popol Vuh* offers clear imagery of the Hero Twins as polymorphous, their aspects guided by a process of *Jaloj-K’exoj*. Portrayed simultaneously is the story, not only of the deified twins, but also of seeds underground and of the changing of the seasons. Paralleled by the cycles of maize are the cycles of life, of the sun and moon, of living time. Entwined in trees are the shadows of deified ancestors, who continue ‘being fulfilled’ in their descendants. The *Popol Vuh* is an ingenious story of death, of transformation, and of regeneration; cycles of sacred change in an ancestral form. The world described in the *Popol Vuh*, like that of the Atitecos, is dictated by the sometimes fierce laws of this change which bind plants, humans and gods alike. But for how long has the Maya world been thus?

Because of the circa A.D. 1700 date of its transcription, as well as its association with the Post Classic Quiche Maya, scholars have often attributed a near-Conquest origin to the *Popol Vuh*. However, new data, in part reflecting advances in Maya epigraphy, as well as the re-evaluation of extant data, have led most Mayanists to accept that some form of the *Popol Vuh* has been central to Maya religion since at least the Maya Late Classic period. Besides evidence from the *Popol Vuh*, other kinds of data also suggest that what the Atitecos call *Jaloj-K'exoj* has helped to guide the shape of Maya culture ever since the Maya Classic period. One such body of evidence comes from Palenque, Mexico, a site whose stone monuments

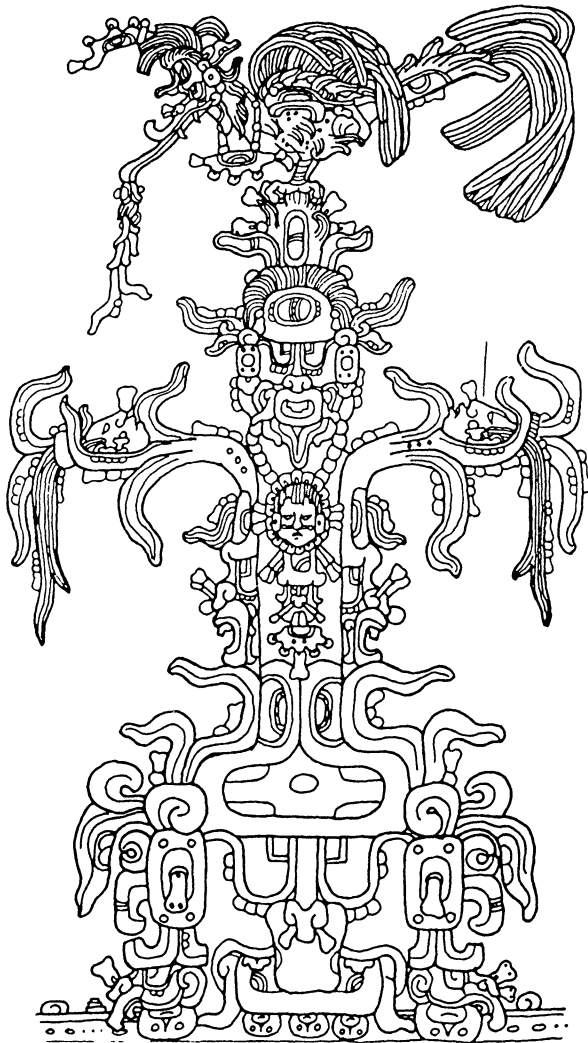


FIGURE 1. The central icon in much of Palenque's monumental art is the World Tree. As depicted above, for the Temple of the Foliated Cross, this *axis mundi* is in the form of a corn plant which issues from the top of a seed/skull. In this, the Palenque iconography is consistent with later Maya understandings. (From Schele & Miller 1986.)



FIGURE 2. The artistry of the Maya ruler Pacal's sarcophagus is dominated by the depiction on its lid of the deceased ruler's descent along the World Tree into the underworld. The exterior sides of the sarcophagus, however, furnish evidence of the divine ruler's ultimate fate. As represented in this figure, the sarcophagus sides testify to a Classic period Maya understanding that the death experience can culminate in rebirth according to a model based on vegetation. Depicted are ancestors of Pacal, identified by name in the accompanying hieroglyphs (as put into English letters below each figure), in a process of rebirth as trees. Other evidence indicates that the regeneration of Maya kings may also have entailed a solar 'dawning'. (From Schele & Miller 1986.)

have been described as illustrating 'the basic structure of Mesoamerican religion' (Cohodas 1976: 155). Motifs found in Palenque (figs 1 and 2) include sophisticated depictions of vegetation sprouting from the heads of humanistic figures; of maize and trees growing from skull-like deities; of ears of maize with transposed human faces; of deceased rulers in a tree-related form and in the process of descent into the underworld.

On the basis of iconographic and epigraphic evidence, we propose that sculpted in stone at Palenque is a symbolic statement similar to that described above for Atiteco culture and for the *Popol Vuh*. Indeed, it has even been argued that certain figures depicted on the Palenque panels must be incarnations of the Hero Twins (Lounsbury 1985: 51). For the present we consider evidence which identifies the principal characteristics of *Jaloj-K'exoj*, beginning with the belief in ancestral regeneration according to a model based on vegetation.

Consistent with Atiteco mythology, the central design element in all Palenque's major temples (excepting the Temple of the Sun), and on the sarcophagus lid of its most noted ruler, Pacal, is that of the 'World Tree' (Schele & Miller 1986). In the Temple of the Foliated Cross, the tree takes form as maize. In all its representations this *axis mundi* is portrayed as growing out of the head of skeletonized deities. For the Temple of the Foliated Cross, Thompson (1970: 208, 227) characterizes the deity, often called GII, as both an ancestor and a vegetation deity. And Schele (1976: 24) describes it as a god of 'generations, ancestry, and lineages'. Perhaps most significantly, Freidel (n.d: 14) identifies this god as a 'seed from which a corn plant containing the Ancestors grows'.

Supplementing these identifications is important epigraphic evidence. For instance, leaf motifs found in all the major temples at Palenque and on Pacal's sarcophagus also make up the glyph *le*, which as Linda Schele notes, has the 'double meaning of "leaf" and "generations" (ancestry)' (1976: 22). This is consistent with

the leaf/generation association cited earlier for the Atitecos. Additional glyphic evidence indicates that, as with the Atitecos, the hand may have figured in this ancient Maya association. Prominent in the 'completion' glyph is a hand incorporated into a person's face. This glyph stands for the number 20, which to the Classic Maya, as to the Atitecos, meant 'person'. It should be recalled that to the Atitecos, there is an association between the fingers as children and the 'completeness' of a person. Moreover, depicted prominently in common variants of the 'parentage statement' glyphs is a hand holding a 'curl', which Taube (1985: 178-9) shows may be a sprout. As noted previously, in Santiago Atitlan, infants are thought of as sprouts.

Drawing on the evidence from Palenque, it is important to mention that as depicted in fig. 2, on the sides of Pacal's sarcophagus are portrayals of humans who have emerged plant-like from cracks in the ground. From the head of each grows a tree. Included are various *le* glyph leafs. Under the humans' root-like lower torsos are what appear to be germinating seeds, but are probably representations of the *caban* glyph, which signifies 'earth'. Significantly, glyphs associated with human/tree combinations identify the individuals as ancestors of Lord Pacal (Schele & Miller 1986: 285). In short, we argue that the accumulation of evidence drawn from Palenque's most important monuments testifies to the deep historical centrality of the Maya belief in ancestral renewal founded in the life cycle of plants.

We conclude our argument that adherence to what Atitecos call *Jaloj-K'exoj* guided the culture of Palenque by considering how this paradigm permeates and informs the operation of multiple cultural phenomena. We have already shown that depicted in the central iconographic elements at Palenque are deities which combine seed and skeletal qualities, and that together with the World Trees that they support, aspects of human and vegetal life are combined. Furthermore, the Palenque iconographic complex combines not just humans and vegetation but also political rulership. Schele and Miller (1986: 72) have even associated kingship itself with the '*axis mundi*', the World Tree. Moreover, according to these scholars, this relationship can be expanded to include, among other elements, an association with the sun, an interpretation supported by the common glyphic reference to Maya kings as *Mah-K'ina*, or 'He of the Sun' (Lounsbury 1985: 47). For instance, Schele and Miller argue (1986: 269) that the depiction on the sarcophagus lid of Pacal's death, of his 'falling down the *axis mundi*', is 'metaphorically equivalent to the sun at the instant of sunset'. They add that 'like the sun, which rises after a period of darkness', the Maya believed that Pacal too would rise again. Reincarnation is demonstrated.

It should be noted that in a recent article which discusses the centrality of Maya understanding of cyclic death and rebirth, Coggins (1989: 66) states that 'the poor were probably not entitled to the same afterlife [as the elites], although resurrection following an agricultural model...might in theory have been accessible to all'. The *Popol Vuh*, like the Atiteco data, demonstrate that this was indeed the case.

Included in the symbolic statement of the Palenque panels, as we have shown, are the elements of rulership, of the sun, of vegetation, of ancestry, of birth and death, and seemingly of 'dawning' and 'sprouting'. The abilities of Palenque artisans cannot be doubted. Had those artisans desired to portray a series of discrete processes, singular images of accession to office, of the cycles of maize, of birth

and death, and so on, they would have done so. Apparently this was not wanted. We propose that the mix of seemingly unrelated processes and elements and their integration through the *Jaloj-K'exoj* paradigm, as revealed in Atiteco culture and as described in the *Popol Vuh*, also underwrites the iconography of Palenque's monuments.

Accordingly, we argue that, in a manner symbolized by vegetation issuing from an ancestral skull, the complexity that is Maya culture has been, and continues to be, pulled into intelligible form through a distinct understanding of the past. As if ignoring the timeline of history, the Maya conceive of a sacred past which sustains, is replicated in, and symbolically informs the present and the future. Through the mechanism of what in Tzotujil is called *Jaloj-K'exoj*, an indigenous understanding of circular time permeates Maya culture and is revealed in economic, political and religious institutions. To the Maya, the pull of the past is often given religious expression, in what we have called 'the flowering of the dead'. In the concluding section we shall consider another avenue through which the Maya ancestral past continues to guide the present and the future; by which the dead continue to flower.

The conversion of the saints: discussion and conclusion

We have argued that highland Maya culture exhibits continuity; that some contemporary Maya represent points on a cultural continuum which extends deep into a pre-Columbian past. While such a stable state need not entail salient 'survivals' (M.E. Smith 1982), we have identified what we believe is a significant exception. It is proposed that what Atitecos call *Jaloj-K'exoj* survived the Conquest, helped to shape the 'reconstituted' Maya culture of the Colonial period, and that it continues to have relevance. We do not mean, however, to suggest a culture somehow frozen in time. Quite to the contrary. Given that cultures constitute adaptive responses to open and changing environments, their stability demands flexibility. To remain stable, cultures must add, and will subtract, attributes. It follows that to survive, any guiding paradigm, such as *Jaloj-K'exoj*, must itself be able to accommodate change. Before elaborating on the dynamics of this adaptive process, an example from contemporary Santiago Atitlan will serve to illustrate our position. We turn to the Atiteco 'cult of the saints'.

The saints of Catholicism undoubtedly constitute one of the most salient aspects of post-Conquest Mesoamerican religiosity and are therefore an appropriate element on which to base consideration of the highland Maya response to Hispanic intrusion. In Santiago, the cult of the saints is incorporated into the town's *cofradía* system. Collectively, the system is called by its members *R'kan Sak R'kan Q'ij* ('Foot of the Dawn, Foot of the Sun') and is concerned with effecting the smooth movement of the seasons and of the sun (Prechtel & Carlsen 1988). On another level, the ten public *cofradías* pertain individually to particular aspects important to the town (Douglas 1969: 83). Qualities associated with these aspects and attached to the saints afford an opportune window into local religiosity. Examples include Concepcion (impregnation and planting), San Nicholas (shamanic doctoring), San Juan (midwifery) and San Francisco (death). For the present, however, let us consider Santiago, Saint James, the patron saint of the town. This 'saint' has a processual association whose characteristics, appropriate to his central position in

the community, should by now be familiar. In native taxonomy, Santiago is categorized as a *bokunab*, an antiquated and esoteric term now used only in the *cofradías*. Derived from the word *bokul*, 'so many', the etymology of *bokunab* is easily understood. According to legend, Santiago's *bokunab* quality became apparent when as a soldier a strike from his sword created twin enemies where formerly there had been one. Fortunately for the Atitecos, this ability to effect regeneration and multiplicity (i.e. *Jaloj-K'exoj*) from the death of the original was better applied toward agricultural fecundity. Santiago joins other *bokunab* in the Atiteco pantheon as a fertility deity.

Santiago's integration into the Atiteco religious configuration supports our contention that local 'folk Catholicism' derives from a reinterpretation of intrusive elements according to characteristically Maya paradigms. As demonstrated above, these have been formulated on the basis of everyday experience. All cultures include such empirically-based and seemingly self-evident paradigms. From these paradigms are derived secondary and logically consistent postulates. Santiago's 'conversion', like other aspects of the local religion (c.f. Tarn & Prechtel in press), attests to post-Conquest Atiteco manipulations in these derivative levels of the local culture, manipulations which have led to the elaboration, addition and subtraction of cultural attributes. In short, the Atitecos have conformed to the general human tendency to attempt to process information according to previous experience, on the grounds of routinized paradigms. Only when these prove inadequate might they be discarded. It must be kept in mind that the competing paradigms carried by the conquering Spanish incorporated the Catholicism of the day, a fanatic expression grounded in a history and a geography distant from the Maya highlands. Adding to a resulting irrelevance was the fact that the Mayas' place in this alien scenario was to be as cultivators of pig food (maize), as wayward desert dwellers – the 'lost tribe' of the despised Jews. Such was the discordance between Spanish and indigenous conceptions that it is unlikely that paradigms of the order of *Jaloj-K'exoj* were ever challenged by the Conquest. Rather, the resultant crisis may have been aetiological. A need to explain why the old gods had failed to deter conquest would have been answered by the incorporation of the foreign invaders' gods, the saints (Early 1983).

From this perspective, the Mayas' adoption of select elements of Catholicism helped to maintain cultural stability, may actually have had a revitalizing effect, and above all was adaptive. Given, however, that adaptation is a function of environmental disturbance, that such disturbances can overwhelm the adaptive capacity of any social system, and that the Conquest and all that it entailed might be understood as the prime example of just such an overwhelming environmental disturbance, it must be asked how, in spite of all that has been argued above, could Maya culture have retained its stability from the pre-Conquest into the post-Conquest era?

In response, it should first be noted that the Spanish incursion into Mesoamerica entailed variable degrees of disturbance, with some areas far less affected than others (MacLeod 1973; Orellana 1981; 1984; Jones 1988). For example, the economic and geographic marginality of Santiago Atitlan served as a buffer against strong Catholic influence. From 1620 until just a few decades ago the town rarely had a resident priest (Madigan 1976). It is not surprising, therefore, that as late as 1967

only 7.1 per cent. of the town's population was identified (by the Church) as being Catholic (Anonymous 1967: 343).

Coupled with these kinds of historical circumstances, the ability of some groups of Maya to regain cultural stability following the shock of conquest must also have involved dynamics intrinsic to social systems. Admittedly, in all cases post-Conquest Maya communities have been subjected to varying degrees of manipulation. Yet it is fallacious to assume that even the toppling of native priesthoods and of indigenous political systems must have led to cultural collapse. To survive, core cultural elements, such as *Jaloj-K'exoj*, need not be linked to the specific control mechanisms operated by social hierarchies, mechanisms such as creeds or systems of codified laws. On the contrary: the more focal such an element is 'the more strongly it is rendered invariant by the aggregate pressure of all the other activities and interests dependent on it' (Nadel 1953: 267). In terms of the present study, local modes of production, understandings of lineage, legends, indigenous language, and so on, have formed a pervasive and durable system of non-specific controls which have buttressed *Jaloj-K'exoj*. Moreover, the entire *Jaloj-K'exoj*-centred nexus has in turn provided a mechanism to integrate intrusive elements into Atiteco culture, converting them to a form acceptable to the local Maya population. We submit that when revealed in their obvious contrast to highland Maya culture, Hispanic cultural intrusions have triggered indigenous responses which have ultimately resulted in the modification and normalization of the original practices and beliefs.

These dynamics explain what has been called the Mayas' 'fierce resistance toward acculturation' (Carmack 1983: 218). One very important element in this process, however, needs to be considered. Although Maya 'fierce resistance' may at first glance seem to be exclusively an activity of the living, in fact the equivalent of a memory, by and large founded on past activities of the dead, is represented in the 'repetitive patterns and maintained loops' of the cultural complex (Yowell 1986: 91). Through the activities of the society's living members, themselves having been integrated into their culture through normative socialization, the structure and the function of the system embodies its own history. The relationship between the associations of the World Tree with kingship and with *cofradía* organization comes to mind. Whether the convergence of symbolism with civil-religious structure represents direct continuity (Early 1983), or not (Chance & Taylor 1985), may not be of vital importance. Even granting the latter interpretation, it has been demonstrated above that Maya civil-religious structures are institutions which store paradigmatic information, in this case related to *Jaloj-K'exoj* and symbolized by the World Tree, and are not themselves the source of that information. Given that such information is stored elsewhere in diverse forms, direct continuity in particular cultural components is not necessary for indigenous responses to have effected a reworking to the point where pre-Columbian and post-Columbian forms bear a close resemblance.⁹

Throughout much of the post-Conquest period a predominant bias represented in the literature on Mesoamerica reflects Hispanic myths of lazy and childlike Indians. These self-serving ethnic myths have contributed to the assumption that Indians are incapable of taking meaningful and significant action. As a result, the huge indigenous population has, until recently, been highly conspicuous in its

near absence from the pages of the historical literature. When Indians have appeared on the printed page they have typically been presented either as the targets of charges of mindless 'paganism' or as subjects of paternalistic claims promising to advance them towards a 'civilized' state along the liberating path of forced manual labour. Yet, despite conventional history, the indigenous population has not co-operated in an imposition of cultural amnesia. In the case of the Tzutujil Maya of Santiago Atitlan, it has been shown that the past can be recorded in ways other than conventional written history. Moreover, it has been argued that this alternative recording of the past has been integral to the continuity of local indigenous culture. Drawing for support on recent ethnohistorical research (MacLeod 1973; Carmack 1983; C. Smith 1984; Hill & Monaghan 1987), we submit that the post-Conquest highland Maya have not been the functional equivalents of billiard balls, mindlessly submitting at every historical juncture to the agendas of their European masters. Instead, the highland Maya have interacted with their environment as thinking human beings, and have been largely successful in their cultural adaptations.

NOTES

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¹ Currently Guatemala's Maya find themselves in a battle for physical and cultural survival. In the 1980s, tens of thousands of Guatemalan civilians were killed. This killing has continued into the present decade. Beyond the killing, certain interests have marked out traditional indigenous culture as a target. It is our belief that richness of culture and history not only strengthen a people from within, but can allow a defence from without. We hope that the present effort may benefit those to whom the living Maya tradition belongs.

² *Cofradias* were introduced into the New World from Spain in the mid-sixteenth century. Behind their introduction was an attempt on the part of the Spanish to incorporate the native population into Catholicism, as well as to facilitate revenue collection. However, in the *cofradia* the Indians found an institution which could be refabricated to their own ends. *Cofradias* were subsequently used by the Indians to barter with non-indigenous interests (MacLeod 1973). While the effects of such factors as a changing regional ecology, the current violence, and massive missionary intrusions into Maya communities have eroded the strength of the traditional religion, *cofradias* remain vital in numerous Guatemalan communities.

³ Since at least the Classic period, Maya cosmology has included a conception of the world as a house, with a tree at its centre.

⁴ In her study of religious symbolism in the Cakchiquel Maya community of San Andres Semetabaj, Warren describes the salience of 'agricultural metaphor'. She states (1989: 33-4) that this metaphor 'likens the planting and harvesting of the agricultural cycle to creation and destruction as well as to birth and death'. While Warren corroborates our argument for a multidimensional agriculturally-based Mayan religion, we believe that her interpretation of this religion as an indigenous response to Hispanic superordination is incorrect.

⁵ The *Popol Vuh* is often regarded as the most important native language New World text. The manuscript from which all existing translations of this text come is a Quiche version dating from shortly after the Conquest. For the present study we use D. Tedlock's (1985) translation of this text.

⁶ In his commentary on the spitting into the hand of Blood Woman, D. Tedlock (1985: 274) mentions that the hand is significant in that it unites the fingers, which are symbolic of the living members of one's family. This belief is certainly related to those cited earlier for the contemporary Atitecos.

⁷ Based on glyphic evidence, a Maya use of the *k'ex* naming tradition can be established for the Classic period. However, in that epoch, its use was not as uniform as in the present. According to Linda Schele (pers. comm. 1990), its use may have been voluntary. Schele adds that in the epigraphic record, evidence for 'skip generation naming' is associated with 'successor glyphs', and includes connotations of 'sameness and replacingness'.

⁸ 'Grinding bones under grandmother's house' originally appeared as the title of an essay co-authored by Robert Carlsen and David Carrasco, and presented at the 1987 American Academy of Religions Western Annual Meeting in Boulder, Colorado. Our appreciation is extended to Professor Carrasco for agreeing to the use of this title in its present context.

⁹ In presenting our primary arguments, we have emphasised cognitive aspects of Maya culture. Yet, as these interrelate with the Mayas' natural environment – underscored by the fact that the associated symbolism is an attempt to model that realm – the influence of material factors is also evident. In any functioning society, both material and cognitive factors are vital and must be accorded equivalent priority. The rules are greatly altered, however, when a given population strays outside of certain materially-based parameters. When, for instance, variables related to demography or access to resources are irreparably violated a given society's restorative capacity will be affected. Abrupt swings in cultural behaviour can be expected to follow. We are prepared to argue that this underlies the current changes in highland Maya culture indicated by the figures on Anteco religious affiliation cited in this article. As McCreery (1986: 113) argues, the late nineteenth-century confiscation of vast amounts of Maya land, in combination with exploitative labour practices (to which we would add explosive population growth [see Early 1983]), has undercut the 'self-reproductive capacity of the indigenous peasantry at both the level of simple economics and at the sociopolitical and ideological levels as well'. These are conditions of certain and profound cultural change.

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La Floraison du mort: une interprétation de la culture maya montagnaise

Résumé

Cet article considère des questions importantes encore non résolues à propos de la relation de l'ancienne culture maya avec la contemporaine. Suivant une étude de la littérature adéquate, des données originant de trois sources sont discutées: a) la culture maya tzutujile contemporaine de Santiago Atitlan, Guatémala, b) l'ancien text maya Popol Vuh et c) la période classique maya de Palenque au Mexique. Il est argumenté que bien que des aspects saillants de la culture contemporaine des tzutujils dérivent de l'incorporation d'éléments non-mayas, ils ont toutefois été incorporés selon des paradigmes typiquement mayas. Les changements en résultant reflètent les adaptations tzutujiles à un environnement plus vaste, adaptations qui ont permis à la fois la stabilité et la continuité culturelles.

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