

From Out of the Earth:
Water, Maize and Caves in Ancient Maya Myth and Religion

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Before the conquest of Central America by the Spanish, and before the Aztec empire came into its prime, the Maya dominated the Central American landscape. This civilization stretched from what is today southern Mexico, down through modern day Guatemala, Belize and parts of Honduras. Contrary to popular belief, these people were not a homogeneous group, but various separate city-states with their own political systems and agendas. However, most of these distinct groups seemed to have a good deal in common, namely their religious rituals and beliefs. Polytheistic to a large extent, the ancient Maya had a religious system that modern readers may see as confusing and illogical. They worshiped gods who were at the same time male and female, young and old, associated with both peace and war, and who resided in stones, trees, food and mountains. Though the importance of these gods and locations of worship varied from city-state to city-state, throughout the Maya area a great deal of importance was given to three things: caves, water and corn (maize).

Through the various myths and legends which have been recovered and translated over the years, we can see that these three natural resources were central to Mayan religious life. From the Guatemalan creation stories and heroic tales of the Quiché Maya of the lowlands to legends about the finding of corn from the Jakaltek Maya of the highlands, maize, water and caves play a major role throughout the Maya area. As caves are seen as the source of both water and corn, which as we shall see are not only staples of the Mayan diet, but are also the physical basis for the human body, caves can therefore be seen as the origin of life itself.

In order to illustrate this, three myths in particular will be examined in depth; two of these myths deal with the importance of corn, while the third explores the importance of water. In all three of these myths, corn and/or water are in some way connected to caves and their role as sources of life-giving substances. The first of these three stories is the legend concerning the

creation of the world and of man; the second deals with the adventures of the semi-divine Hero Twins and their resurrection through underground water systems. Both of these myths come from the Quiche Maya book, the *Popol Vuh*. As for the third myth, which examines the discovery of corn by humans, we must turn to other parts of the Maya area, namely the highlands of Guatemala and the Chiapas region of modern Mexico. However, before exploring these myths, it is useful to examine the geological makeup of the Maya area, as this heavily influenced the cosmological beliefs of the Mayan people.

The physical landscape of the Maya area is a diverse one, which is particularly apparent in the differences in surface features between the highland areas in modern Guatemala and the lowland areas in the Yucatán Peninsula. These differences are caused by the geological makeup of these areas, as the highlands are formed for the most part from volcanic rock, while a bed of highly permeable limestone underlies the Yucatán Peninsula. This limestone bed allows any rainwater to percolate directly into the underground river and cave systems which wind their way through the limestone itself. In fact, as Charles W. Houck Jr. states, there are “almost no significant sources of surface water – rivers, streams, or lakes – [which] exist on the peninsula north of the Río Hondo,” which separates modern day Mexico from Belize.¹ Because of this, the collection and storage of water was one of the primary concerns of the Ancient Maya. It is for this reason that cities and towns sprang up around the many *cenotes*, or water-filled sinkholes, which dotted the landscape, providing a principle source of water.²

The presence of limestone, a rock which dissolves when exposed to repeated contact with water, causes much of the surface area to be pitted with bowl-shaped depressions and sinkholes,

¹ Charles W. Houck, Jr., “Cenotes, Wetlands, and Hinterland Settlement,” in *Lifeways in the Northern Maya Lowlands: New Approaches to Archaeology in the Yucatán Peninsula*, edited by Jennifer P. Mathews and Bethany A. Morrison (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006), text and quote, 60.

² Sylvanus Griswold Morley, *The Ancient Maya*, Third Edition (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1956), 16.

while cave systems wind their way through the underlying rock. The forms which result from the reaction between water and limestone are defined as “karstic dolines”,³ five types of which are presented by Charles W. Houck Jr.: “cenotes, *rejolladas* (dry sinks), and *dzadzob* (sinks with swampy bottoms), each of which break down further into several subcategories.”⁴ These subcategories include two types of *cenotes* (columnar and *cubierto*) and two types of *dzadzob* (water-only and multi-use). While all *cenotes* by definition penetrate the water table, the columnar variety are barrel-shaped while *cubierto*, or covered *cenotes* “consist of a water pool within a partially collapsed cavern, accessible only through a hole in its roof,” making them harder to detect from the air, though they are also the most common in the Maya area.⁵ *Rejolladas*, which Houck cites as a “defining physical feature of the karst plain,” are round depressions with smoothly sloping sides and a level floor. As the floors of these depressions were closer to the water table, they were generally used by farmers for wells and the growing of crops such as tomatoes and other water-sensitive plants.⁶ As for the *dzadzob*, physical appearances vary though the majority are a combination between *rejolladas* and *cenotes*. “Water-only” *dzadzob* barely penetrate the water table and are generally unusable for cultivation as they have little available soil, while “multi-use” *dzadzob* have swampy, soil-filled bottoms which occasionally contained an exposed water source and can be used to grow crops.⁷

While these dolines supplied the Maya with semi-reliable sources of water, they occasionally dried up. When this occurred, the Maya had to turn to other access points, namely caves. As many of these caves consist of deep, long caverns, the Maya were forced to traverse in almost complete darkness for miles before coming upon a significant source of water. Because of

³ Houck, 61.

⁴ Houck, 62.

⁵ Houck, 62-63.

⁶ Houck, quote and text 62.

⁷ Houck, 64-65.

this, the prevailing nineteenth-century archaeological thought concerning caves is that they were used “exclusively as utilitarian water sources,”⁸ which does not necessarily hold true for the entire scope of Mayan cave use, as it disregards the Mayans’ spiritual attachment to these geological phenomena.

Such is the case presented by Dominique Rissolo in her examination of ritual cave use in the Yalahau region of the Yucatán Peninsula in the state of Quintana Roo, which lies on the northeastern tip of the peninsula.

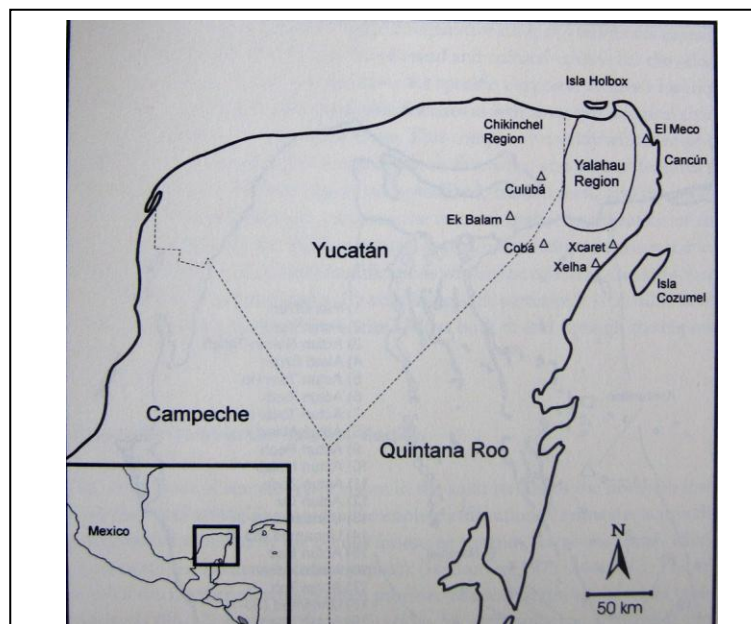


Figure 1. Map of Yucatán Peninsula.

Dominique Rissolo, “Beneath the Yalahau: Emerging Patterns of Ancient Maya Ritual Cave Use from Northern Quintana Roo, Mexico,” *In the Maw of the Earth Monster: Mesoamerican Ritual Cave Use*, edited by James E. Brady and Keith M. Prufer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 343, figure 14.1

Wetlands are plentiful in this part of the Yucatán, providing reliable sources of fresh water, along with the “numerous small cenotes and ancient wells” present in the area.⁹ According to Rissolo,

⁸ Dominique Rissolo, “Beneath the Yalahau: Emerging Patterns of Ancient Maya Ritual Cave Use from Northern Quintana Roo, Mexico” in *In the Maw of the Earth Monster: Mesoamerican Ritual Cave Use*, edited by James E. Brady and Keith M. Prufer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 345.

⁹ Rissolo, 345-346. Quote 346.

while caves are common in the upland areas, those which contain water are mostly inaccessible through easy means. Venturing into these caves most often requires crawling through small passageways and scaling long vertical drops before finally reaching the water source and then navigating back out again carrying a ceramic jar of water (see Figure 2).

The question now becomes why, with the prevalent wetlands, wells and *cenotes* nearby, did the ancient Maya venture into these dangerous cave systems in search of water when they could easily obtain it elsewhere? This indicates to modern archaeologists that the water collected from these caves was not just for slaking thirst or watering crops, but that it was held sacred and used for rituals and ceremonial activities.¹⁰ As Andrea Stone states, “the sanctity of space was proportional to its lack of accessibility,”¹¹ which challenges the early archaeologists’ “exclusively utilitarian water source” theory cited previously.

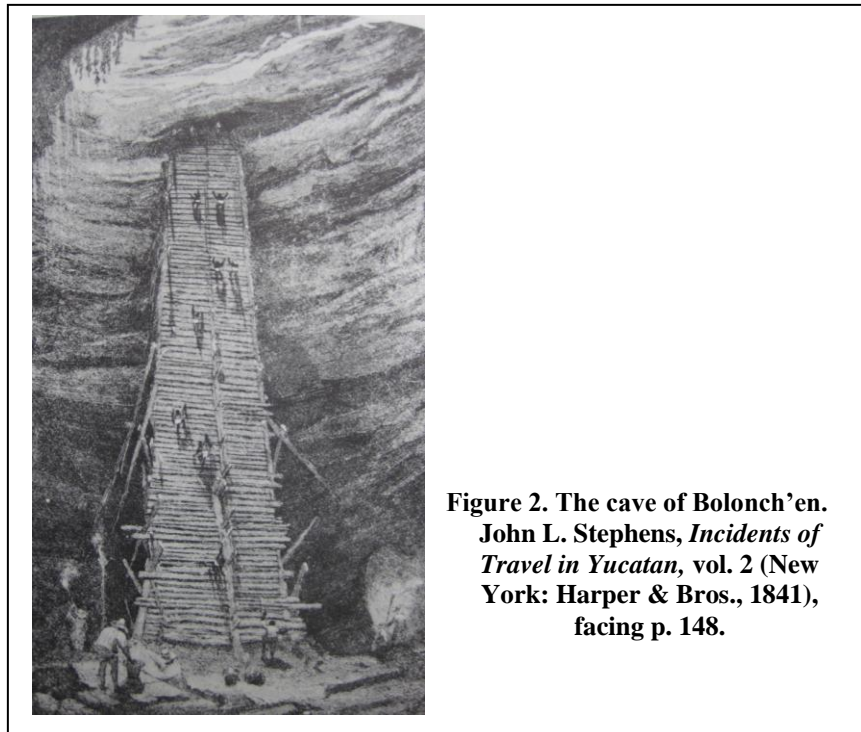


Figure 2. The cave of Bolonch'en. John L. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Bros., 1841), facing p. 148.

¹⁰ Rissolo, 346.

¹¹ Andrea Stone, *Images from the Underworld: Naj Tunich and the Tradition of Maya Cave Painting* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1995), 239, quoted in Rissolo, 346.

Of all the karstic dolines presented by Houck, the *cenotes* are perhaps the most well-known. These deep, water-filled sinkholes were not only sources of water, but also thought to be the dwelling places of rain, water and earth deities. This can be seen in the popularly cited evidence found in the *cenote* at Chichén Itzá in the northern Yucatán, which shows that offerings were often thrown into the water in order to appease and petition the gods. Occasionally human sacrifices were thrown in as well, most often young children of both sexes. However, these victims were given to the gods not only as offerings, but as intermediaries as well. If the victim survived the sixty-some foot drop into the water and stayed alive after a period of time with their hands bound, they were fished out by priests and questioned as to what message the gods had imparted. According to J. Eric S. Thompson, most victims were willing to be thrown in, as a place in heaven awaited them upon death.¹²

The importance of these *cenotes* to the ancient Maya was centered around both water and access to the gods, though these were not the only places in the Maya area which held this special significance. The cave systems mentioned previously were also believed to hold the same sacred power and importance. In fact, to the ancient Maya, caves and *cenotes* were considered to be equivalent to each other. This is not to say, however, that the Maya did not recognize the physical differences between the two formations, they just did not see the need for separate words. As such, the word commonly translated as “cave”, *c'en*, according to James E. Brady, “includes caves, grottoes, cenotes, sinkholes, many springs, places where rivers emerge from or disappear into the earth, crevices, and any number of other holes.”¹³ Brady’s research is focused on the site of Dos Pilas, which is located in the highlands of Guatemala. Because of the linguistic differences between highland and lowland Maya, it is logical to assume that Brady’s translation

¹² J. Eric S. Thompson, *Maya History and Religion* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), 180.

¹³ James E. Brady, “Settlement Configuration and Cosmology: The Role of Caves at Dos Pilas” *American Anthropologist* 99, no. 3 (1997), 603.

of “*c’en*” is one of distinctly highland origin. However, according to Dr. Ramsey Tracy, the word “*c’en*” in lowland Yucatec can be translated as “spring,” or more specifically as “well.”¹⁴ As such, it may be safely assumed that the lack of distinction between caves, *cenotes*, and other water-filled depressions in the earth is a trans-Mayan phenomenon. In addition to this linguistic blending of geological features, caves were also associated with mountains. As the Maya saw all mountains as hollow, this belief thus made mountains the external casings of the caves themselves.¹⁵

How do caves relate to maize and water? To examine the basis for these relationships, one must venture into the myths, legends and creation stories of the ancient Maya, namely those contained within the *Popol Vuh* of the Quiché Maya, for explanation.

The *Popol Vuh*, a council book of the Quiché Maya from western Guatemala, gives the accounts of the formation of the earth, the creation of humans, the adventures of the Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, and the founding of the Mayan civilization. This book has been translated by numerous scholars over the years, and as new information concerning the language of the Maya comes to light, these translations change in sometimes subtle and occasionally drastic ways. With this in mind, the version cited here is Dennis Tedlock’s 1996 revision of his earlier 1985 translation. In his preface, Tedlock mentions specific revisions, such as the translation of some of the Mayan names whose English equivalent was not previously known.¹⁶ Though this is not the most recent translation available,¹⁷ this volume gives a concise summary of the events contained within the *Popol Vuh* in modern English, which, as the original text is

¹⁴ Ramsey Tracy, Western Oregon University, personal communication, 3 May, 2011.

¹⁵ Brady, 603.

¹⁶ Dennis Tedlock, trans. *The Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 15.

¹⁷ For example, see Allan J. Christenson’s *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007).

filled with references to events, places and people the modern reader may not have knowledge of, is very helpful in understanding the various story lines.

A full examination of the *Popol Vuh* cannot be conducted, however, without addressing the problems associated with its study. As with all ancient Maya written texts, one must take into account many things, first of which is the time period in which the text was actually written. As many of these texts “reached their present form during a period in which many indigenous elites had recently converted to Christianity,”¹⁸ and a great many of the scribes who wrote the texts were themselves elites, Christian references and Spanish “loanwords” crop up repeatedly within the texts and must be sifted through to find the true Mayan spirit and beliefs within them.¹⁹

The second problem is the question of the audience for which the text was intended. The *Popol Vuh* was written by the Maya for the Maya. The readers of, and those listening to, these texts were familiar with the “metaphors, mythic characters, and motifs” contained within.²⁰ Yet another problem is the fact that each dialect of the Mayan language has its own definition for each word. As such, the translator must decide which dialect or regional variant to rely on for the translation.²¹ We as readers must also remove ourselves from our own “head space” and view the text from the perspective of a Mayan individual. As mentioned previously, and as illustrated below by Tedlock, the concept of separating “myth” from “history” was, and still is in some parts of the contemporary Maya area, nonexistent:

To this day the Quiché Maya think of dualities in general as complementary rather than opposed, interpenetrating rather than mutually exclusive. Instead of being in logical opposition to one another, the realms of divine and human actions are joined by mutual attraction.... For Mayans, the presence of a divine dimension

¹⁸ Timothy W. Knowlton, *Maya Creation Myths: Words and Worlds of the Chilam Balam* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2010), 3.

¹⁹ Knowlton, 3.

²⁰ Knowlton, text and quote, 3.

²¹ Knowlton, 3; Michael D. Coe, “The Mysteries of the Maya,” *Linus Pauling Memorial Lecture Series*, Oregon Institute of Technology, March 10, 2011.

in narratives of human affairs is not an imperfection but a necessity, and it is balanced by a necessary human dimension in narratives of divine affairs.²²

With this mindset, it is possible to examine the *Popol Vuh* as a kind of roadmap for Mayan thought, and thus better understand the cosmology, history and mythology contained within. As two of the three myths which will be examined in the course of this paper come from the *Popol Vuh*, it is important to examine the overall cosmology of the Maya people, as it is a complex and sometimes confusing mix of gods, creatures and shifting time periods. Comprehending this complex cosmology will also help in understanding the importance of caves, water and maize to the ancient Mayan peoples.

As mentioned above, the world-view of the ancient Maya is one which modern students of these people occasionally have a difficult time comprehending. Because of the “non-Western” way in which the Maya constructed their universe, it becomes necessary to step outside of our own mind-sets and view the Mayan cosmology through unbiased eyes while at the same time forgetting all we think we know about our own world. Western thought looks at the human world through science, analyzing and contemplating in cause-and-effect terms why the world functions as it does. For the ancient Maya, cause-and-effect relationships were rarely highlighted in their creation stories and heroic myths. Instead, the Maya stressed the cyclical nature of the universe, and the inter-dependence of the divine and human narratives. This can be seen as well in the structuring of their world-view.

The Maya believed that the world consisted of a flat disc resting upon a sea, which separated the earth from the underworld below. Combined with this was the view that the surface of the earth was a four-cornered plane whose sides corresponded and were oriented towards the

²² Tedlock, 59.

four cardinal directions. At each of these sides was a mountain in which the gods and ancestors of the Maya lived, the insides of which could be accessed by a cave marked by a tree or a cross.²³

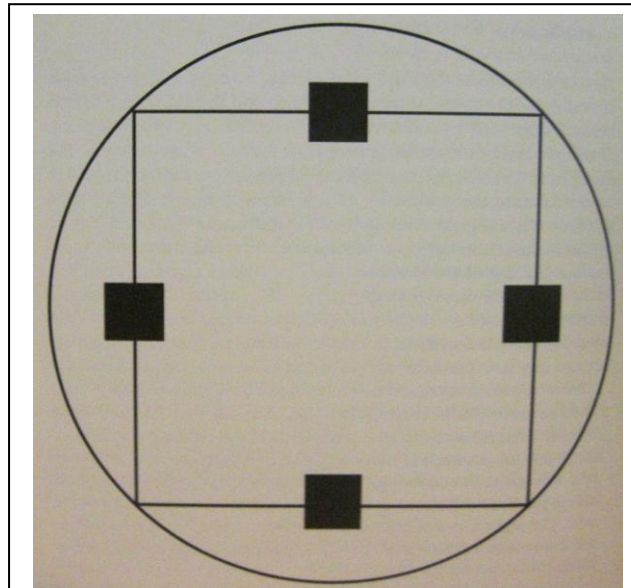


Figure 3. The Quadrilateral World
Karen Bassie-Sweet, *At the Edge of the World: Caves and Late Classic World View*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 22, figure 1.

In addition to the belief in a four-cornered world, the ancient Maya had an impressive repertoire of gods, goddesses and spiritual beings. According to the early Spanish *conquistadores* and priests, as well as early archaeologists, this pantheon of the Maya was immense, as many pre-Conquest codices list thirty or more individual gods by name.²⁴ However, in reality many of these deities are merely manifestations of only a few gods. As Michael Coe tells us, “this theogonic multiplicity results in part from the gods having many aspects,”²⁵ in which each deity has at least four separate manifestations (one for each cardinal direction), plus they may have had a manifestation as the opposite sex as well, “a reflection of the Mesoamerican principle of

²³ Karen Bassie-Sweet, *At the Edge of the World: Caves and Late Classic Maya World View* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 19-21.

²⁴ Michael D. Coe, *The Maya*, Sixth Edition (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 204.

²⁵ Coe, 204.

dualism, the unity of opposite principles.”²⁶ In addition to these aspects, any deity having to do with astronomical phenomena, such as the sun, moon, planets, etc., contained an aspect which reflected him or her as an underworld deity as well, as the Maya believed that the heavenly bodies passed through the Underworld before reappearing in the sky.²⁷ This duality extended to the personality of the deities as well. As will be explored later in the specific case of rain and water deities associated with caves, many of these gods and spirits had both benevolent as well as malevolent aspects, which reflect the element, object and/or idea with which they were connected. These gods, whether in their malevolent or benevolent aspect, demanded payment in return for protecting the Maya from outside forces which “were constantly threatening destruction,”²⁸ as well as for creating the world and human kind. As shall be seen, this need for worship, offerings and payment is a central theme in the creation story of the *Popol Vuh* which follows.

After the creation of the earth, the creator deities, the “Maker, Modeler, named Bearer, Begetter”²⁹ and others attempted to create humans. These first creatures, however, had “no arms to work with, and [could] only squawk, chatter and howl,”³⁰ and were deemed failures in the eyes of their creators. From these creatures come the animals of the world today. The second attempt at man was made from mud, but could not hold its shape or move without falling apart. No descendents from these beings are found today. Before the third attempt, the creator gods consulted the divine matchmaker, Xpiyacoc, and his wife the divine midwife Xmucane, who confirmed to the creators that wood would be the best material for the next creation. These

²⁶ Coe, 204.

²⁷ Coe, 204.

²⁸ Bassie-Sweet, *World View*, 132.

²⁹ Tedlock, 63.

³⁰ Tedlock, 32.

creatures “turn[ed] out to look and talk and multiply themselves something like humans,”³¹ but failed to remember to give due adoration to the gods. For this failure, the gods sent a flood, and incited the animals, cooking implements and houses to turn against their owners, disfiguring and mutilating them. These wooden people then became the monkeys who live in the jungles of today.³²

The material for the fourth and final creation, which resulted in the humans inhabiting the earth today, was brought to the gods by the animals, specifically the fox, the coyote, the parrot and the crow from “Split Place, Bitter Water Place”³³, which Dennis Tedlock tells us was a hollow mountain.³⁴ The material brought to the gods was maize. The divine midwife, Xmucane, ground the maize into meal, which was mixed with water when she washed her hands. The maize meal became human flesh, and the water became fat and blood.³⁵ These humans had the ability to walk, speak, reproduce, and most importantly, they remembered to give thanks to their creators: “Truly now, double thanks, triple thanks that we’ve been formed, we’ve been given our mouths, our faces, we speak, we listen, we wonder, we move.... Thanks to you we’ve been formed, we’ve come to be made and modeled, our grandmother, our grandfather.”³⁶ Thus ends the quest for the creation of the perfect humans.

The quest for the perfect creation by the creator gods illustrates the importance of water and maize to the Maya. Because the flesh of humans is believed to be formed from the mixture of ground corn and water, these two substances are thus the physical basis of life, as well as life-giving staples of the Maya diet. The role of caves in this creation story, while not readily

³¹ Tedlock, 32.

³² Tedlock, 70-72.

³³ Tedlock, 145.

³⁴ Tedlock, 43.

³⁵ Tedlock, 146.

³⁶ Tedlock, 147.

apparent, comes to light when one remembers that, as mentioned previously, the Maya believed mountains to be hollow, and that every mountain therefore did in fact contain one or more caves. The corn which was retrieved from the mountain, “Split Place, Bitter Water Place,”³⁷ therefore came from a cave. From this, one can further associate life not only with corn, but with the caves it originated from as well. The importance of water to the Maya is not highlighted quite as clearly in this story as it is in the legend of the Hero Twins, where underground rivers provide the opportunity for the Twins’ eventual resurrection.

The Hero Twins, most commonly named Hunahpu and Xbalanque, were the twin sons of non-human brothers (they themselves twins) named One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu.³⁸ Though the Hero Twins are commonly called the sons of both One and Seven Hunahpu, they were in fact the biological offspring of only the former brother. Though the *Popol Vuh* begins this tale with the Hero Twins themselves, chronologically it begins with their fathers and their trip down to Xibalba, the Mayan Underworld to play ball with the Lords of that realm.

One and Seven Hunahpu were proficient ball players who annoyed the Lords of the Underworld with their loud games. Inviting the brothers down to Xibalba for a ballgame of their own, the Lords trick them into failing various tests, including one which required the brothers to keep a pair of cigars and a torch lit for the entire night and returning them whole to the Lords the next morning. As this feat was naturally impossible, the brothers were sacrificed before they even reached the ball court. One Hunahpu’s severed head was placed in a tree, where it became the fruit of the calabash. Eventually, Blood Moon, the daughter of a Lord of Xibalba, wandered across the tree where One Hunahpu’s head spat into her hand, impregnating the girl with the

³⁷ Tedlock, 145.

³⁸ The *Popol Vuh* does not say that the first set of twins, One and Seven Hunahpu, were semi-divine, but the stories concerning both them and their sons the Hero Twins are inserted between the third and fourth creation of humans related above. As the third creation was destroyed and the fourth had yet to be formed, this gives rise to my belief that One and Seven Hunahpu themselves were not human. See Tedlock, 32-33.

Hero Twins. Blood Moon was subsequently ejected from Xibalba after her father decided to sacrifice her. Convincing the messengers of Xibalba to let her go, Blood Moon fled to Xmucane, the mother of One and Seven Hunahpu. This of course, was the same Xmucane who later created the first humans out of maize.

When the Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque grew up, they were told by a rat of their fathers' ball equipment, which their grandmother had hidden away, perhaps in fear of the same fate befalling her grandchildren. The Lords of Xibalba were once again annoyed by the sounds of the Twins' ball games, and invited them down to play. This time, however, the Twins managed to outwit the Lords, sending a mosquito in to learn the name of each Lord, using macaw feathers to simulate the torch and lit cigar ends, among other tricks. In this way, they were able to play ball with the Lords and eventually defeat them.

In retribution for this humiliation, the Lords decided to sacrifice the Twins by burning them in a "stone oven".³⁹ Tricked once again by the friends of the Twins, the Lords were convinced to grind the bones of the Twins and throw the powder into the river, which subsequently brought the Twins back to life. Disguising themselves, the Twins then performed "sacrifice[s] without death",⁴⁰ eventually sacrificing themselves and bringing themselves back to life. When the Lords demanded to try, the Twins sacrificed them but "they did not come back to life."⁴¹ Thus the Twins defeated the Lords of the Underworld, and eventually brought their fathers back to life.⁴² As such, these semi-divine heroes of Maya legend were brought back to life through the power of water.

³⁹ Tedlock, 130.

⁴⁰ Tedlock, 137.

⁴¹ Tedlock, 138.

⁴² Tedlock, 111-141.

The importance of water is illustrated in multiple places throughout the legend of the Hero Twins. The first occurrence of the life-giving properties of this liquid is seen in the conception of the Hero Twins themselves: One Hunahpu's head spits into the hand of Blood Moon, impregnating her through his saliva, itself a common form of water.⁴³ The second instance of water providing life is the first sacrifice and subsequent resurrection of the Twins. Without the help of the underground river, the Hero Twins would have remained as bone dust, moldering away in the dark recesses of the Underworld. Thus, for the Hero Twins, water is the life-giving substance. And, as each of these examples takes place within Xibalba, which is only accessible through cave systems, caves can be seen as the source of this water and therefore of life.

These two legends from the *Popol Vuh*, while illustrating the relationship between life and water, maize and caves, are not the only sources for this belief. Legends concerning the finding of corn within mountains (and therefore caves) come from other regions of the Maya area as well, in addition to beliefs surviving into modern times of caves being the producers of rain and all other forms of water. The highlands of Guatemala give us a legend from the Jakaltek Maya concerning the story of how humans came to acquire maize seed for planting crops, while the highland Chiapas region of modern-day Mexico provides evidence from the Zinacantán Maya as to the belief that rain, clouds and all other forms of water originate in caves. This concept has survived into the present day, with modern Maya still believing in the water-producing powers of the caves.

⁴³ Tedlock, 99.

The Jakaltek Maya believed that maize was once stored beneath a stone, mostly likely in a mountain cave.⁴⁴ An ant, finding the maize through a small tunnel, began to carry the seeds away on their backs. A human named B'alunh Q'ana', or "First Father," saw the ant, and decided to try and get some corn for himself. However, First Father could not get to the maize because of the rock which protected it.⁴⁵ Petitioning the rain gods who lived within the cave for help,⁴⁶ he was eventually answered by the chief of these deities. Using his lightning, the god split open the rock at its weakest point, thus freeing the maize for human use.⁴⁷ This myth illustrates not only the cross-Mayan association of maize with caves, which was also shown in the *Popol Vuh* of the Quiché Maya, but presents the close correlation of water with caves as well. In this legend, it was a *rain* god which split open the rock, which seems natural once one takes into account the fact that rain deities lived inside caves and *cenotes*. In fact, the Maya believed, and in some places still do believe (as discussed further on), that rain and water are created within caves. This may also explain why the word "c'en" discussed by Brady above also includes "many springs, [and] places where rivers emerge from or disappear into the earth[.]"⁴⁸

The Mayan belief that water, rain and all associated phenomena (including lightning) originates from caves is illustrated by Evon Z. Vogt's studies of the Zinacantán Maya of the Chiapas highlands:

I have had a number of interesting conversations in which I have attempted to convince Zinacantecos that lightning does *not* come out of caves and go up into the sky and that clouds form in the air. One of these arguments took place in

⁴⁴ Karen Bassie-Sweet, *Maya Sacred Geography and the Creator Deities* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 7.

⁴⁵ Leah Alexandra Huff, "Sacred Sustenance: Maize, Storytelling, and a Maya Sense of Place," *Journal of Latin American Geography* 5, no. 1 (2006), 90-91.

⁴⁶ Barbara MacLeod and Dennis Puleston, "Pathways into Darkness: The Search for the Road to Xibalba" in *Tercera Mesa Redonda de Palenque Vol. IV*, edited by Merle Greene Robertson and Donnan Call Jeffers (Palenque: Pre-Columbian Research Center, 1978), 72.

⁴⁷ J. Eric S. Thompson, *The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilization* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), 273.

⁴⁸ Brady, 603.

Paste? [sic] as I stood on the rim with an informant, and we watched the clouds and lightning in a storm in the lowlands some thousands of feet below us. I finally had to concede, that, given the empirical evidence available to Zinacantecos living in their highland Chiapas terrain, their explanation does make sense. For, as the clouds formed rapidly in the air and then poured up and over the highland ridges... they did give the appearance of coming up from caves on the slopes of the Chiapas highlands.⁴⁹

This correlation between caves and water production is not only one of physical observation and deduction, but also of mythological and spiritual beliefs, as evidenced by the location and residence of one of the major deities of the Maya, namely that of rain.

The chief rain god, who split open the rock to reveal maize to humans in Jakaltek legend, is commonly known as Chac and is perhaps one of the most highly worshiped gods in the entirety of Mayan history.⁵⁰ However, Chac was not always seen as the benevolent, maize-and-water-giving deity that the legend presents. As the principle god of rain, Chac also possessed the ability to withhold the life-giving water, as well as send deluges which would flood the fields and prevent crops from growing. As such, it was necessary to appease and cajole Chac so that the rains would come and go in a reliable manner. These petitions came in the form of offerings left in caves, as well as ritually thrown into the *cenotes*, such as the one at Chichén Itzá mentioned previously. As Patricia A. McAnany states, many depictions of Chac represent him as “a deity with a decidedly mercurial personality” and that “ritual practice [which] focused on Chahk [sic] – the bringer and withholder of rain – sought to assuage this deity, curry favor in the form of ample rainfall, and thus bring under social control a force that is not controllable.”⁵¹

The presence of Chac in the caves, when modern Western thought would immediately place him, as a rain deity, in the sky, indicates the close relationship the Maya felt existed

⁴⁹ Evon Z. Vogt, *Zinacantan: A Maya Community in the Highlands of Chiapas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 387.

⁵⁰ Miller and Taube, 59

⁵¹ Patricia A. McAnany, *Ancestral Maya Economies in Archaeological Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 94.

between water and caves. For the Maya, if Chac as the rain god lives in a cave and/or *cenote*, then rain logically comes from the same place. As the quote from Andrea Stone cited in the beginning of this paper stated, the importance of this cave water was not that it was needed for drinking, but that it was obtained from the place of birth itself.⁵² Thus the water, and whatever it was used for or with, was considered special and sacred as well. This reminds one of the fact that Xmucane, the divine midwife in the *Popol Vuh*, mixed water with corn meal to create the first humans. Perhaps, as both water and maize originated in caves, it was fated that the creation to combine these two sacred elements would survive.

Maize, being one of the staples of the Mayan diet, was naturally an important part of life. In fact, it was believed by the Maya that without maize the human soul would wither and die.⁵³ However, from the creation story presented in the *Popol Vuh*, we see that maize was not only important as a food source, but was also considered the source of physical being. In addition to this, in the legend of the Hero Twins, before travelling to Xibalba to play ball with the Lords of the Underworld, the Twins leave ears of maize with their grandmother, Xmucane. These ears were to symbolize the life of the twins, as when they dried out Xmucane would know her grandsons were dead, but when they later sprouted, she would know they lived once again,⁵⁴ thus associating their lives with the life cycle of the maize plant. This is paralleled by the fact that the planting, harvesting and preserving of maize determined the yearly cycle of holidays, celebrations and life events of the Maya.

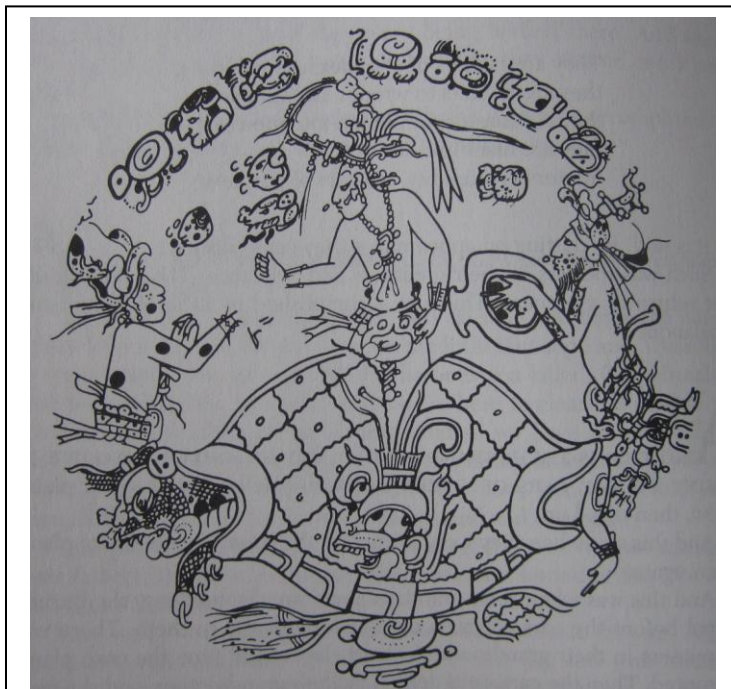
The maize plant, while considered living in the basic sense that any growing thing is living, is also seen by the Maya as living in a spiritual sense. As such, it is considered as a

⁵² Stone, quoted in Rissolo, 346.

⁵³ Bassie-Sweet, *World View*, 10.

⁵⁴ Tedlock, 116.

sentient being, with depictions of the grain as a human head in much of ancient Mayan art.⁵⁵ The god of maize, one of the most prevalent deities in the Mayan pantheon, is often seen as a handsome young man with a stylized maize plant atop his head.⁵⁶ Alternatively, the maize god is also considered to be One Hunahpu, the father of the Hero Twins mentioned previously, after he is resurrected by his sons.⁵⁷ This can be seen in Late Classical Mayan art, particularly on a bowl which depicts the resurrection of One Hunahpu by his sons. He emerges (sprouts), wearing the regalia of the maize god, from the back of a turtle, which is a common pictorial depiction of the earth (see figure 4).⁵⁸ However, as we have seen, maize is not the only substance connected with caves that the Maya held sacred, as it cannot grow without the aid of water.



**Figure 4. The Hero Twins and One Hunahpu as Maize God
Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of
Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings* (New York: Simon &
Schuster, 1996), 140.**

⁵⁵ Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 108.

⁵⁶ Miller and Taube, 109.

⁵⁷ Miller and Taube, 109.

⁵⁸ Tedlock, 140.

As mentioned previously, *cenotes* and occasionally caves were principle water sources for the ancient Maya, as well as places of divine communication. Like maize, water was important to the Maya in many ways. Not only was water necessary for physiological survival as a source of hydration, but was also necessary for the growing of crops. Without water, the foodstuffs of the Maya would not be able to flourish, and the people would starve. In addition to this, water was also held sacred in the cosmological and mythical sense. In the *Popol Vuh*, water was transformed into fat and blood when Xmucane washed her hands above the ground maize,⁵⁹ and the Hero Twins were conceived from the saliva of their father's dismembered head.⁶⁰ More importantly, the Twins were able to resurrect themselves by being thrown into a river after the Lords of the Underworld sacrificed them in a fire.⁶¹ In addition to the *Popol Vuh*, caves are associated with water, corn and life in the Jakaltek and Zinacantán legends mentioned above.

The association of maize and water with caves may be one which is foreign to the modern Western reader, as many of us have little to no concept of food production progressing further back than the corner grocery store, and water being escorted into our homes through pipes and bottles. However, many of the Maya living today still hold these associations within their minds and hearts. Through the various myths and legends, as well as geological and archaeological evidence, it is possible to determine that the connection between caves and life was even clearer to the ancient Maya. Caves, being access points to the inner workings of the earth, were thought of as producers of rain and clouds, as well as the mythological home of maize which itself had strong ties to human existence, as the flesh of the first humans consisted

⁵⁹ Tedlock, 146.

⁶⁰ Tedlock, 99.

⁶¹ Tedlock, 136-137.

of its ground kernels. Thus these three seemingly separate natural occurrences, water, maize and caves, connect in the Yucatán to form and support the gods' greatest gift: that of life.⁶²

⁶² I would like to thank my parents, Carol Scillian and Michael Kennedy, for supporting me throughout this process. Mom, for the garbled phone calls and wet shoulders, and Dad for the endless grammatical and “Does this sound right?” questions. Thank you for giving me the opportunities to fulfill all my dreams. ILYL.

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