



Article

It's the journey not the destination: Maya New Year's pilgrimage and self-sacrifice as regenerative power

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Abstract

This article examines Maya New Year's rites involving pilgrimage and bloodletting. We suggest that ceremonies today that center around the initiation of young men and involve self-sacrifice and long-distance pilgrimage to the mountains and coast may have pre-Hispanic roots. New Year's ceremonies express a core ontological principle of dualistic transformation involving physical change (*jal*) from youth to adulthood and transference or replacement (*k'ex*) of power in official leadership roles. This distinct way of knowing the world emphasizes one's reciprocal relationship with it. We conclude that ancient Maya pilgrimage was not about acquiring a particular thing or venerating a specific place or destination. It was about the journey or what Timothy Ingold calls "ambulatory knowing." The Maya gained cosmological knowledge, linking the movement

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of their body to the annual path of the sun and their sexuality and human regenerative power to earthly renewal, which required blood to be successful.

Keywords

Maya, New Year, pilgrimage, male initiation, turtles, genital bloodletting, circular and colonnaded architecture, marriage and sexual relations, ethnoarchaeology

Introduction

Today and in the past, Maya New Year's rituals were among the most important ritual celebrations conducted throughout the year. This annual celebration occurs around the Spring Equinox and today coincides with Holy Week (*Semana Santa*). The first day of the New Year marks the first station of their 365-day solar year, which corresponds with the arrival of the "yearbearer"—a day named for the corresponding position of a 260-day calendar. This ritual calendar aligns with the lunar cycle and human gestation and is still used today in traditional Maya communities (Tedlock, 1982: 93). New Year's ceremonies honor the last 5 days of the 365-day solar calendar and this 5-day period is known as the Wayeb'. The Wayeb' period marks the end of the dry season and the return of the rains in late spring, bringing with it the renewal of the earth's fertility and the return of the agricultural cycle.

Spanish ethnohistoric accounts by Fray Diego de Landa (1941) and Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas (1958) suggest that burning incense, erecting monuments, penis bloodletting, and pilgrimage were all activities associated with the annual Maya New Year's ceremonies in the sixteenth century. Today, Maya New Year's ceremonies involve an initiation of young men who are transitioning to adulthood and preparing for marriage and requires them to make a long-distance pilgrimage and self-sacrifice for the earth lord, *Mam*. This article presents archaeological data that lends further support to the assertion that these ritual acts have pre-Hispanic roots, aimed at ensuring rain and the annual renewal of the earth (Christenson, 2016; Cook, 2000; Grofe, 2007: 34; de Landa, 1941: 135–149, 151–153; Love, 1986: 169–204; O'Brien-Rothe, 2015; Palka, 2014: 77–80, figure 2.18; Pharo, 2014: 151–223; Stanzione, 2003, 2016; Taube, 1988a, 1988b; Vail and Looper, 2015).

In this study, we rely on the comparative ethnographic work of Cook (2000), Stanzione (2003), and Christenson (2016) who have each specifically documented in detail the practices and significance of the contemporary Maya New Year's ceremonies that still occur in highland Guatemala today. Vincent Stanzione has lived among the Tz'utujil Maya for over two decades and has written about them as both ethnographer and member of the Atiteco community. He invited Astrid Runggaldier and Alex Gantos, co-authors on this article, to observe and participate in aspects of the New Year's ceremony, including the so-called "Fruit Bearing ceremonies," which represent the culmination of a 3-day pilgrimage to the coast,

discussed in more detail below. In this article, we cross-examine the ethnographic and ethnohistoric data alongside the archaeological evidence for pilgrimage and self-sacrifice, namely blood-letting and its historical ties to Maya New Year's celebrations. We recognize that ethnoarchaeological data has its pitfalls and that there is never a perfect one-to-one correlation with cultures separated by a thousand years or more. However, like other Maya pilgrimage scholars, we find an ethnoarchaeological approach helpful for not only shedding light on "the dynamics and metastructure of Mesoamerican pilgrimage in the *longue durée* . . ." (Palka, 2014: 37–38), but also for illuminating the highly physical and sensory experiences that are central to Mesoamerican pilgrimage.

Using an ethnoarchaeological approach, we consider how pilgrimage to the mountains and coast coupled with genital bloodletting rites among men that occurred during ancient New Year's ceremonies was concerned not only with earthly renewal, but also with their own fertility and regeneration as newly married men. We suggest that these annual initiation rites in the past may have prepared young men for a fecund marriage and other activities related to adulthood, including political leadership roles within their community. We present epigraphic, iconographic, and architectural contexts, including circular shrines and colonnaded buildings with archaeological evidence of pilgrimage, bloodletting, and other activities related to Maya New Year's ceremonies, which date primarily to the Terminal Classic and Postclassic periods (ca. AD 800–1500).

Theorizing pilgrimage

Turner (1973, 1974) is known for providing one of the more comprehensive treatments of pilgrimage in anthropological theory (for a fuller discussion of the intellectual history see Skousen's introduction). Rather than a fixed characterization, Turner (1973: 194) focuses our attention on the processes by which pilgrimage becomes lasting and ultimately governed by social and/or religious norms or laws, transforming from "liminal phenomena" to "normative *communitas*." Both kinds of pilgrimage involve a collective, but the latter is more tightly controlled with legitimating authoritative structures (Astor-Aguilera and Jarvenpa, 2008: 484; Turner, 1973: 193–194). A normative *communitas* is often applied to the more massive ceremonial pilgrimages that occur among major world religions that have developed "enduring socioceremonial structures which provide an integrating force within and between societies of large scale and complexity" (Astor-Aguilera and Jarvenpa, 2008: 483–484). Palka (2014: 13) observes that unlike these pilgrimage traditions, which tend to focus on a select few ritual sites, the Maya had a potentially infinite number of sacred geographic locales—what he calls "communicating places"—that were visited as sacred locales or openings in the world because they were places known to house spiritual or nonhuman forces (Astor-Aguilera, 2010; Brady and Prufer, 2005).

Astor-Aguilera and Jarvenpa (2008: 483–484) conclude that for the Maya pilgrimage functions as a simultaneous expression of both individual and collective

identity. Likewise, Palka (2014: 40) concludes that Maya pilgrimage often centers around the construction of identity aimed at addressing a combination of concerns for oneself, family, and community. While individual motivations for participating in a pilgrimage may vary, Astor-Aguilera and Jarvenpa (2008: 485) suggest that all participants invariably must share some sense that an inner benefit is obtained through their participation and that “it is these inner feelings of contentment that make pilgrimage communal bonding possible.” From this perspective, the shared motivation for the pilgrimage appears to be not just the destination—whether it be a religious shrine, altar, icon, cave, or some other topographic feature—but rather, the journey itself has some kind of inner benefit—economic, personal, political, or otherwise.

In Palka’s study of ancient Maya pilgrimage, he considers inner benefits like “economics, personal healing, and political competition . . . as secondary functions, as they may not always occur in Mesoamerican pilgrimage” (Palka, 2014: 39). He concludes that what is shared among all pilgrims is “the movement of the body and stimulation of the senses” (Palka, 2014: 39). This perspective is in line with the relational ideas and approaches presented in this and other articles in this special issue on pilgrimage. Some see such relational perspectives as an extension of post-processual thought, but the interpretive theory of postprocessualism (first challenged by phenomenology in 1990s) stands in stark contrast to relational perspectives, which are more often seen as an extension of ontological theory (Alberti, 2016: 164; Thomas, 2015: 1288). Rather than searching for or trying to decode a shared motivation (or representational meaning), a relational perspective codes performance—in this case the performance of pilgrimage—as both a conscious and unconscious way of being and doing (for more discussion on this distinction, see Harrison-Buck, 2018).

As a means of rethinking pilgrimage from a relational perspective, Skousen outlines in his introduction to this special issue, three inter-related themes—movement, materials of vitality, and the senses—that are helpful for theorizing the being and doing of Maya pilgrimage, both today and in the past. For instance, in the circumambulatory rituals of contemporary highland Maya, the *movement* of the young men’s bodies is calendrically timed with the annual celebration of the Maya New Year. Today, the journey for the Maya involves the visitation of special ancestral locales, including mountain-caves and coastal lowlands and the taking and transport of certain *materials of vitality*, including personified and gendered fruits, flowers, and cave formations that have sexual potency. In this paper, we discuss the ancient linkages between the New Year’s ceremony and offerings of gendered and personified goods, including speleothems and marine shell that we suggest were acquired through long-distance pilgrimage. These items are found associated with evidence of genital bloodletting, which we argue were sacrificial acts that accompanied pilgrimage and were aimed at ensuring sexual potency and procreative power for the earth as well as for humans.

From this study, we conclude that Maya pilgrimage was not just about acquiring a particular thing or venerating a specific place or destination; it was about the journey

or what Ingold (2010) refers to elsewhere as “ambulatory knowing.” Ambulatory knowing is a sensory experience with emotive impact, akin to Gell’s sense of “enchantment.” As noted by Skousen in his introduction, affect has the power to alter the way one experiences the world. Yet, ambulatory knowing is more than just an emotional feeling; it is a form of experiential learning centered on a relational interdependency between the pilgrim and the world through (not on) which the pilgrim walks. Ingold (2010: S134) describes ambulatory knowing as the traveler or wayfarer who builds knowledge along the way where “moving is *knowing*” and being attentional (vs intentional) is how one learns (see also Ingold, 2013). For the Maya, pilgrims gain cosmological knowledge like the wayfarers that Ingold describes, learning as they go that the movement of their body is linked to the annual path of the sun and that their sexuality and human regenerative power is directly tied to earthly renewal. This bodily knowing and distinct way of being in the world emphasizes the pilgrims’ reciprocal relationship with it and constitutes not a one-way relationship but a mutual interdependency. Below, we describe this kind of ambulatory knowing using Maya ethnography before turning our attention to the archaeological evidence, which helps us to further understand the self-sacrifice involved in being a pilgrim and performing pilgrimage for the Maya in the ancient past.

Ambulatory knowing, pedestrian movement, and temperate experience

I once accompanied the [young men] down to their coastal fruit-gathering place to participate with them and the “Mayori” [elders] in their ancient ritual. It was a powerful transforming experience and taught me the deeper meanings of this ritual of the young men who sacrificed themselves to it as initiates into the world of traditional Tz’utujil religion. It became apparent through participating in the *costumbre*, through walking, talking, and singing with the young and old men along the way, that this “*costumbre*” was “the” *costumbre* of a young man’s life. After the ritual’s completion a young man no longer sees himself as being the child of his mother. Through sacrifice the young man became a man among men who were “one” in the ritual and civil service to their village of Santiago Atitlan. Stanzione (2003: 169)

When Stanzione accompanied the young men (referred to as *Alcila*) on their pilgrimage, he describes a means of experiential learning for young Maya men that resembles what Ingold (2010) describes as ambulatory knowing, which occurs not just through dialog, but through pedestrian movement and temperate or emotional experience where one’s body becomes intimately connected with the world around them. The pilgrimage performed in the days prior to the New Year’s ceremony by the young men from Santiago Atitlan is a form of ambulatory knowledge. Participation in this 3-day journey together to the coastal lowlands to collect fruit and flower offerings ensures the return of the rains and the renewal of the earth’s regenerative power. Guided by elders (or *Mayori*), the *Alcila* walk from the

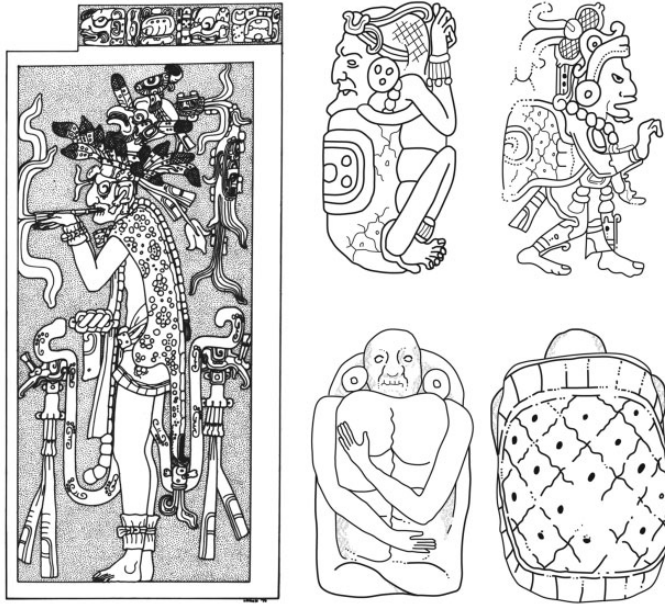


Figure 1. Ancient counterparts to Mam or MaXimón arbitrarily referred to as God L (left) and God N (right) (image on left copyright David Schele, The Linda Schele Drawings Collection #176, courtesy of FAMSI Resources; images on right after Zender, 2005: figure 8, redrawn by Katherine Titus).

highland town of Santiago Atitlan to the slopes of the Pacific piedmont or “Boca Costa” where cacao (chocolate) trees have a long history of being grown and tended by the Tz’utujil people (Stanzione, 2003: 2–5). They bring the fruit and flowers back for *Mam*, the primordial ancestor and First Father of the earth, also known among the Atiteco as *MaXimón*. The ancient counterparts associated with Mam are the aged year bearer deities referred to arbitrarily by the names God L and God N, often shown wearing turtle shell carapaces on their backs (Figure 1).

For the Tz’utujil Maya, the journey down to the coastal piedmont is arduous; the young men carry large, heavy *kakaxtles*. These backpacks are decorated with flowers and palm fronds and filled with ripe cacao and other fruit, which they load onto their backs and carry via a tumpline on their heads. Stanzione (2016: 22) observes that the young male initiates wear the *kakaxtles* “as kok or tortoise shells...[and] by wearing them [become] the ‘replacements’ of their First Father... who walked the world fearlessly.” These types of backpacks are evident in ancient contexts, including the famous Maya-style murals from the site (appropriately called) Caxactla in Mexico, where God L (Mam) is shown standing next to a cacao tree ready to load the ripe fruit onto his *kakaxtle*. The similarities between the ancient backpack and the modern one are striking (see Figure 2).

The Alcila arrive back into town after their 3-day journey carrying their heavy *kakaxtle* filled with fruit. Their arrival is accompanied by festivities that involve



Figure 2. Examples of kakaxtles (back racks) (a) carried by the contemporary Alcila (photo by Alex Gantos), and (b) carried by God L as shown in the murals from the site of Cacaxtla, Mexico (after Coe and Coe, 1996: 55; redrawn by Katherine Titus and Marieka Brouwer-Burg).

music, dancing, and ceremonial drinking. Although it is no longer strictly the case, the Alcila who traditionally participated in the journey to the Boca Costa “were young men who had contracted marriage with young women from the village or from a Tz’utujil town on the Boca Costa” (Stanzione, 2003: 167). The fruit offerings the Alcila have collected are brought back and given to Mam who serves as the initiator of young men and also oversees marriage, fertility, and sexual order (Stanzione, 2003: 14; Tedlock, 1985: 100–101). That night, the newly married men of Atitlan have transitioned to adulthood and are allowed to make love with their wives for the first time; only if the fruits provided to Mam are ripened will they be able to conceive a child (Stanzione, 2003: 14).

The rituals involving male initiation center around an important period of transition in their lives. These rituals are not just symbolic or honorary in nature, but express a core ontology for the Maya that involves dualistic transformation—what the Tz’utujil Maya call *Jaloj-k’exoj*, demarcating physical change (*jal*) from youth to adulthood and transference or replacement (*k’ex*) of power in official leadership roles (Carlsen and Prechtel, 1991: 26–30). The young men who return from these pilgrimages are now ready for marriage and are also ready to assume inherited leadership roles in public office within the community as the *k’ex* or junior replacement for their elder ancestor, referred to as Mam.

K’ex: Replacement, sacrifice, and offerings in New Year’s ceremonies

Taube (1994) describes the deep roots of Maya sacrifice as a *k’ex*, meaning to substitute or exchange for something else. This concept extends from ancestral replacement to substitutions as sacrificial offerings to the earth lord for health and appeasement. For instance, among the contemporary Yucatec Maya, in curing rites animals such as chickens are sacrificed to restore the stolen spiritual co-essence of an injured person; as the modern substitute for a human sacrifice,

the chicken “should be the same sex and approximate age as the patient” (Taube, 1994: 670). It would seem that the original intent of the k'ex sacrificial exchange was to provide an equivalent in kind replacement to appease the earth lord, Mam.

In the days leading up to the contemporary New Year's Wayeb' ceremony, all members of the Maya community perform sexual abstinence as a form of self-sacrifice or k'ex to avoid abject deformities, miscarriage, or stillbirth (Christenson, 2016: 175). This and other practices of self-sacrifice, like bloodletting, conducted during the Wayeb' period appear to have had a similar objective. Christenson (2016: 176–178) notes that an elderly Maya church official told him that in his youth, prior to foreign priests, the highest ranking Tz'utujil religious official within the Roman Catholic Church would administer whippings during Holy Week that were severe enough to make one bleed.

The official said that when he was young people used to say that it was necessary for blood to be shed during Holy Week to help women have healthy babies, for the earth to produce maize, and for Christ to be reborn out of the underworld. Without this the first rains would not come and everything would dry up and die. Christenson (2016: 178)

Although in recent years the sacrifice of animals has largely replaced self-inflicted bloodletting, young men and women today still practice forms of self-sacrifice that includes whipping, which is supposed to “[make] them more fertile in their marriages” (Christenson, 2016: 177). These self-mortification practices are relatively mild today and the whippings are more playful gestures during Maya New Year's ceremonies, but they are clearly a vestige of a bloodier form of self-sacrifice that occurred in the pre-Hispanic past. de Las Casas (1958) describes a sacrificial rite at the time of Contact involving a pilgrimage associated with New Year's rites, which required young males on the road to adulthood to go “out to crossroads and mountains to make blood offerings” (Cook, 2000: 209; see also Christenson, 2016: 98–99). de Landa (1941: 125) also reported during the sixteenth century that young men secluded in the temple or other ceremonial buildings were expected to carry out bloodletting and other sacrificial rites.

According to ethnohistoric accounts, a k'ex sacrifice of blood for the earth lord was necessary during the Wayeb' period for ensuring that the rains would resume and that all the earth would regenerate. The ethnographic data suggest that a k'ex sacrifice of blood was critical for the healthy regeneration of human offspring and also maize, which is still a staple crop for the Maya today. Cook (2000: 205) observes that a central rite of the contemporary New Year's ceremony involves a core Maya myth from the Classic period involving “the defeat and resurrection of [the personifiers of] maize and the sun and their overcoming the powers of death and sterility to inaugurate the maize planting season.” Indeed, the regeneration of corn was a standard petition of k'ex blood sacrifices in ancient times (Schele and Miller, 1986; Taube, 1994).

Taube takes this human-maize plant connection one step further, suggesting that the act of husking corn was analogous to penis perforation, where the awls (still used today to husk maize) are held at waist level and the pointed tip is placed into the head of the cob “exactly the same way the ancient awls . . . were inserted into the open wounds along the top of the penis . . . And since the maize cannot seed itself, cutting off the head is necessary if the seeds are to be removed and planted for the next crop, an action that symbolizes the perforation of a penis” (cited in Freidel et al., 1993: 206). Freidel et al. (1993: 206) describe the penis-plant parallel as a kind of *symbolic* metaphor, but the ethnographic data suggest that these k'ex sacrifices were personified and gendered and in kind replacements for one another, much like the chicken sacrifice described above for curing ceremonies. In Maya creation myths like the Popol Vuh, the Maya are described as made from maize (Christenson, 2003; Tedlock, 1985). In this way, the life-cycle of humans and maize plants has always been conjoined since creation and is part of a deep-seated continuum celebrated annually during the Wayeb' period when a k'ex sacrifice of blood for the earth lord ensures the successful insemination of both maize plants and humans.

For the Maya, acts of self-sacrifice and self-mortification described above do not appear to have been restricted to humans. For instance, in the mid-twentieth century, Mendelson (1957: 267 cited in Christenson, 2016: 178) observed during the Wayeb' period: “Fruit trees are also beaten so that they should give more fruit . . .” In addition to trees, other objects and beings, such as tools, household implements, and animals also needed to be whipped (“to bleed”) in order to purify them and to maintain good health throughout the coming year (Christenson, 2016: 178; Tarn and Pretchtel, 1997: 269). It would seem that anything with the power to birth or produce something else was considered animate and needed to “bleed” to be procreative.

In addition to blood rites, the act of long-distance pilgrimage and the taking of fruit was another form of k'ex sacrifice necessary for a fecund marriage that occurred as part of the Maya New Year's rites that appears to root in pre-Hispanic times. The fruits collected during the 3-day pilgrimage with male elders are likened to human captives and are carefully guarded throughout the night by the young males, who consider themselves warriors serving their community (Christenson, 2016: 215–219). Some reported to Christenson (2016: 216–217) that “the ‘fruit’ are women captured by the young men of the town as wives for [Mam]” but others stated that “men must cut the fruit from the trees themselves, just as they cut young women away from their families when they marry them, or as their ancestors before the Spaniards captured their enemies and sacrificed them with machetes.” Both explanations, in fact, may be true. The archaeological and ethno-historic data indicate that noble brides and noble captives often were paired as equivalent substitutes, with bundles of cacao serving as a standard k'ex for the bride and also for the captive (Harrison-Buck, 2017: 116–118). Harrison-Buck (2017) concludes that cacao, along with brides and captives, were exchanged as k'ex and functioned similarly as gifts with regenerative power.

Both today and in the past, cacao represents the principal fruit associated with Mam and has long been associated with females, described as breast-like fruit. Stanzione (2003: 168) observes from his own experience of traveling down to the Boca Costa, that the Alcila also select a type of melon (*kixlan kum*) that they describe as “a sweet-smelling swollen male member” (Stanzione, 2003: 168). Once full, their kakaxtle is said to be an impregnated being, a full womb that “must be treated gently” and with utmost “respect and devotion” (Stanzione, 2003: 173). In this way, the fruits taken by the young men are gendered and personified beings—both captured brides and war captives with procreative power. The fruit that the young men bring up from the coast should be perfectly ripened without any bruises or worm holes. Unripened or blemished fruits are considered an impurity of the young male initiate and an indication of infertility, adultery, or sexual indiscretions during the period of abstinence (Christenson, 2016: 227).

Traditionally, upon their return as part of their initiation as marriageable men the Alcila gather at the house of the village head who serves them *Maatz'*, a traditional k'ex made of thickened salty corn gruel that the Maya liken to semen (Stanzione, 2003: 159). While the initiates drink the *Maatz'* prior to their pilgrimage to the coast, this is the first time they drink *Maatz'* with the adult males of the village and this time it is served to them spiced with chile and mixed with ground cacao and achiote (*'Q'atuj'*), which turns the drink blood red (Hull, 2010: 249–250). Stanzione (2003: 159) relates the significance of this ceremonial drink to a Mexican creation myth about a primordial creator or First Father (Mam) who lets blood from his genitals onto the ground bones of the ancestors to regenerate life (Stanzione, 2003: 178; see also Grofe, 2007: 32; Miller and Taube, 1993: 70). Stanzione (2003: 158–159) observes that the ground corn maize in the ceremonial drink is equivalent to the ground bones of the ancestors and that the cacao and achiote is the sacrificial blood, which when combined regenerates life each spring during the New Year's ceremony. Notably, this ceremonial drink is still served in a gourd container called an “*aq'ab'al'*,” which was traditionally used for sacrificial bloodletting (Stanzione, 2003: 158)—an important point that resonates with the archaeological data that we turn to below.

Ancient roots of the New Year's ceremony

In Classic and Postclassic contexts, Mam is referred to as a “yearbearer” for the New Year and is frequently associated with the act of genital bloodletting. As noted above, imagery in Classic Maya contexts shows an ancient version of Mam, referred to arbitrarily as Gods L and N. God L is frequently characterized as a traveling merchant god who carries a backpack, while the variant of God N is typically a wrinkled old man wearing a shell or turtle carapace (see Figures 1 and 2). Although the translations remain debated, the ancient name of God N in the glyphs is thought to be *Pauhtun* or *Bacab*, although more recently has been translated as *Itzam* (Figure 1 (Stuart, 2007; Taube, 1992: 92–94)). These Classic

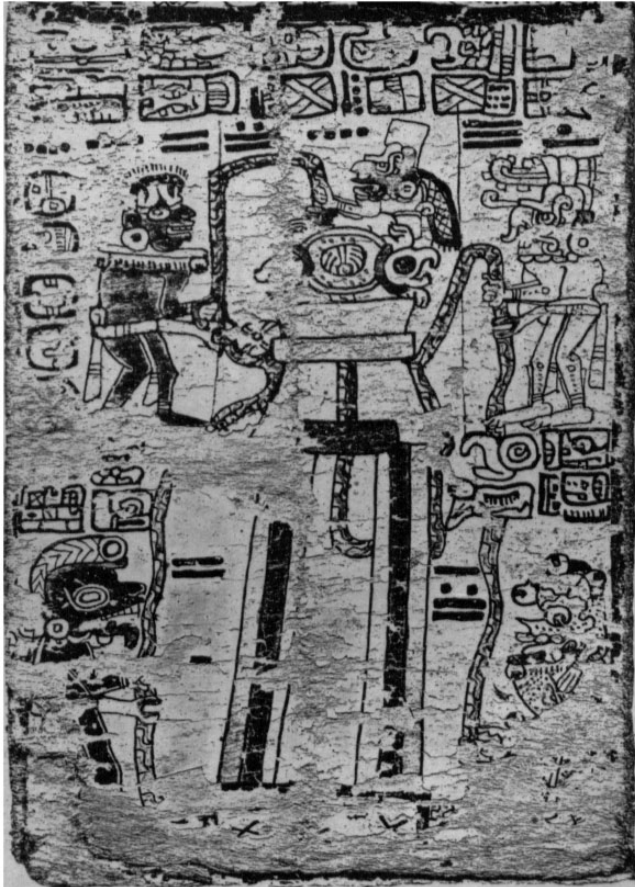


Figure 3. Page 19b of the Madrid Codex showing a New Year's ceremony involving bloodletting (after de Rosny [1883]. Courtesy of the Florida Institute for Hieroglyphic Research, St. Petersburg, Florida).

counterparts to Mam are consistently associated with the earth, thunder, and rain and embody a four-part configuration, expressing the four world directions (Taube, 1992: 97). As a means of moistening and germinating the four-part earth, the bloodletting ritual for Mam ensures the renewal of the rains and the agricultural cycles each spring and the annual regeneration of the earth.

There are a number of archaeological examples from Classic and Postclassic contexts that present the four Mams or yearbearers letting blood from their genitals onto a turtle effigy. For instance, on page 19b of the Madrid Codex (Figure 3), there are four individuals who are tagged in the associated glyphic text as the four Mams or year-bearers (Taube, 1988b: figure 7). These four anthropomorphic individuals are arrayed around a central structure, which Vail suggests is a shrine or

altar (Knowlton and Vail, 2010: 721; Vail and Loooper, 2015: 129). The central figure holds a cord coming out of the top of a turtle and the four participants are shown pulling this long cord through their penises. Vail and Hernandez (2013: 394) argue that this scene recalls yearbearer rituals involving genital bloodletting that was carried out during the Wayeb' period to regenerate life at the beginning of a new year, recorded at the time of Spanish Contact by Bishop Diego de Landa in the sixteenth century (de Landa, 1941: 145). Chase and Chase (1988, 2008) describe a collection of figurines from the site of Santa Rita Corozal in northern Belize dating to the Postclassic (ca. AD 900–1500) that resemble yearbearer rituals involving genital bloodletting carried out during the New Year's ceremonies at the time of Spanish Contact (de Landa, 1941: 145; see also Vail and Hernandez, 2013: 394 for further discussion). One Late Postclassic cache deposit contained an array of figurines including four Mam yearbearer figures standing on the backs of turtles letting blood from their genitals similar to the scene in the Madrid Codex described above (Figure 4 (Chase, 1985; Chase and Chase, 1988: figures 24 and 25, 2008)). A comparable quadripartite configuration of four "God N" turtle effigies was found in a Late Postclassic cache deposit in Structure H-17, a colonnaded building at Mayapan, a Maya center in northern Yucatán, Mexico (Taube, 1988b: 186).



Figure 4. Cache deposit at Santa Rita Corozal, Belize showing three of the four Mam yearbearers standing on a turtle letting blood from the genitals and other figurines, including a seated figure blowing a conch trumpet (photo by Jorge Pérez de Lara).

At Mayapan and also at Chichen Itza, another major center in northern Yucatán, Late Postclassic deposits have yielded carved stone turtle effigies with receptacles on their backs. In her investigations at Mayapan, Proskouriakoff (1962: 331–333) noted that one cache with a carved turtle contained obsidian blades and stingray spines and she interpreted them as small altars associated with bloodletting. Taube (1988b: 193) concludes that the receptacles on the backs of the turtle effigies might have been used to hold bloodletting tools or blood itself. We suggest that these small “altars” may have functioned similarly to the turtle effigy used for New Year’s ceremonies that is seen in the Madrid Codex, sitting on an altar where intertwining cords used in penis bloodletting were threaded through a hole in the altar table, which fed into the receptacle on the back of the turtle effigy. Another example from outside the Maya area may be shown in the scene on the Structure 4 panel at El Tajin in the Gulf Coast of Mexico (see Koontz, 2010: figure 7.4). Like in the Madrid Codex, four entwined cords come together and are threaded through a hole in an altar table and inserted into the back of a turtle effigy that sits, in this case, beneath the altar.

Other examples of stone turtle effigies have been found at Santa Rita Corozal. One was found associated with the latest phase of Structure 77 and measures around 30 cm in length with a cavity or receptacle on the back measuring about 2–3 cm in diameter (Figure 5 (Chase and Chase, 1988: 27–31, figure 9)). The size is roughly equivalent to the turtle effigies from Mayapan and Chichen Itza. Similar-sized carved limestone turtles (both with and without receptacles on their backs) also have been found associated with Late Postclassic deposits at Nixtun-Ch’ich’ in Peten, Guatemala. Pugh et al. (2016: 8) refer to them as “altar turtles” and note that of the five recovered in excavations, all were found in the interior spaces of shrines.

Turtle imagery is often associated with phallic imagery in both Peten and Yucatán. At Nixtun-Ch’ich’ several portable-size carved phalli stones were found in association with the altar turtles in colonnaded shrine buildings (Pugh et al., 2016: figure 9). Another example of a portable phallic sculpture was found on the access stairway to the House of the Turtles at the northern Yucatec site of Uxmal (Amrhein, 2000: 8). Phalli imagery has been documented in the form of sculpture, architectural elements, and carved or painted imagery, but very few examples have known archaeological provenience (Ardren, 2012: 56). For instance, of the 57 examples collated by Ardren (2012: table 5.1), only 28 have known archaeological provenience. Of these, a number of them functioned as architectural adornments projecting from cornices and walls, including one example that served as a water spout on the Temple of the Phallus at Uxmal (Amrhein, 2000: figure 8). In addition, five examples were found in ancient Maya cave contexts. That a total of six (more than 20%) of phalli sculptures with known provenience are associated with water-related features is significant. For the ancient Maya, stalagmites were conceived of as phalli and caves served as places of human origins and sources of fertility, abundance, and rain (Brady et al., 2005; Moyes, 2005; Nielsen and Brady,

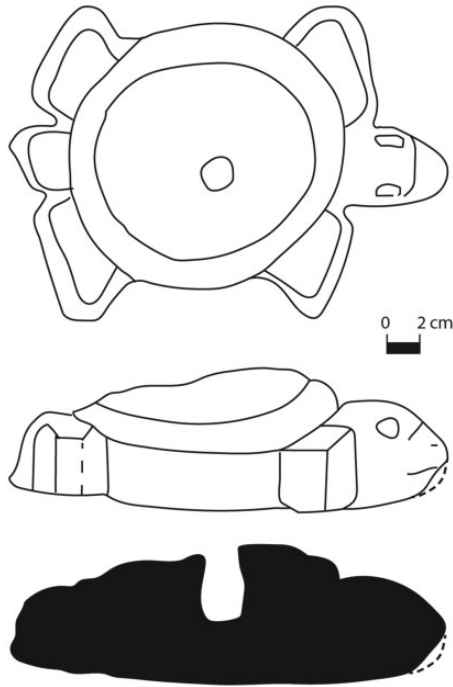


Figure 5. Altar turtle from Santa Rita Corozal, Belize (after Chase and Chase, 1988: figure 9, redrawn by Katherine Titus).

2006; Palka, 2014). Still today, caves have strong sexual connotations where cave openings and their dripstone formations are likened to female and male genitalia (see Brady et al., 2005: 189–222). Notably, “yearbearer and other period-ending rituals were often performed in cave contexts” which includes genital bloodletting (Vail and Looper, 2015:127; see also Stone, 1995). Therefore, it is not surprising to find cave- and water-related imagery in the form of speleothems, phalli, and turtles in the context of yearbearer ceremonies.

In addition to cave contexts, carved turtle and penis effigies indicative of genital bloodletting activities are frequently found in shrine contexts, including colonnaded and circular structures dating to the Terminal Classic and Postclassic periods (ca. AD 830–1500). For instance, three of the five open colonnaded halls that were excavated at Nixtun-Ch’ich’ contained portable phalli stones and all of the altar turtles found at this site were in colonnaded rooms (Pugh et al., 2016: 8). All of the altar turtles found at Mayapan were associated with shrines located in either large residences or in colonnaded buildings (Taube, 1988b: 186). Altar turtles are also found associated with circular shrine architecture, such as Str. H-18 at Mayapan and the Caracol building at Chichen Itza (Ruppert, 1935; Taube, 1988b: 189).

Evidence of Terminal Classic New Year's ceremonies

More recent investigations at Chichen Itza in the Initial Series Group have revealed another circular shrine (Structure 5C17), this one constructed in the form of a turtle that dates to the Terminal Classic period (Schmidt, 2007). Examples of circular shrines dating to the Terminal Classic period have been found across the Maya Lowlands, including Belize (Harrison-Buck, 2012; Harrison-Buck and McAnany, 2013). Several examples of circular architecture in the Sibun and Belize Valleys suggest connections with turtles and acts of bloodletting as part of Maya New Year's ceremonies. Although no carved turtle effigies with receptacles have been found in these contexts, the structures all exhibit exceptionally high quantities of turtle bone, which in many cases cluster around the central doorways and centerlines within the interiors of these shrine buildings (Duff and Harrison-Buck, 2015: 42; Harrison-Buck, 2013: 119). The depositional pattern is similar to the placement of limestone turtle effigies found on the centerlines of shrine buildings and altars at sites elsewhere in the Maya lowlands.

Taube (1988b: 189–193) argues that turtle carapaces themselves may have served as the locus of bloodletting from Classic through Postclassic times. Notably, in and around circular shrines from both the Belize and Sibun Valleys, a high density of bloodletting implements was found associated with the turtle shell, which lends support to Taube's argument that the turtle shell receptacles were associated with bloodletting. Perforators that were recovered range from stingray spines to obsidian blades, but obsidian was by far the more common bloodletting implement found in these contexts. The number of perforators suggests that multiple participants may have engaged in penis perforation, perhaps similar to the scene in the Madrid Codex where four participants perforated their penis and let blood into a single turtle shell receptacle through a shared intertwined cord strung through the perforated penis.

Although no phallus effigies have been recovered from the Terminal Classic shrines, evidence of cave speleothems have been found on and around circular shrine buildings in the Sibun Valley (Peterson et al., 2005). Like the turtle bone, the speleothems tend to cluster around the central doorways of these buildings (Harrison-Buck, 2012: 72–73). Some are small, portable speleothems but others are large cut cave formations that were integrated into the construction of the circular shrines, such as a stalagmite used as one of the doorjam stones at the Sibun Valley site of Pechtun Ha (Peterson et al., 2005: figure 12.6).

Another class of artifacts associated with the circular shrines in Belize are conch shell trumpets (Harrison-Buck, 2012: table 1). Different species of marine gastropods from the Caribbean were found, primarily *Strombus* and *Melongena*. In many cases, the shell is unworked, but in several instances the tips or apices of the marine shell were cut and appear to have functioned as trumpets. Notably, shell trumpets are part of the bloodletting assemblage as seen in the Santa Rita figurine assemblage from Structure 213 noted above (see Figure 4 (Chase and Chase, 1988: figure 25b)). The high density and distribution of shell deposits found around the

exterior of the shrine buildings in Belize suggest that these shells may have been used as trumpets and in some cases possibly as architectural adornments (Harrison-Buck, 2012: 72–73). In addition to the marine shell, other marine products, including stingray spines and coral, are found associated with circular shrines pointing to connections with the coast, likely the Caribbean. Notably, at Nixtun-Ch'ich', Pugh et al. (2016: 10) reported finding a large piece of coral on the bench in the eastern hall of a colonnaded room in Structure QQ1/1 in the same context as a portable phallus stone, with a turtle altar found in the adjacent western hall of the same structure.

Discussion

Coral and similar marine objects such as stingray spines, *Strombus* (conch) shell, and *Spondylus* shell...likely represented distance and connections to faraway places. Knowledge of how to travel to distant places often shores up political and religious legitimacy. Things from such places can likewise be considered powerful and be incorporated into ritual activities because they present solid evidence of one's travels and knowledge of the outer world. Acquiring such objects was a power practice that established one as a broker with external worlds. Pugh et al. (2016: 10)

Like at Nixtun-Ch'ich', which is located inland near the Peten Lakes, marine products like seashells, coral, and stingray spines are not found nearby the settlements in Belize where we find circular shrines. The Caribbean coast, as well as the karstic hills where the nearest caves and speleothems can be found, are at least a day's walk or more from these settlements. These "natural specimens" are not what one normally would characterize as objects of mercantile trade; more likely they were acquired through the course of long-distance pilgrimage to these sacred locales. Numerous scholars have observed that water bodies and caves were locales selected for pilgrimage, seen by the Maya as places of fertility, abundance, and rain and as places associated with creation and origin from which humans were thought to emerge (Brady and Prufer, 2005; Moyes, 2005; Nielsen and Brady, 2006; Palka, 2014; Vail andLooper, 2015: 131–132). Cave and water-related rituals are specifically tied to the renewal and rebirth of humans and the earth during the annual New Year's ceremonies each spring (Moyes, 2005: 189; Stone, 1995: 87–90; Vail andLooper, 2015: 131–132).

Elsewhere, Harrison-Buck (2012) has argued that the marine products and speleothems may have served as the visual and aural signals of wind and the coming rains and animated circular shrine buildings in different ways. The presence and distribution of these and other "natural" artifacts, such as turtle shell, support the idea that wind, water, and fertility were directly associated with these buildings. These materials may have been charged with animate powers of a watery (under)-world and served as a means of petitioning the annual rains in the hopes of an abundant crop, which the pre-Hispanic Dresden yearbearer almanac suggests was a

central component of the New Year's ceremonies (Vail and Looper, 2015: 127). Citing ethnographic accounts (Ravicz and Romney, 1969: 394), Brady et al. (2005: 219) report speleothems being physically removed from caves "... and set up outside of the dwelling of those just married. Considered to bring good fortune, health, and many children, the stones are phallic and have a fertility function." Perhaps the cave formations associated with the circular shrines functioned similarly to ensure male sexual virulence and an ability to procreate. If circular shrines were places of penile bloodletting during the New Year's ceremonies, perhaps these and other materials imbued with fertility were purposefully acquired in the course of long-distance journeys as part of male-male initiation rites to aid in both earthly regeneration and human fertility as young men prepared themselves for marriage and adulthood.

Ancient Maya epigraphic accounts lend support to the notion that such long-distance journeys to the mountains and the coast may have been necessary for young men transitioning to adulthood (*jal*) not only for marriage but to assume a political role and successfully replace (*k'ex*) elders in official leadership positions. Finamore and Houston (2010: 201) note one glyphic passage that describes a pilgrimage conducted by a new ruler of the city of Cancuen following his accession in December of AD 656, reaching a hilly or mountainous location around the Maya New Year's the day before the Spring Equinox in AD 657. From there, the noble lord traveled to the sea accompanied by at least one other person, reaching there by August of AD 657 about five months later. Given the duration of time, these scholars suggest this was likely not a metaphorical journey, but involved an actual ruler physically walking from Cancuen to the coast (Finamore and Houston, 2010: 201). The glyphic evidence supports the idea that pilgrimage to both the mountains and the coast were an important part of male initiation rites for young Maya rulers, perhaps analogous to the contemporary Maya rites of passage.

Concluding thoughts

Maya pilgrimage was not just about reaching a particular destination or acquiring some exotic good. It was about the journey or what Ingold (2010) calls "ambulatory knowing" where movement and bodily knowledge is fundamental to learning. For the Maya, ambulatory knowing is a dualistic process of transformation where movement involves both physical change (*jal*) from youth to adulthood and generational change involving the cyclical replacement (or *k'ex*) as young adults get married, give birth to a new generation, and replace elders in leadership roles. The Maya pilgrimages of the New Year's ceremony examined herein align with Ingold's (2010) ambulatory knowing and the themes of relational pilgrimage—movement, materials of vitality, and the senses—described by Skousen, which involve a "meshwork" of relationships between human and other-than-human entities (*sensu* Ingold, 2006). According to Stanzione (2003: 108, 204), the movement of the young men's bodies follows "the footpath/footprint of the sun"; the calendrical association of the New Year's pilgrimage, timed with the spring equinox, links

the young men's bodies and their regenerative power with the annual cycles of earthly renewal. Today and in the past, this movement accompanied forms of bodily self-sacrifice. In ancient times, captive-taking may have been a requirement of long-distance pilgrimage as well as self-mortification in the form of penile blood-letting on altar turtles, which embodied the movement of the sun and the passage of time.

For the contemporary Maya, the materials of vitality brought back from their pilgrimage to the coast were offered to Mam, their primordial Earth Lord and First Father. These fruits and flowers were gendered and personified and the kakaxtle or turtle shell filled with generative gifts was an animate impregnated earthly womb that had to be handled with utmost care. This heavy turtle-earth they carried on their backs signaled their role as the future replacement or *k'ex* for their First Father, Mam. In ancient times, such long-distance pilgrimages may have involved the transport of personified fruits and other goods such as marine products and portable cave formations—items that may have been gendered and personified with sexual potency and procreative power like they are today. Likewise, we conclude that both “real” and “artificial” turtles and phalli were involved in bloodletting activities that took place in the context of colonnaded and circular shrine buildings and may have functioned similarly in male–male initiation rites, aiding in both earthly regeneration and human fertility as young men prepared themselves for marriage and adulthood.

In the context of bloodletting and pilgrimage, the shared embodied experience of the young men engaged all of the senses, not as an individual body, but as a “community of being” or what Bird-David (2017: 20) describes elsewhere as the *pluripresence* of being. What emerged for young men as a collective outcome was knowing how their own self-sacrifice and reproductive power was intrinsically linked to the regeneration and renewal of life in the world; it was their bodily movement and blood that moistened and inseminated the earth. We argue that as a relational act, genital bloodletting onto the turtle-earth in ancient times did not just “symbolize” the onset of the rains and changing of the temperate seasons, but was a procreative act that was necessary for moistening the dry earth and germinating young seed each spring. Ancient Maya iconography, epigraphy, and linguistics further supports the close connections with rain, blood, and semen as life-giving fluids (Normark, 2000:21–22). Traditionalists in the Atiteco community tell us that the moistening of Mam as turtle-earth is an explicit sexual act. This idea could hardly have been introduced by the Spanish priests and seems more likely to be an ancient concept.

Stanzione describes Mam as “Lord of Sexual Heat” and concludes, “Mam is the lord of this unbridled ripened sexual heat, which human maturation brings to fruition in the face of their children. Mam is also the heat that brings the fruit of the earth to fruition” (Stanzione, 2003: 57). These human-fruit parallels are not just double entendre or abstract metaphor, but are relationally constituted aspects of one another. The fruit that the young men bring up from the coast are ripened by the sacred heat of Mam, which is not something separate from themselves, but

is the lustful heat manifest within themselves through their own longing and abstinence from sexual relations. This is why it was not just the divine work of Mam to let his blood or heat, but the work of all young men. In this way, Maya pilgrimage was a sexual act coinciding with springtime to ensure the timing of insemination and regeneration of both humans and the earth. We conclude that for the Maya, both pilgrimage and human sexuality are and have always been mutually interdependent sacrifices with and for Mam. As inherently relational practices, both pilgrimage and sexual relations are bodily movements that are multisensory and pluripresent and embody ambulatory knowing.

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