Resplendent Reflections and Divine Dreams of Flower Worlds:

Indigenous Art, Spirituality, Cosmic Renewal, and Transcendent Lived Experience in Mesoamerica

A monograph by

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Figure 1. (previous page). “B’alun Ik’ u k’uhul k’ab’a K’in siyaj yax k’uhul ch’ok utiy Nikte’ Witz u k’abiy Ix Uh”
Polymer Clay, Jade, Obsidian, Conch Shell, Quartz, Pyrite, all attached to a cloth and wood backing, 2018-2022.

The classic Maya hieroglyphic sentence depicted on the sides of the mountain was chosen to serve as the name of the sculpture work itself (since said glyphs essentially explain the image), though phonetically written in the Latin alphabet, and can be translated as:

“Nine Wind is the sacred name of the day when the new sacred sprout was born, it happened at Flower Mountain, and it was overseen by the Lady of the Moon."

Both the sculpture and the monograph that compose the present project are dedicated to: my beloved parents, for their unbreakable will, perseverance, and hard work, which in turn inspired me to work harder and more carefully than ever before in order to conscientiously complete this project; illegal immigrants who faithfully take dire risks and leave their homeland and loved ones behind in search of a better life; bãdis (or traditional healers) who maintain the ancestral Hñähñu and Yùhu (Otomí) spiritual practices alive, like Don Manuel and Doña Zenaida in Santa Ana Hueytlalpan and many others in places like San Bartolo Tutotepec, not far from my hometown in the state of Hidalgo, Mexico; Indigenous people across the Americas, who have been resisting oppression by the powers that be for over five hundred years, and who maintain enough resilience to survive, thrive, and keep going; and lastly, to a very special family member who is a traditional healer, and whose guidance, wisdom, divine gift of healing, and spiritual strength, have revealed Flower Worlds in the immediacy of direct experience for numerous people, including myself, even long before I knew what concepts like sacredness or Flower Worlds were. Per her request, her identity will be kept anonymous.

Land Acknowledgement

Iowa City and Cedar Rapids, the stolen land areas of present-day Iowa where I have been living and making the present sculpture and written work, are ancestral Sauk and Meskwaki, Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Dakota Sioux), Báxoje Máyaⁿ (Ioway), and Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo) land. If we lived in accordance with true justice and fairness, substantial reparations would be made at once, and these and all other systematically relinquished lands would be immediately returned to living Indigenous peoples, the rightful overseers of these sacred lands. Hopefully this is done before the dominant and deadly capitalist culture of insatiable greed irremediably destroys these lands on which humans and other-than-human beings of all kinds depend. The written and sculpted works presented here were only made possible precisely because past and present Indigenous peoples across the Americas have maintained the prodigious flame of ancestral traditions alive. My most heartfelt gratitude for said honorable and noble people, who's innumerable and profound contributions immensely enrich the human experience across the world. I respectfully support the protection and preservation of sacred lands and ancestral traditions.

Introductory Remarks

By producing the present monograph and related sculpture, my aim is to showcase important systems of values and meaning as traditionally developed and maintained throughout Mesoamerica by past and present Indigenous people. The composition of this written work might seem odd due to the lack of a conventional structure, especially since there is no thesis or conclusion. I do not aspire to prove any theory or substantiate any argument. The closest approximation to a thesis would be that Indigenous people's systems of relations sustained with the environment are viable alternatives for us living in this global society, although to my mind this is a clear fact, as elaborated on by several of the scholars whose work I have studied. Because this monograph is not technically a scholarly one, I only add citations when directly quoting others, but not in-text or otherwise. However, the consulted bibliography is properly provided at the end. Generally, the information is presented to explain the imagery and meanings directly integrated into the sculpture, while additional detailed facts are provided for a more proper contextualization, all in order to supply the viewer with an approximation to a holistic understanding of the work. Given the complexity of utilizing copyrighted images, I only provide my own photographs and my own ink illustrations. In regard to the illustrations, I tried my best to draw Maya art accurately, but I still ended up being a bit off on some of them. Their inclusion in the present work is intended for reference only, so the reader should look up other illustrations by more specialized scholars, like those found at FAMSI, the Linda Schele Drawing Collection, Andrea Stone and Mark Zender's "Reading Maya Art," Harri Kettunen and Christophe Helmke's "Introduction to Maya Hieroglyphs," and Alexandre Tokovinine's "Beginner's Visual Catalog of Maya Hieroglyphs." In general, I highly encourage the reader to look up the various artworks, architecture, people, characters, and narratives I talk about here, as well as the sources mentioned in the bibliography. Although for the most part everything is woven together within the monograph, the only information I claim as mine is the one given when I provide my personal experience (which is mostly in the introductory chapter) and when formally describing the sculpture, while the vast majority derives from the sources that compose the bibliography.

While I do have some Indigenous blood in me, some of it is of European origin too, although I do not know the specifics. When living in Mexico, I was raised in a non-traditional environment, one in which people strived to align themselves with Western capitalist values of economic growth out of necessity, along with Christian and Catholic religious views out of institutionalized pressure. As for my part, I never really felt identified with these colonizing and modernist ideals I was surrounded with while growing up. Besides making sculptures, it has been oral traditions, the Moon, and the general beauty of that which in Western culture is often called nature, that have captivated my attention, delighted my senses, and enchanted my mind for as long as I can remember. Also, a healer in my mom's family side kept various traditional expressions close to our lives. Still, because Indigenous groups in the area consider people who grow practicing the traditions and speaking the language and who are less mixed with non-indigenous blood as truly Indigenous, I respectfully do not publicly claim indigenous identity (even though I do identify more with Indigenous ways and values in my personal life). However, I do recognize my ethnicity to be, like a large number of Mexican people, mixed. Although my family is not financially rich, I have had the privilege of experiencing economic and social stability for the most part throughout my life, all thanks to my parent's unyielding hard work ethic. My family and I were incredibly fortunate to obtain authorization to legally move to the US, all thanks to my parents' perseverance throughout the tedious and expensive legalization process. But I have not failed to notice the multitude of problems and shortcomings that people, and especially Indigenous people, experience due to not being as fortunate as me. There is not

much I can do about these unfortunate situations. Still, through my work, I intend to raise awareness of the incalculable value of both the traditional systems of relations maintained with the environment and the Indigenous people who keep such traditions alive.

In the past few decades, there has been a growing interest in appreciating, understanding, and reclaiming important aspects of the rich Indigenous heritage of Mexico, which according to the official state narrative, is considered to be an essential component of the cultural identity of all Mexican people. According to such views, Indigenous material and nonmaterial creations, past and present, constitute the legacy of the Indigenous peoples who produce them and of their descendants, but also of Mexico as a nation, of Latin America, and ultimately, of all of humanity. However, this official narrative has been overseen and manipulated by the establishment, along with its affiliated institutions and people in positions of power who tend to be white or of European descendance, in order to legitimize and validate their privileged statuses, which is a practice reflected elsewhere in the world. These notions are also utilized by the establishment and its elites to substantiate the modern idea of Mexico as a political unity, an idea that does not reflect the reality nor the desires of all Indigenous groups in the region. It is precisely living Indigenous people themselves who are among the least benefited and the most harmed by such manipulated postulates, since often neither they, their interests, nor their well-being are taken into account. Such precarious circumstances are gradually changing, though not fast enough. Thankfully, there is a growing number of Indigenous leaders, scholars, and other mindful individuals working tirelessly to correct the situation while amplifying the voices of those who are oppressed and disenfranchised by the establishment. Of course, these circumstances are nothing new. For over five hundred years, Indigenous peoples across the Americas and beyond have been resisting the relentless onslaught of destruction and death unleashed on them, first through colonization and then through imperialism, industrialization, capitalism, globalization, and now the degradation of the world's biosphere through climate change. Nonetheless, Indigenous people maintain their ancestral traditions, adapt to the ever-changing conditions, and claim their fundamental birthright to exist and thrive as sovereign members of the world we all are part of. Accordingly, Indigenous material and nonmaterial creations, past and present, constitute the inalienable traditional legacy of the Indigenous peoples who produce them and of their living descendants. Since my work, written, drawn, and sculpted, is for the most part substantiated by Indigenous traditional creations, it belongs in part to me but also to the living descendants of the Indigenous peoples my work is inspired by. Therefore, I plan to give back to Indigenous communities near my hometown in Mexico and beyond to the best of my possibilities and in accordance with how well my sculptures are received in the art market. Now this has nothing to do with self-gratification or asking to be praised as something like a "Good Samaritan," but rather to legitimately give back. It is only fair that any person who takes from the creations of other people, especially when the latter live in disadvantaged and precarious circumstances, must not only be respectful of the original works but also give back in substantial ways to the original creators or their descendants. By implication, all the written works of academics and the visual works of artists that have been substantiated by the material and nonmaterial creations of Indigenous peoples, also belong to the living descendants of the Indigenous groups these works are based upon.

A growing number of well-meaning scholars labor to closely comprehend Indigenous traditions and dissipate misinformation, so that in turn the general public can properly understand and value Indigenous ways as well. However, it is quintessential to be mindful and respectful of Indigenous people, in order not to disclose everything one learns. There is a great amount of sensitive or esoteric information that traditional people of knowledge prefer to either maintain among themselves or among the cultural group that produces and maintains such information.

That is why I have diligently worked to include information provided by ethnography, history, and anthropology studies that in turn aligns with what traditional people of knowledge and related Indigenous people who are in the know themselves choose to reveal to outsiders. Additionally, based on the core cultural elements shared throughout Mesoamerica, I speak of Indigenous people mostly in general terms and provide specifics when necessary, but it is essential to acknowledge the complex heterogeneity of cultural manifestations and dynamics across spatial and temporal differences.

Although the situation with my background may render problematic for some the fact that my art practice is substantiated by Indigenous forms of expression, I have decided to move forward with the project, as said expressions are essential aspects of my cultural heritage. I feel so immensely inspired to honor and communicate the fantastic values and significance of Indigenous traditions and art through my work, that my whole being compels me to express myself. Furthermore, I feel a profound commitment to implement my capabilities and do the best that I can to share important aspects of Indigenous Old Ways through this project. Even though I am no one to tell anybody what to do or how to think, I do hope to inform, inspire, and enrich others with the present monograph and related sculpture, ideally close to the degrees to which my own life has been enriched by traditional Indigenous forms of expression. I primarily intend to promote and celebrate said Indigenous traditions, which evidence different and effective ways to exist as human beings in relation to the environment, and thus, provide viable alternatives to our ever-worsening human condition in today's global society, especially in regard to the escalating consequences of resource depletion, biosphere devastation, and climate change.

The ancestral traditions, which are often called Costumbres, or "Old Ways," among Indigenous peoples throughout Mesoamerica, are the systematic generation of social acts and intellectual processes, both of which are created in accordance with long-established ideological constructs. The Old Ways are perceived more accurately when they are understood as complex modalities of operation, which are constantly developed and implemented by people to navigate reality and, ultimately, to thrive in life. They are also the production of various actions and forms of interaction (with other people, other living beings, and even with larger processes of the world), that have evidenced their usefulness and efficacy throughout the ages. Traditions are continuously created and adapted in correspondence with the changing social and environmental circumstances, through the loss and gain of expendable secondary aspects, while essential primary elements are generally perpetuated. Mesoamerican signification systems reveal central axes of cognition and operation within traditional ways of life, through which people proactively sustain constant relations of reciprocity and balance with the habitat they experience themselves to be components of. For people who partake in these ancestral ways, living with such modalities of experience catalyzes spirited participation in, along with exalted celebration of, the environmental processes and cycles that sustain existence, with special emphasis on the renewal of the force of life on Earth. These features of Indigenous traditions effectively guide people to navigate reality with profound gratitude and respect for all the creatures and phenomena of the world they inhabit. This is indeed a more refined understanding of humanity's place, and a more authentic fulfillment of humanity's function, in relation to the other aspects and forces that make life possible. Naturally, one of the functions of these models of existence is the general modulation of human behavior and experience in regard to the world they are a part of. Just as it is necessary to generally consume what we would call natural resources, it is essential to only take what is needed, because overexploitation can bring disastrous consequences, such as those now experienced on an unprecedented global scale.

General Acknowledgements

In one way or another, I owe my deepest gratitude to the invaluable love, support, inspiration, hard work, and encouragement provided by numerous people, including family, friends, patrons, traditional ritual specialists, mentors, teachers, and researchers. This project would not have been possible without all of them. From the bottom of my heart, I thank my parents, Ursula and Narciso Sr, and my sisters Miriam and Guadalupe, for always being there for me as four pillars that sustain my immediate corner of the cosmos with their transcendent and immanent love. I deeply thank my cousins Leonardo Jr, Juan Manuel, and Jesus, along with my dear friend Alejandro, for kindly assisting me in acquiring important books in Mexico. Immense thanks to my cousins Juan Pedro and Adriana, as well as my uncle Leonardo Sr, for assisting me in visiting various archaeological sites, mountains, and other sacred places in Mexico. My heartfelt gratitude goes out to Alejandro, Eduardo, Carlos, Kenny, Taylor, Gabe, Shelly, John, Kalmia, Alicia, Mel, David, Jane, Madelyn, Elissa, Nat, Charlie, Caitlin, Zach, Ella, Ivonne, Jay, Jan, Tyler, Ryan, Kate, Maddie, Hadiza, Ray, Jared, Kane, Joe, Megan, Anna, and several other friends for all the precious moments I have shared with each, especially when getting together for art-making sessions. Even though I have distanced myself from most people, they all still occupy very special places in my mind and heart. A very significant thank you goes out to Elissa, Andriy, Carlos, Taylor, Leigha, Ryan, Abigail, and Carl, for being kind enough to commission sculptures from me. Throughout the years, many researchers have worked very hard to respectfully understand Indigenous traditions, and especially in recent times, some have even strived to decolonize anthropology and ethnography. It is thanks to their collective labors that I have been able to compose the present monograph and sculpture. I must express my immense gratitude for the exemplary work of many scholars, especially that of Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez, Maarten Jansen, Alfredo López Austin, Miguel León-Portilla, Erik Velásquez García, Sergio Gómez Chávez, Katarzyna Mikulska, Karl Taube, Allen Christenson, Simon Martin, Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos, Andrew Finegold, Federico Navarrete, Linda Schele, Mary E. Miller, Patricia Gallardo Arias, Andrea Stone, Mark Zender, John M. D. Pohl, Carol Diaz-Granados, F. Kent Reilly III, Kelley Hays-Gilpin, Andrew Sherer, David Freidel, Stephen Houston, David Stuart, Nikolai Grube, Christophe Helmke, Gabrielle Vail, Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, Robert S. Carlsen, Martin Prechtel, and Leonardo López Luján. Despite the excellent work this monograph is based on, and despite my own diligence to be respectful of the information and people being studied when writing it, there are aspects of it that certainly remain erroneous, confusing, or inadequate. Any shortcomings present here or in the sculpture are my own fault only. If there is anything that should be changed, omitted, or corrected, I would be happy to do so once properly notified.

Catalysts: Background, Methodology, Calendrics, and the Old Ways

The sculpture half of this project is the most elaborate work I have ever put together, in terms of both visuals and significance. The iconography and meanings integrated there originate from cosmovisions that have evolved during the different time periods of Mesoamerican Indigenous cultural development, from the ancient Formative era to the present, with an emphasis on the expressions of Classic Maya peoples. Indeed, the composite image was elaborated from a variety of ancestral narratives, ideologies, philosophies, and signification systems, many of which still form integral parts of Indigenous living traditions and experiences in our times. Occupying center stage in the sculpture's composition is a very important cosmogonic occurrence: the birth of a sacred tree (i.e. World Tree, Cosmic Tree, Flowery Tree) at a primordial mountain (i.e. Mountain of Sustenance, Flower Mountain, Water Mountain). According to Mesoamerican traditions, the mountain is a divine embodiment of the fertile Earth, while the tree incarnates the precious new sprout that came out of the mountain's summit as the origin of life during creation times. This was among the most momentous events of the latest world creation or world renewal process, and it was essential for the beginning of the current era and the advent of humanity. Other allegories corresponding to the one summarized above have existed for millennia as fundamental episodes of creation accounts, not only among the Maya and other groups across Mesoamerica, but also among other Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas, and they still survive in present times at varying degrees and in various forms. The superficial details and the narratives themselves may differ from one place or time to another, especially after merging with the Judeo-Christian tradition out of necessity through the violent and destructive process of colonization, but the core ideals and essences of the underlying conceptual constructs are manifested similarly cross-culturally. A quintessential dimension of meaning found within these Indigenous allegories and signification systems focuses on deeply venerated natural processes as traditionally perceived: the plant sprouting from the mountain is conceived of as an exemplary manifestation of the cosmic force of vitality rising resurrected from underworldly realms. After undergoing death, overcoming it (through replication, reproduction, and/or transfiguration), and after reintegrating the generative powers of revitalization and growth, the force of life re-emerges through the earthly plane and ascends into higher orders of existence. Through this divine process of development and renewal, the force of vitality, as a prodigious aspect of the transcendent and immanent energy-in-motion that composes all of reality, sanctifies the world with its inherent sacred essences. In turn, this wondrous process is an integral component of the universal operating system that makes Flower Worlds exist as deified dimensions of beauty, healing, fertility, abundance, flourishing, and divine renewal of the ever-unfolding living cosmos. In Mesoamerica, and throughout the Indigenous Americas, the forces and processes that generated and maintain the cycle of life renewal in motion, have long been and still are elevated to divine status of the highest degree.

The place where I am originally from, the present state of Hidalgo in Central Mexico, is inhabited by groups of Indigenous people who speak the Huasteca Hidalguense variants of Nahuatl and Yùhu (Otomí), along with the Valle Del Mezquital variant of the Hñähñu (Otomí) language, and they have lived in the area since ancient times. There are also important archaeological sites located within the state, such as the Classic period Huapalcalco near my hometown, and the Early Postclassic site of Tula. In all likelihood, the ancestors of the present-day Hñähñu and Yùhu had a significant role in the development of these and other sacred sites in Central Mexico, prominent among them, Teotihuacan. The name of the town where I am originally from is Totoapa, which derives from the Nahuatl toponym Totoapan, and it can be

translated as “Place of Birds” (Muñoz, Alejandro, personal communication, 2021). Indeed, since the town is located on a relatively low valley, various creeks provide water, the temperature tends to be cooler, and vegetation is more abundant than in the surrounding higher areas, the place attracts a large variety of bird species. However, only in recent years have I learned most of the facts just mentioned. Never did I actively try to learn about my cultural ancestry or about Indigenous traditions when I lived in Mexico though, as it was unfortunately barely encouraged of me to do so in the nontraditional social climate in which I grew up, where aligning with Western ideals of modernity was prioritized. A marked division was maintained between what were conceived of as the right steps to take for progressing in today's society and traditional ways of life, such as those of Indigenous peoples, with the latter being deemed antiquated and unworthy of attention for the most part. At best, some people had a rough understanding that as Mexicans, we are a cultural mix of Indigenous, African, and European descent, but virtually no one looked for further details. Upper-class people, on the other hand, usually descend mostly from Spanish or other European ancestors and often expressed pride in doing so. The religious tendency was to gravitate towards Christianity and Catholicism while disregarding Indigenous spiritual practices, with intense conversion campaigns that often demonize the latter still conducted today. The trend of trying to learn more about one’s ancestry and cultural legacy, exemplified by either researching the topic or sending blood samples to specialized companies for detailed information, is fairly recent where I am from. Even though Indigenous and Afro-descendant cultures form integral parts of Mexican identity, only bits of the former two, like loose pieces from a mysterious puzzle, were ever taught at school or mentioned elsewhere when I was a kid living in Mexico. As far as I understand, this is still the case, not only in my hometown, but throughout Mexico at large, with the exception of traditional groups and communities who actively labor to maintain the traditional Old Ways and, along with cultural educators, work to communicate the values these carry for the younger generations.

When I was 15 years old, my father, who had been living and working in the US for several years, was finally able to get residency documents for my mom, my two sisters, and myself, and so we all moved to the US in search of a better life. Only after moving to the US, learning English, and later taking a couple of college anthropology classes about Mesoamerican nations, did I start to immerse myself, slowly but surely, in the great mysteries of Indigenous cultural expressions and their invaluable legacy, which still survive today among numerous Indigenous communities. These classes were mainly concerned with the past and present Maya peoples who inhabit southern Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Western Honduras. The term Mesoamerica is used in academia to define a large multicultural area, which extends more or less from Central America to the northern Mexican states of Sinaloa and Durango. Mesoamerica’s history is roughly divided into five major periods: Archaic (8000 BCE to 3000 BCE), Preclassic or Formative (3000 BCE to 200 CE), Classic (200 CE to 900 CE), Postclassic (900 ACE to 1521 CE), and modern times (1521 CE to the present). The Olmec, Maya, Teotihuacan, Toltec, and Mexica (popularly known by the post-colonial generalizing term Aztec), were key ancient civilizations that gave rise to many other cultures that still survive to the present day, like various Maya communities, along with those of the Nahua, Ñuu Dzaui (Mixtec), Wixáritari (Huichol), Yùhu (Otomí), and many more. But of all the native cultures in the Mesoamerican territory, the Classic Maya societies had the most spectacular instances of cultural flourishing, as evidenced by the archeological record. Through college classes and independent studies over the years, the Maya have been revealed to me as linguistically related groups of farming peoples who, through effectively applied methods of cultural growth across large periods of time, achieved prosperity and continued to develop, to the point of being placed today among the ancient world's most sophisticated civilizations. The Maya developed highly complex hieroglyphic writing systems

(arguably the most complex writing systems ever created), calculated the varying positions of the celestial bodies as seen from the Earth with unmatched precision, achieved a profound knowledge of cosmic cycles, and were intimately familiarized with the complex processes of their natural surroundings. Above all the wondrous qualities and achievements of past and present Mesoamerican peoples, their fantastic artistic traditions and the relationship systems sustained with the environment captivated me the most and continue to do so with ever greater magnitudes. Despite focusing on one Mesoamerican culture, one can still obtain significant insights into the worldviews of other Indigenous peoples through comparison within this region, since all share core characteristics.

Cultural exchange has been an integral social practice across Mesoamerica, as has been the case around the world. The assimilation of foreign customs into one's own systems of cognition and operation can be a passive process. It can also be a conscious act, an effort to enrich oneself by conserving and assimilating important components from a tradition outside one's own. Since times immemorial, Indigenous nations have sustained interactions across the vast distances of the Americas in the form of trade, tribute, wars, migrations, peregrinations, etc. Ritual practices, spirituality, and signification systems, all of which are composed of underlying central characteristics shared by a great number of Indigenous peoples, are among the most prominent examples of the effects of these multicultural networks. Although the delirious diversity of customs and traditions present in Mesoamerica is celebrated by most cultures who inhabit it, the widespread expressions of analogous core elements culturally unite the peoples in said region. Furthermore, the recurring essential similarities evidence all these traditions emerged from a very ancient but common origin: a primordial cosmovision with unified systems of signification and spirituality, which were created in remote prehistoric times, gradually transforming and ramifying throughout the ages and across the Americas into the multitude of variants known today. The systems of spiritual practices and worldviews of the Maya are more authentically accounted for if they are acknowledged as manifestations of deeply rooted Indigenous traditions in the Mesoamerican area. Even in our times, these conventions undergo constant change and influence one another through the continuous interaction of people who exchange ideas, practices, and goods.

Iowa City and Cedar Rapids, the Iowa areas of stolen Indigenous land where I have been living and making the present work, are about an hour away from Tama County. Tama has been inhabited by people of the Meskwaki Nation since the mid eighteen hundreds when they began purchasing land and settling there. It is worth remarking that, thanks to the wisdom, vision, and hard work of their ancestors, as continued into the present, the Meskwaki thrive as a sovereign and free Indigenous nation. Like innumerable other Native Indigenous nations throughout the Americas, the Meskwaki people were driven off their original lands by the relentlessly destructive expansion of colonizing groups of European origin and descent. What is now called Iowa is the ancestral original home of people of the Sauk and Meskwaki, Ihanktonwan (Yankton Sioux), Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Dakota Sioux), Báxoje Máyan (Ioway), Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo), 𐓏𐒰𐓓𐒰𐓓𐒻 (Osage), and Jiwere (Otoe), nations, until the majority of them were displaced and systematically removed from their motherland. In turn, the prehistoric homelands of some of these cultural groups were originally located near the eastern areas of the Great Lakes and along the Mississippi River. Present-day Iowa is located between two major North American cultural zones, northwest of what has been called the Eastern Woodlands and East of the so-called Great Planes. Like Mesoamerica, the Eastern Woodlands and the Great Planes were composed of culturally and linguistically diverse populations who nevertheless shared core concepts of ritualism, ideology, spirituality, and cosmology, all in turn emerging out of an ancestral tradition developed from times immemorial. Archaeological remains of Eastern Woodlands peoples'

presence are quite rich, with important ancient sacred sites, earthworks, artifacts, and artworks found mainly near rivers in the Southeast and Midwest areas of present-day USA, such as Effigy Mounds National Monument in Iowa, the ancient city of Cahokia in Illinois, and Picture Cave in Missouri, but also as far West as the highly significant site of Spiro in Oklahoma, and beyond. Some of the earliest clear evidence of Woodlands cultural development dates back to around 3,500 BCE and can be found in the site called Watson Brake, located in present-day Louisiana. The site is composed of astronomically aligned earthworks or earthen mounds likely utilized for ritual purposes. However, the earliest earthen mounds built in North America, which are also located in Louisiana, have been recently dated to around 9,000 BCE and were constructed by the predecessors of the Woodlands cultures. But the most complex, influential, and most developed of these ancient Woodlands peoples that can be counted among North America's classic cultures, were the Mississippians, as referred to in the literature. The Mississippian period of Woodland cultural development extended roughly from around 800 ACE to around 1600 ACE, and mainly revolved around important and large ceremonial centers such as Cahokia, Moundville, Etowah, and Spiro. By far the largest quantity of decorated Mississippian ritual implements was found at the most important earthwork constructed at Spiro, the so-called Craig Mound, specifically at Spirit Lodge, which is a sacred chamber built within the mound. Spirit Lodge was filled with thousands of embellished artifacts brought from areas throughout the Eastern Woodlands, the Great Planes, and beyond, and all were carefully arranged both to express a grand narrative of world creation and to effectively transform the space into a sanctified environment of atemporal ritual activity, or as referred to by researchers such as David Freidel, an eternal performance.

Although Mesoamerica is located at a great distance from the Eastern Woodlands, there are a couple of pieces of material evidence of transcontinental contact between these cultural areas: a piece of obsidian, originally from Otumba, near Teotihuacan, was found at Cahokia, and another piece of obsidian, originally from Pachuca, Hidalgo, was found at Spiro. Beyond the archaeological record, there are several cultural traits Mississippian peoples have in common with peoples from Mesoamerica, and to an extent even with South American peoples, such as the presence of divine heroic twin agents along with horned and feathered serpents in narratives, ancestor worship practices and related world renewal ritualism, general tripartite vertical division and quadripartite horizontal sectioning of the cosmos, as well as an intimate relationship with, and profound veneration for, the environment. Just as in Mesoamerica, comparing the iconography of the ancestral Mississippians with the imagery, worldviews, and oral traditions of their living descendants, has allowed for a substantial understanding of the signification systems of this ancient civilization. The abundant Mississippian art, earthworks, and other ritual implements were created by the venerable ancestors of many of today's Native American peoples, such as the Sauk and Meskwaki, Caddo, 𐓏𐒰𐓓𐒰𐓓𐒷 (Osage), Chahta Yakni (Choctaw), ᏣᎳᎫᏪᏘᏱ Tsalaguwetiyi (Cherokee), Lakȟótiyapi (Lakota), and Chikashsha I̱yaakni' (Chickasaw), to name a few. Indeed, Mississippian graphic elements evidence clear correspondences with the material and nonmaterial traditional creations of these and numerous other North American Indigenous nations. A vast variety of ancient works were graced by master creators with prodigious images of Earthmother (also called Spider Woman), Morning Star (also called Hawk), sacred animals such as thunderbirds and underwater panthers, and many others that are still produced today, demonstrating cultural continuity between the past and the present. The extraordinary survival of Native American traditions and the resilient people who maintain them are rendered more significant when considering the relentlessly violent genocide and eradication processes they have been subjected to since European colonialism started developing in the Americas and up until very recent years, including displacement from originally occupied lands, degrading religious conversion practices, purposely inflicted diseases, forceful placement

of children into abusive boarding schools, sexual abuse, racism, terrorism, massacres, systematic oppression, transgenerational trauma, and general disenfranchisement. The horrible amounts of suffering and death inflicted on Indigenous peoples across the Americas through the process of colonization and its derivatives are appalling. Besides the currently unfolding climate change crisis, one of the most shameful and nightmarish tragedies in human history is the subjugation process by which European nations, along with people, institutions, and societies of European descent, have exploited Indigenous land and people, not only in the Americas, but also throughout the African continent, Oceania, and Southeastern Asia. Even after all this immense suffering and death, Indigenous people continue to resist the colonialism-derived capitalism and globalization systems, by righteously claiming their place in the world and maintaining the ancestral traditions, both of which are inalienable birthrights. Native artists, artisans, and creators in general produce works that bear elements of signification systems passed down since extreme antiquity, from past generations to the current ones, as evidenced in major recent exhibitions, such as “Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists” and “Recovering Ancient Spiro: Native American Art, Ritual, and Cosmic Renewal,” among others.

Figure 2a

Figure 2b

Figure 2c

Figure 2d

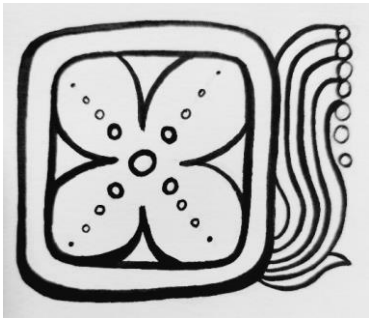


Figure 2e

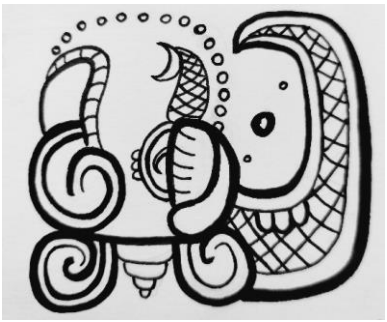


Figure 2f

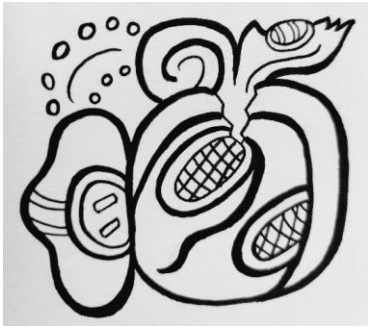
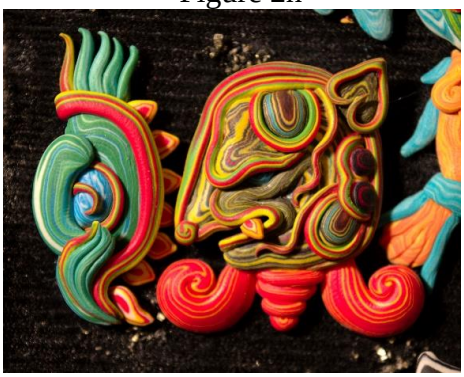
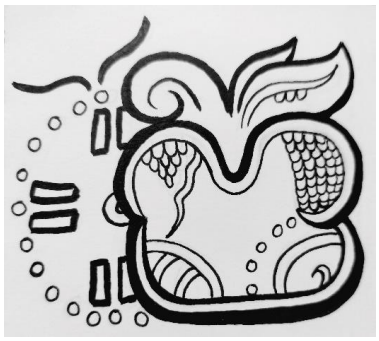


Figure 2g

Figure 2h





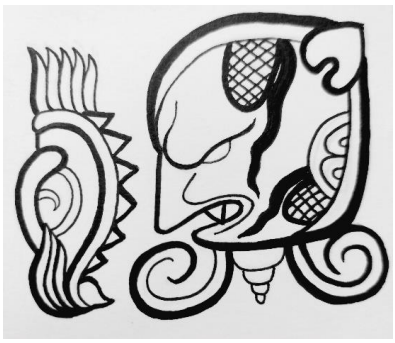


Figure 2i

Figure 2 a-i. Individual pictures of the sculpture's hieroglyphs with their respective drawings.

Once again, the glyphic passage in my sculpture reads as follows:

B'alun Ik' (Figure 2a) *u k'uhul k'ab'a* (Figure 2b) *K'in* (Figure 2c) *siyaj* (Figure 2d) *yax k'uhul ch'ok* (Figure 2e) *utiy* (Figure 2f) *Nikte' Witz* (Figure 2g) *u k'abiy* (Figure 2h) *Ix Uh* (Figure 2i)

As previously stated, this can be translated as:

"Nine Wind is the sacred name of the day when the new sacred sprout was born, it happened at Flower Mountain, and it was overseen by the Lady of the Moon."

Just as in the ancient Classic Maya sculptural tradition, the visual work presented here is composed of text and image. This is the first time I make a sentence that nears coherent concordance with traditional conventions of Mayan hieroglyphic writing systems. My glyphic text and the overall sculpture both focus on the emergence of a sacred World Tree at the Mountain of Sustenance, which is one of the main events of pan-Mesoamerican cosmogonic accounts. In the text, I associate this auspicious event with the date *B'alun Ik'* (or *B'olon Ik'*), which translates to "Nine Wind/Breath," but can also be read as "Many Winds" in non-calendric contexts (Figure 2a). Ik' is the second of a series of 20 day names that, along with 13 numbers, compose the framework of the ancient 260-day ritual calendar, which is referred to as "The Ordering (or Counting) of Days" among both the present Maya and the ancient Mexica (Aztec), or *Tzolk'in* and *Tonalpohualli* respectively. In Classic Maya inscriptions, it is common to find a day name from the 260-day ritual calendar, followed by a date from the *Ha'b* (or *Haab*) cycle, the latter of which is the 365-day solar calendar. When applied together, the *Tzolk'in* and the *Ha'b* calendars composed a more complete date that could be precisely located in what anthropologists call the "Calendar Round," a larger cycle of 52 years. In turn, these calendars were utilized in combination with others, like the cycles of the planet Venus and the cycles of the

Moon, to come up with more intricate and accurate calendric systems, as well as more complex and profound elaborations of meaning. For divining and recording even larger dates, the Classic Maya implemented the Long Count system, which spans cycles of 5,126 years. In order to register and divine time in the deep past or deep future, they applied the vast Grand Long Count, which spans a mind-boggling time period of over seventy-one octillion years. That is 71,803,130,579,762,893,154,680,634,776 years to be exact. Therefore, the Grand Long Count's starting date occurred eons before our universe began, and its end date will happen eons far after it ceases to exist. These calendric systems, along with other complex signification constructs, can be difficult to understand in their intricate and elaborate depths, although a fuller picture of them approaches ever closer as research advances. A phenomenal work in this regard, and a major source for the aforementioned general information about the workings of Indigenous calendars, is David Stuart's book, "The Order of Days." Only a day name from the 260-day divinatory calendar is present in my sculpture's glyphic sentence, and as a partial date, it cannot be found within the great Calendar Round cycle. When an ambiguous date is presented in this manner, calendric precision is sacrificed so that the emphasis can be placed on the meanings and qualities related to the numbered day name, as well as its intrinsic associations with other dates of great importance, usually divine or transcendent in nature. In fact, Erik Velásquez García tells us that, at times, Classic period Maya inscriptions include dates that are arithmetically impossible. That is to say, according to the way the mathematical conjunctions of the different time periods occur in the calendar, these special dates would not even be possible. More than calculation errors, these extraordinary dates present time as it occurs in non-ordinary cosmic dimensions. Another possibility is that these dates come from an older calendric system, alternative and maybe complimentary to the standard calendars implemented during the Classic period.

It is difficult to overstate the prominence that calendric reckonings, along with the elaborations of signification associated with them, have had throughout Mesoamerica. The diverse calendars shared in the area have been in fact among the quintessential cultural axes around which Mesoamerican peoples have revolved for millennia. The 260-day ritual calendar is still implemented for divination, healing, and other practices by traditional specialists of ritualism and spirituality in the present, and together with Indigenous languages still spoken today, it is one of the most important manifestations of Indigenous identity survival in Mexico and Central America. In "Time and the Ancestors," Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez and Maarten Jansen explain how in this calendric system, each number and day name combination that compose a date manifest paired qualities and associations, which in turn are based on deified universal forces, along with other important principles and characteristics of the world that significantly affect and shape existence. Indeed, the essence of these ancestral calendars in Mesoamerica is the human experience itself, as well as the relationship systems that intimately interweave the lives of people with their environment and the cosmos at large. Since the earliest times, the traditional calendric systems have been prime agents for structuring social and spiritual practices: every passing day and night get related to certain themes of historic or otherworldly nature, sets of patron deities, as well as cosmological and cosmogonic concepts. For instance, the sacred 260-day ritual calendar can be divided into four parts, each linked to one of the four horizontal directions of the world as anchored around the cosmic center. In turn, this quadripartite spatial arrangement is determined by the regularly varying positions of the Moon, the planets, the Sun, and the other stars, through daily and yearly cycles as perceived from the Earth. As much as space is organized based on time's ongoing unfolding, temporal cycles themselves are inherently ordered through the spatial dimension when their passage is marked (which is to say, time and space substantiate one another). This calendric relationship with the universal order of space evidences that the dimension of time essentially permeates the entirety

of the cosmos, an idea not too distant from that of the space-time continuum in today's scientific theories. For the Ñuu Dzaui (Mixtec) and Nahua cultures, the first name designated in a person's life was the same as the name of their day of birth, their calendar name, which determined the parameters of a person's personality, life journey, and ultimate destiny. For example, in the case of the name of the famous Ñuu Dzaui lord and cultural hero, Eight Deer Jaguar Claw, the first part comes from the name of the date on which the ruler was born, the sacred calendar day Eight Deer, while Jaguar Claw is comparable to a personalized prestigious title, earned for outstanding military labors and exceptional prowess in otherworldly endeavors. The complex calendric systems have been instrumental not only for recording events, knowing the passage of the dry and rainy seasons, and establishing quantifiable temporality in general, but have also been quintessential for understanding and engaging with the diverse cosmic cycles and processes influencing life, for properly ordering humanity in the grand scheme of things, and for the composition of ever more elaborate and practical signification constructs. Virtually all ritual endeavors and spiritual practices, including anything from sorcery, to divination, and healing, have long been traditionally mediated at varying degrees in accordance with the varying positions of celestial bodies as seen from the Earth and the workings of the calendars. A great majority of the remaining ancient Indigenous texts, literature, and sacred scriptures, from the earliest Preclassic glyphs to the Late Postclassic and early colonial period documents, are either focused on the calendar systems, feature dates prominently, or at least reference time and its continuous influence.

Now the attention is focused back on the date in my sculpture, *B'alun Ik'*, or "Nine Wind" (Figure 2a). The main component of the standard version of the Maya *ik'* hieroglyph is the so-called "T" shape enclosed inside a cartouche (see Figure 39c). This graphic element relates the day name to an ancient wind divinity, Ik' K'uh or "Wind Deity," who, according to researchers, was associated with rain cloud-bearing winds, the force of vitality as breath (akin to the idea of the "breath as soul"), as well as beautiful and pleasant things and phenomena, such as flowers, music, and the paradisiacal realms known by the general term Flower Worlds in the literature. During days named Ik' and the month Mak, this entity functioned as the presiding divinity of the dates. On the other hand, nine was a very important and auspicious number throughout Mesoamerica. One of the associated concepts of this numeral was cosmic order: generally speaking, underworldly realms were composed of what can be conceptualized as nine superimposed levels. When Classic Maya scribes depicted calendar dates, both number and day name parts could be substituted by the heads or the full bodies of the divinities identified with each corresponding part. The number nine could be expressed by the deity provisionally named Yax B'alun, who was a major participant in several primordial events of world creation, and was also a kind of owner, or perhaps ruler, of the forest animals and of wilderness at large. At the sacred city of Lakamha (present-day site of Palenque, Mexico), very important historical and transcendent events occur during Nine Wind dates, some of which are: the rebirth of important divinities into higher orders of being after cosmic creation; the very foundation of Lakamha itself; and the ascension of prominent royal people and deities into power, along with other important associations from this and other urban centers in the Maya area. For the Ñuu Dzaui people of Postclassic Oaxaca, Nine Wind was the calendar name of the great Mesoamerican Plumed Serpent, known by the Nahua of Central Mexico as Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, who was a major deity associated with ancestry, wisdom, the arts, raincloud bearing winds, and the breath of life, as well as the creation and renewal of the cosmos, among other essential elaborations of meaning. Four red-yellow flowers shown emitting breath scrolls and marked with the Nine Wind date are included on the sides of the mountain in my sculpture. Then there is the central flowering tree, which, although not marked with the date, is presented as the sprouting plant

mentioned in the glyphic text, and its central flower emits breath scrolls just like the other four to the sides. These outwardly spiraling volutes also signify wind and breath, and in Maya art, the Ik' icon and these scrolls can substitute for one another (see Figures 1 and 32). These five floral elements allude to a sacred place of cosmogonic significance, named Five Flower Place in glyphic writing, as the setting or location where the Maize Deity was born. Moreover, the fivefold plant arrangement is also a direct reference to Mesoamerican worldviews and signification systems regarding the horizontal quadripartite organization of the world and the cosmic center, in which four divine trees facilitate the movement of sacred essences between universal domains, as the *axis mundi* establishes temporal and spatial order while sustaining all of existence.

My sculpture's narrative is in part fictitious, and in its present configuration, does not appear in the known corpus of art made by ancient or contemporary Indigenous people of Mesoamerica. Instead, the included graphic elements have been portrayed over and over again, often with corresponding meanings but with substituting components, all of which vary depending on the artist or patron's intended messages. For instance, as far as I am aware, the concepts of the Nine Wind date, the World Tree, and the Mountain of Sustenance, are depicted as part of the same visual narrative only in the so-called Group of the Cross, an architectural complex located in the sacred city of Lakamha (Palenque), in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. In that fantastic work of Maya architecture and art, the day name, the tree, and the mountain are linked, although only tangentially, through the elaborate images and texts sculpted on the similarly designed stone tablets set within the inner chambers of the three temples that compose the Cross Group. According to the work of various researchers, including Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos as well as David and George Stuart, the glyphic passages of each tablet are related to their corresponding sets of double portraits of the great Lakamha ruler, K'inich Kan Bahlam, presenting offerings before major iconographic compounds that evoke divine primordial origins and universal order. At the Temple of the Cross, one of the central foci of the tablet's narrative is the celestial resurrection of the main patron deity of Lakamha, an aquatic being provisionally called GI who is associated with the first dawning Sun. This account of divine rebirth is said to occur during an extremely remote day named Nine Wind. Other important events also happen during dates with this same numbered day name throughout the accompanying text. At the tablet's center, K'inich Kan Bahlam is depicted twice, as a youth and an adult, standing before a prodigious portrayal of the World Tree's eastern aspect, which has been called the Resplendent Jewel Tree and is one of the main inspirations for my sculpture's main tree. Just like in my sculpture, the eastern tree grows there from the Quadripartite Badge, a very important iconographic assemblage connected to concepts of self-sacrificial bloodletting, divine birth and rebirth, the sunrise along with the world direction where it occurs, burnt offerings, and paradigmatic ritual acts established in primordial times by the creator deities. In Maya art, GI is sometimes portrayed wearing the Badge as a headdress. Nearby, at the Temple of the Foliated Cross, there is a more direct connection between the precious mountain and the tree. Two more portraits of Kan Bahlam are shown here, this time standing between a bejeweled deified maize plant growing out of the waters of creation. A very possible reading of the name of this arboreal deity is K'an Nahb' Ixiimte', or "Precious Sea Maize Tree/Plant." One of the portraits presents Kan Bahlam dressed like the Maize Deity and standing on top of the Mountain of Sustenance itself. Maize foliation comes out of the divine mountain's cleft, and it appears as if Kan Bahlam also emerges from it, but in the living image of the Maize Deity. Later on, I will elaborate more on the resurrection associations that GI and the Maize Deity share, as well as on the third temple at the Group of the Cross, the Temple of the Sun, and its main theme: warfare. In general, the

three temple tablets feature paramount Mesoamerican processes of cosmic order and creation, namely: the first dawn, the establishment of warfare, and the sprouting of maize. A remarkable association of the Group of the Cross is that each inner chamber within the temples was conceptualized as a steam bath house, and each is located in different cosmic domains. It is speculated that the temple chambers were not deployed as functional steam houses because no evidence of smoke or acts of burning has been found inside of them. More will be said about traditional steam bath houses and their healing properties in the section about the transcendent Goddess. Scholars have theorized that the divine images and texts gracing the inner sanctums of each temple are intended to aid in inducing profound states of reflection and contemplation during intimate rituals performed by Lakamha's royalty and elite ritual specialists.

The elaborate narrative of the Group of the Cross is the only instance in the surviving corpus of Maya art where the date Nine Wind, the Mountain of Sustenance, and aspects of the World Tree appear together, although at first their relationships with one another can appear to be more indirect there. But the connection of the three concepts with one another is found at a much deeper level. For the most part, each icon is intrinsically related to pleasant and benign ideas, some of which are: music, winds, and the breath of life for the date; for the somewhat overlapping signification of the mountain and the tree, one finds flowers and their aromas, world renewal and revitalization, as well as cosmic order, among others. All of these concepts, either when included in art and texts or when they actually occur in the environment, are in turn associated with, and directly evocative of, the experiential presence of Flower Worlds, paradisiacal cosmic realms on which I will elaborate later. The coherence of stating that the tree sprouted from the mountain during the day Nine Wind rests on the complex narrative and graphic elements found at Lakamha's Group of the Cross, on the connections the three icons share in relation to Flower Worlds, and on various other cross-cultural associations with ideals of cosmic renewal and the continuation of life. Therefore, even though the sacred event might not have been directly accounted for in the way that I present it through this sculpture work, my rendering of it is still essentially manifested in systematic concordance with Mesoamerican worldviews and elaborations of meaning. This is to say, even if part of my sculpture's narrative rests in fiction, its very essence is still true to Mesoamerica's Indigenous traditions of signification.

There are colors that recur and concentrate around certain areas of the sculpture. They are presented, for the most part, in accordance with traditional Mesoamerican coloration systems. One of the characteristics of these colors that most significantly define their graphic communicative functions in compositions is their essential association with the general horizontal and vertical segmentations of the cosmos. According to the three main vertical divisions: the underworld area is linked with the nighttime, along with dark hues of blue, brown, and black; the earthly plane is related to blue and green or a multicolor mixture; and finally, the fiery celestial realm of the daytime is identified with shades of yellow, orange, and mainly red, as well as other warm colors. The horizontal designation of color is prescribed in accordance with the Mesoamerican world directions, which do not always parallel Western configurations of cardinal directions, and at times seem to be oriented in accordance with the sunsets and sunrises during solstices. Generally speaking, in the Maya area, the color designation for North is white and for South is yellow, though those tend to vary regionally, but the most important directions, West and East, are usually associated with black and red correspondingly. Although not always included, the world center is often considered to be multicolor or blue-green, as an evocation of the World Tree and the fertile Earth, the latter embodied by the Mountain of Sustenance from which the sacred tree grows. Some more general color signification follows: red evokes blood, which is associated with sacredness, as well as the dawning Sun, and by extension, world

renewal; black recalls death, the nighttime, remote origins, and mysterious transcendent powers; yellow alludes to ripening plants, especially maize, and other phenomena and qualities considered precious; shades of blue-green can signify newness, wet and fertile Earth, but also evoke polished jade, unripe plants and sprouts, and by extension, renewed life. The presence of these colors in art connotes their associated cosmic realms and corresponding extended meanings. It is important to emphasize that the organization of colors might present marked variations even within a single cultural model, and that the intended outcome or result of ritual performance might determine such differences. The elaborations of signification multiply when different colors are presented together. For instance, when cold or dark colors combine with warm and light ones in certain contexts, they express the fundamental interrelation of polarizing but complementary cosmic forces that compose an unfolding consummate continuum.

Although polymer clay used to be quite polluting, companies have been switching to citrate-based plasticizers in more recent years, and so I am able to work with these biodegradable and environmentally friendly materials. One of the reasons why I work with polymer clay is the highly vibrant colors I am able to achieve with it, which in turn allow me to more faithfully portray aspects of Flower Worlds in accordance with Mesoamerican systems of signification. Other reasons why I choose these non-traditional materials are their facility to work with and bake, which are significant differences from the more finicky regular clay, as well as the fact that they are easily available. Ever since colonial times, either because of the exploitation of their traditional lands and resources, the systematic disenfranchisement they are subject to, or their own assimilation of Western ways, Indigenous people throughout the Americas have been integrating whatever is available to them for crafting, because they are not given much of a choice. In addition, it can be difficult and expensive for regular people to acquire authentic traditional materials, and besides, it is better to leave the authentic materials to authentic practitioners. Through the marbling treatment of the polymer clay colors in my sculpture, I aim to indicate that the scene is of transcendent nature and exists in non-ordinary experiential dimensions of time and space. On the other hand, the dynamic colorations create an overarching sense of movement, with which I intend to express the sacred energy-in-motion that, according to long-standing Indigenous traditions, composes all of existence.

Consistently with these perspectives, the various lithic pieces included (jade, quartz, obsidian, and pyrite), as well as the black background to which the sculpture is attached, are already expressive of this perpetually moving and changing divine energy. Throughout Mesoamerica, jade is evidenced to have long been associated with the breath of life, and is also considered to be akin to a more permanent manifestation of the force of vitality. Jade was also evocative of watery environments, the Earth's fertility, and newly sprouted plants. Quartz crystals are still regarded as instruments of power by ritual practitioners across the region, who implement them for divination, sorcery, and healing. K'iche' people today apply the word *ilb'al*, meaning "tool (or place) for seeing," to talk about telescopes, binoculars, eyeglasses, and also crystals, the last of which are implemented by traditional specialists in order to see beyond ordinary existence. Glistening pieces of pyrite have been attached to the dark background to recreate the brilliance of stars in the night sky, following the treatment of the underworldly tunnel surfaces within the Ciudadela architectonic complex at Teotihuacan. The black background itself is intended to make present the primordial darkness, a concept analogous to the dark waters of creation, from which everything originates. Among its multiple applications, obsidian has long been valued for creating scrying mirrors, the dark coloration of which was associated in ancient times with transcendent powers, mysterious ancestral origins, and other concepts that will be further explored in later sections. It seems appropriate to mention here that the most authentic lithic piece included in my sculpture is the obsidian mirror, since it was

crafted at Taller del Sol, a local workshop just outside of the main ceremonial center at Teotihuacan. The other article I got at Teotihuacan is the small conch shell. In all fairness, both were sold as souvenirs. The rest of the items were purchased at a couple of metaphysics shops in the Cedar Rapids and Iowa City area. A former teacher of mine explained her experience after working at one of these shops. She found out that the foreign people who worked on the stones sold at the shop were poorly paid, as sadly is the case with innumerable other over-exploited people around the world. And the people who ran the shop knew this was the case, but still continued with business as usual because of the low prices they are able to get for themselves, and in turn, for their clients. My teacher's perspective was transformed after she understood better how the industry works, and she quit working at the metaphysics shop. I completely stopped going to these kinds of stores after learning about this, and in general, I try to be more mindful of what I buy and how it is produced, although it is difficult to do. The situation is indeed more sinister than it might seem at first glance. In order to make commodities available to their consumers at low prices, it is well known that companies often outsource labor to poorer countries. The people employed there, who are often poor, of color, and who often lack labor options, are not only underpaid, but are also objectified, overworked, and dehumanized, so their well-being and their very lives are essentially sacrificed, all for consumer convenience and financial gains. In a very real and impactful way, elites around the world are reaping economic profits by enabling the systematic sacrifice of poor people, because the former are fundamentally desensitized to the suffering of the latter. As eloquently said by numerous wise people, if one would feel the consequences of one's actions, one would immediately stop any harmful behaviors. Instead of completely taking the stones I had bought at the metaphysics shops out of my sculpture, I decided to leave them in place as a way to pay respect to those who originally worked on them. I intend to honor the humanity and sacrifice of these unknown people, who through their hard labor imbued these stones with their own vital forces.

A large amount of pre-hispanic Mesoamerican art is concerned in one way or another with the elite ruling class, and in many cases, the subjects depicted were male, as clearly evidenced throughout the archaeological record. Most of the time, royal imagery was merged with intersecting elements of ritual, cosmologic, cosmogonic, and military significance, as well as calendar period-beginning commemorations, to then serve as powerful political propaganda. According to the work of people like Kristin De Lucia, Michael E. Smith, and David M. Carballo, a marked exception to this trend is found in the cosmopolitan city of Teotihuacan, in Central Mexico, where art, architecture, household remains, and burials, evidence more collective configurations of social organization than in most of Mesoamerica. Relatively speaking, Teotihuacan people seem to have integrated more communal values in their daily lives, such as gender equality, general inclusiveness and prosperity of the common population, and celebration of diversity in their society. This somewhat less centralized government was apparently implemented to systematically undermine personal individuality, while simultaneously strengthening the composite identity of the multicultural communities within the growing city-state. Such practices deemphasize the notion of individual identity, allowing society to unfold the concept of the self in varying degrees, expanding it to incorporate the compound identity of the household and the community at large. Furthermore, for past and present Indigenous people across the Americas, the quality of "personhood" and the concept of selfhood have been boundlessly applied beyond the city and the human-made world, permeating all kinds of aspects of the environment, and even the divine realms of reality, in accordance with traditional signification systems. These elaborations of identity extend to ultimately encompass all multifaceted expressions of the complex dynamics between the different aspects of the universal and divine energy-in-motion, which in turn compose the totality of the living cosmos

as it continuously develops and comes into being. Of course, outside of philosophy, spirituality, and cosmology, another reason for this more inclusive social organization was political control: the elite provided the population with a sense of inclusiveness and equality in order to appease the masses and maintain social order in the face of status differences, ethnic contrasts, general uncertainty, and constant change in the developing cosmopolitan society that was Teotihuacan - just as it is done in today's societies. Indeed, even at Teotihuacan, as has been the case elsewhere in the world, the monopolization of power, resources, and ideology, was mainly concentrated among the elites. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that, although the ruling class controlled most social endeavors, the core components that permitted numerous instances of cultural flourishing in Mesoamerica (such as traditional spiritual practices, worship of ancestors, high regard for world renewal as expressed through the persistence and continuous unfolding of life on Earth, thoroughly integrated systems of relations between humans and their habitat, and sustained intimate communion between the outer environment and the inner cosmos of the human mind, as well as calendrical and astronomical reckonings), had already been present from times immemorial among all expressions of social organization.

It is important to acknowledge that the information presented here is a general overview of the spiritual practices, signification systems, and worldviews of the peoples of Mesoamerica, and especially of the Maya, as revealed by the diverse works of ethnography and anthropology from numerous researchers. In order to comprehend these cultural characteristics more closely to their original meanings, it is imperative that they are accounted for in their own terms as much as possible, while recognizing that one can only approximately understand concepts originating not only in a different language from one's own, but which were also created by people with different worldviews and with different relationships with themselves and their environment. For the most part, the expressions implemented throughout the present monograph have been selected because they were employed by research specialists in accordance with more recent studies and more refined understandings of Mesoamerican cosmovisions. Generic denominations, like gods or souls, can be useful, but are inadequate to convey the meanings of their corresponding Indigenous counterparts. In addition to being relatively free from much of the outdated semantic associations of previous misinterpretations and wrongfully applied words, the preferred designations allow one to communicate the traditional concepts a bit more accurately, and to characterize their particular qualities more faithfully. Obviously, this is by no means a perfect system of substitution, and surely it has its own problems, but it seems to function effectively for approximating fidelity to the original systems of signification. For example, ritual behaviors in traditional Indigenous practices have nothing to do with the Western idea of sort of mindless or irrational repetitions of actions. Rather, they can be more authentically understood as strategic modalities of cognition and operation, in which actions, implements, substances, and significations are properly ordered and orchestrated in order to effectively engage with transcendent and immanent processes, forces, entities, and the systems of relations connecting all cosmic components into the unfolding dynamic unity that is reality. It is worth emphasizing here that there is no word or concept in Indigenous languages or signification systems that can be equated to the idea of god as understood in the Judeo-Christian tradition. As mentioned elsewhere, Indigenous deities are better understood as personifications of divine cosmic forces and sacred essences, as deified ancestors, as powerful beings from alterity and transcendent dimensions, but also as dangerous entities, and as potentially destructive as they can be beneficial and generative. In present times, these divine ancestral beings are considered to be the owners of riches, abundance, and even of life itself. It is necessary that humans relate to these sacred agents in one way or another, and it is best to maintain a reciprocal relationship with them, one in which people give back in gratitude and provide offerings in exchange for good

fortune, health, intelligence, and personal fortitude, along with all other possible benefits they can bestow. At times and in certain contexts, people even despise these entities. Generally speaking, it can be said that some of the functions of ritual practices are to control these ancestral deities and to allow people to sustain the existing states of affairs and relations with them.

"Divine agent," "personified divine essence," or "personified sacred force" and their variants have been favored over the word "god," but for purposes of clarity, I also utilize "deity" and "divinity." Out of respect and reverence for the transcendent yet immanent feminine aspect of existence, I do include the word Goddess. Instead of mentioning a "spirit world," I write in terms of a "netherworld/otherworld," "realm of the dead," "realm of the ancestors," or a "transcendent order, state, or condition of being." I also include anthropology's denominations regarding Mesoamerican cosmic realms beyond the earthly plane: underworldly places, Flower Worlds, the Heavenly or Celestial plane, as well as non-ordinary time and space. Words like "spirit" and "soul" are nearly fully replaced by "vital force," "divine essence," and variations of both. Almost contrary to this substitution pattern, I still implement the terms "spiritual practices" and "spirituality." In addition to accounting more accurately for Indigenous modes of ritual operation and cognition than words like "religion" or "myth," the chosen terms serve to anchor the traditional practices and ideals of Mesoamerican peoples within the larger contexts of corresponding paradigms around the world. The well-known but extensively misused and misunderstood title "shaman" has been completely omitted. The denominations selected to replace it are "specialized practitioner," "ritual specialist," "practitioner of the ancestral spiritual traditions," and "person of knowledge (or power)," among others, but when possible, I try to refer to such special people by the titles utilized in their own native languages. "Myth" has been excluded, and in its place, I deploy terms borrowed for the most part from the great master teacher of Mesoamerican cultures and cosmovisions, Alfredo López Austin, like "ideological construct," "metaphoric (or conceptual) elaboration," "systems of signification and values," "ancestral narrative systems," "traditional accounts," "dimensions of meaning," and their variants. The expressions "transcendent" and "transcendental" are extensively implemented as cognates of words like "otherworldly," "non-ordinary," and "spiritual," as well as replacements for "supernatural," since all of them are interwoven concepts in general. One of the main contexts in which these denominations are included is the realm of rarefied experience. In other words, ordinarily perceived existence is what is being transcended, and such special instances of enhanced awareness can be qualified as extraordinary, divine, or transcendental. Overall, the chosen designations align more accurately with the complex and multifaceted worldviews that permeate the human experience among Indigenous nations. Moreover, these and other reliable expressions account better for the life-affirming values, elaborate signification systems, and blissfully elegant poetic nature of traditional Mesoamerican oral narratives and written texts, emphasizing the sublime qualities of such works of material and nonmaterial literature, the excellence of which is comparable with anything produced elsewhere in the world, like the Greek Odyssey, or India's Ramayana and Mahabharata. Allen Christenson, professor of Maya studies and author of important works I reference in the present monograph, makes the previous cross-cultural comparison, and I merely paraphrase here.

The last time I made a sculpture with an added written explanation of the included iconography was back in 2016 (Figure 3). It was a simpler attempt at communicating a few Mesoamerican cultural ideals, with an emphasis on ancient Mexica (Aztec) and Toltec spirituality traditions. A defining factor of both the sculpture and the written piece was that there were only a handful of sources I was drawing the information from, the main one being "Tula: Espejo del Cielo," a video documentary over a decade old. Interesting and even highly insightful

theories are presented there, but in hindsight, some appear to be a bit speculative and not founded in concrete arguments or evidence. The sculpture's concept was based on one of the documentary's postulations, which revolves around the fact that from its very conception, the famous image of Our Lady of Guadalupe was heavily imbued with Indigenous meanings and visual elements. It is argued in the documentary that, as a whole, the image directly communicated an episode of the divine labors of Quetzalcoatl known to early colonial Native audiences, specifically the part when the deity descends from the sky to enter into the underworldly realms beneath the Earth. This argument does not seem to appear anywhere else, and in general, seems somewhat speculative. In addition, the main source for the creation of this documentary was a book written by anthropologist Alberto Davidoff Misrachi, titled "Arqueologías del Espejo: Un Acercamiento al Espacio Ritual en Mesoamérica," which I was finally able to acquire in the first quarter of 2022. This book, published in 1996, does present interesting and insightful reflections, but some of the theories written there rest in misinterpretations that have been corrected since then, while some propositions need refinement or further research to confirm their validity. I actually never even cite any sources for this initial project. Needless to say, my work also acquired a speculative quality as a consequence of these circumstances.

More recent studies, like the work of James M. Córdova included in the fantastic 2021 book "Flower Worlds," demonstrate much more complex contexts in which the concepts revolving around the Virgin of Guadalupe originated and developed. It is well established there that, colonial-era Mexican literature and images devoted to the divine figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe, evidence dynamic discourses and creative accommodations from both main sources of its conception: Christian devotions towards the virgin Mary, and traditional Indigenous knowledge of the divine living cosmos and its constant creation (especially in relation to Flower World concepts). Flowers are indeed quintessential to the signification system elaborated around the Virgin of Guadalupe, and they functioned as fundamental divine elements that bridged European and Indigenous theological traditions. In some of the accounts of the prodigious manifestation of her image on St. Juan Diego's cloak, the Virgin herself rendered her own likeness on the cloak, and she miraculously painted it with the flowers St. Juan Diego gathered for her atop the holy Tepeyac Hill. The Tepeyac itself was part of sacred pre-hispanic landscapes, clearly connected to the ancestral concept of Flower Mountain, and an earthly embodiment of Flower World itself. The Virgin of Guadalupe created the image on the cloak by applying roses and lilies, which are flowers of European origin, but also deployed Indigenous flowers, like the traditional *izquisuchil* or "popcorn flower," among other divine flowers. Furthermore, just as it is evidenced in artistic expressions related to Flower Worlds from Early Classic Escuintla, Guatemala, Our Lady of Guadalupe can be conceived of not only as a divine being inhabiting a paradisiacal and wondrous landscape of flowers: the Goddess herself is an embodiment of the ideal flowery environment, personified as a sacred agential dimension of beauty, femininity, healing, fertility, abundance, transcendent flourishing, and divine renewal of the ever-unfolding living cosmos.

Moreover, I ended up idealizing Mesoamerican cultures (although when compared with Western culture, Indigenous peoples are indeed better expressions of humanity, especially because of the effective relations maintained with the environment). This idealization was fueled by the well-spirited but sometimes sensationalized writings of the late Linda Schele and other researchers. The fascinating words of Schele and others regarding the Maya cosmos were beautiful and compelling, but as I would later find out from more recent and refined research, some of that information was just not accurate. But I am not trying to discredit Linda Schele's work here either. Co-authored with an equally brilliant scholar, Mary E. Miller, Schele's

triumphant book “The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art” was published as a catalog to complement a landmark Maya art exhibition of the same name in the mid-eighties. This large-format book marked a new era for Maya scholarship, presenting some of the most groundbreaking research results at the time. Embellished with Schele's drawings and with fantastic photographs of Maya art taken by Justin Kerr, this work set new high standards for what books should be in the field of Maya studies. It is important to acknowledge that some of the information and interpretations put forth not only by Schele and Miller, but also by many others in those earlier days of iconographic and epigraphic decipherment, have since been gradually reworked by other scholars, with newer research and discoveries. Assisted by new technologies and information, specialists have found different results, as well as more refined understandings of previous readings proposed in earlier works. Still, Linda Schele's enthusiasm for Maya culture was of such magnitude, and her work is of such importance, that her influence is still very much present in recently published works of anthropology and ethnography. She is, and will still be for a long time to come, an important referent and a towering figure in the study of ancient Maya writing and culture in general.

In the course of several years, I have made a variety of sculptures that reflect my understanding of traditional worldviews at the time of their creation (Figures 4 to 8). Before even planning for the present work, I dedicated a lot of time to researching Indigenous Mesoamerican cultures, focusing on past and present cosmovisions in the Maya area. Throughout the sculpting process, I have tried to forge a critical and up-to-date point of view, keeping up with the publication of new research results as much as possible, which has been tricky and pricey, since I am technically an independent researcher who is not associated with any university or organization in the field. I read as many respected authors in Spanish and English as possible, studying their work but complementing it with the interpretations of others who had equally insightful views, and at times, even opposing ones. As research advanced and my understanding deepened, I bitterly realized that some of the things I had taken to be facts, were actually misinterpretations at best, or mere speculations at worst. Also, the information I had previously shared regarding the Classic Maya needs to be better aligned with the current consensus of the experts, so here are some long overdue corrections: it is not a set fact that the word *it’zat*, “sage, learned one," was expressed with the so-called “banded bird” hieroglyph; the name of the World Tree at Lakamha (Palenque) was not Wakah Kan, “Raised-up Sky,” as a more accurate name for it would be “Resplendent Jewel Tree”; there is no First Mother nor First Father in the Lakamha creation account as interpreted by Schele, but instead, the former is more like a local aspect of the general Maize Deity, and the latter is a version of the enigmatic solar divinity provisionally called GI; one of K’awiil’s *wahyob* (meaning personified spells, spirit-animal companions, or co-essences) was named Sak B'aak Naah Chahpat, a divine skeletal centipede, not the serpent Sak B'aak Naah Kan as previously misinterpreted, although at least another one of K’awiil’s *wahyob* was indeed ophidian (and in addition, both snakes and centipedes are at times merged into composite, dragon-like creatures in Maya iconography). Even when one means well and only intends to understand, any distorted views of people inevitably relinquish them, at best partially, of their humanity, and for people who are already heavily misunderstood, there are few things worse than magnifying misconceptions. It was difficult to accept, but the corrected information had to be acknowledged, and I had to change my mind. Anthropology is, after all, a science for the study of people and their ways. Like in any other field of science, when new or refined insights emerge, poorly supported theories have to be discarded and more substantial information has to be embraced.

Figure 3. “The Descent of the Star-Flowers from the sky, into the Earth” Polymer Clay, 2016.

The aforementioned situations of misinformation evidence much deeper problems with academic studies. In concordance with the recent research of Federico Navarrete, Maarten Jansen, Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez, and others, colonialism and racism have imposed a paradigm in which Indigenous people are objectified for detached and impersonal examination, akin to studying things in a laboratory. Unfortunately, this approach has resulted in limitations for the potential and scope of investigations, as well as in misunderstandings, exclusion, alienation, and even psychological harm for people of Indigenous descent across the Americas. Directly or indirectly, the consequences of these modalities of study contribute to the deterioration of ancestral Indigenous ways of life, and with them, part of the identity and essence of the people who are part of those societies are also destroyed. Even popular notions about Indigenous people are influenced by distorted perceptions, to the point that concepts like the continuity between past and present cultures are often largely overlooked.

Contrary to popular belief, scientific observations are actually not always as neutral, innocent, and beneficiary as they are claimed to be, because they are mediated through the perspectives of the specific researchers involved, who in turn revolve around the entangled dynamics of power and canonical narratives in academia. It is an ethical imperative to approach research through decolonizing methods. For example, colonial-era sources are indeed valuable for understanding collective memory and Mesoamerica after the conquest, but they are also quite incomplete and biased, so it is essential to complement them with the archaeological, artistic, and iconographic remains of pre-hispanic times, along with the rich oral traditions of present-day Indigenous people, who in turn have directly inherited the Old Ways from the ancestors. Although difficult, it is critical to be able to follow and comprehend the overarching lineages of intellectual development and threads of signification that can be traced in the artwork, iconography, and even nonmaterial forms of expression across temporal and spatial horizons, in order to contemplate Indigenous traditions in more holistic, accurate, and respectful ways. In addition, the human sciences inescapably involve the joint participation of the human subject and the observer, so the objective modality of research applied by the natural sciences has to be discarded. It is important to implement an empathetic study practice that involves the full experience of the researcher, engaging his or her different senses, along with intuition and self-reflection, in order to be able to overcome the shortcomings of objective observation and dry analysis. Furthermore, the active engagement and participation of people of Indigenous descent are ideal. When possible, the investigation's findings should be verified and understood by those who are being studied (or their descendants), in order to unfold more inclusive discussions and contribute to decolonizing cultural memory. Indeed, it is crucial that the research contributes to the empowerment of Indigenous communities so that their voices can be heard and be decisive on matters that affect them.

The main inspirations that catalyzed the creation of the sculpture part of this project were Karl Taube's groundbreaking paper titled "Flower Mountain," Alfredo López Austin and Leonardo López Luján's prodigious joint book "Monte Sagrado, Templo Mayor," and the two-part video interview with Alfredo López Austin by Radio INAH titled "Alfredo López Austin: La Idea del Monte Sagrado en Mesoamérica" on YouTube. I began to plan and sketch for this sculpture in January 2018 and began working on the polymer clay by the following month. The first time I considered the sculpture finished was around late April 2018. Although much less intricate at that point, a good amount of what is visible now was already made by then, with the notable exception of the hieroglyphs, which were made and remade several times much later. The present monograph accompanying the sculpture was started around May of the same year, and it was intended to be at most a handful of pages long. As the learning process unfolded, it became evident when some components of the sculpture and parts of the accompanying essay

created incongruences of meaning, so they had to be changed. Some things were eventually added, and some were removed, in order to make something meaningful that effectively and respectfully aligned with Mesoamerican traditions. Most of the changes were minimal, but some of them have been major time-consuming modifications, especially with the monograph. Working in this manner was very much like the saying goes, "grinding the stone," but it also felt like what I imagine would be like to polish a very hard and resistant stone, like jade, with traditional Indigenous techniques, and without modern electric tools: an extremely time and energy consuming labor, but one in which the more the work progresses, the more refined the stone's surface becomes, as it consolidates little by little into a jewel. One of the factors that I constantly struggled with was the disharmony between the hieroglyphic sentence and the overall image. It is common to find glyphic texts in Classic Maya art, and in most of these cases, text and image make up a coherent whole that could be well understood. This kind of visual efficacy was only approached late in the creative process, when the sculpture's main components and the glyphic sentence acquired their present general form. The full project was only recently completed, the sculpture in December 2022, and the written work's first draft in January 2023 (with the latest draft done in July 2024). The great complexity, nobility, and aesthetic elegance of the included traditional elaborations of meaning, along with the profound reverence I feel for these venerable concepts and for the Indigenous people who still preserve them as part of their ancestral heritage and living experience, guided me to take the most careful, critical, and respectful approaches possible so that there could be overall integrity and concordance with the signification systems addressed in this project. Some of the information I would read about is pretty complex, and some of it would simply go right over my head at first. Not only did I need to understand additional concepts first in order to assimilate and comprehend certain ideas in their proper contexts, but I also had to overcome a number of personal issues. The latter, much like my creative endeavors, are works in progress, and although they are not completely resolved, I keep getting better with practice, patience, and perseverance. As part of the personal growth processes I have been going through, there have been considerable psychological transformations that have catalyzed significant openness and maturation, as well as overall refinement of my faculties. Early in the process of making the current work I quit social media altogether, not only as part of efforts to eliminate distractions out of determination to thoroughly complete the project, but also because I was unable to fulfill my claim that part of the earnings gained from selling my sculptures would be destined to aid Mexican Indigenous communities in need. The intention was to give back, mainly because my artistic practice directly benefits from integrating traditional Indigenous signification systems, but also because Indigenous people, as systematically oppressed groups, tend to be among the most economically disadvantaged. As mentioned earlier, it would be essentially wrong to take from disenfranchised people without substantially giving back. However, selling my sculptures has proven to be quite difficult over the years, since I generally lack skills for networking and interest in general marketing endeavors. In addition, determining proper connections and practices so that the money actually reached Indigenous Mexican people in need proved to be very challenging, so I stopped even trying at all. Nonetheless, upon completion of the present project, I plan to resume these efforts, and to somehow give back to Indigenous communities in meaningful ways, financially speaking and/or otherwise, although next time, I will attempt to work with Indigenous collaborators or organizations directly in order to more effectively make a positive difference together.

Figure 4. “The Birth of the Plumed Serpent” Polymer Clay, 2014.

Figure 5. “Hero Twins Singing for the Cosmic Tree” Polymer Clay, 2014.

Figure 6. “Cosmic Tree Flourishing” Polymer Clay, 2014.

Figure 7. “Where the Earth Meets the Sky” Polymer Clay, 2015.

Figure 8. “Tatéi Naariwáme, Tatehuari, Maraakame, Hikuri” Polymer Clay, 2015.

November the eighth, 2019, marked 500 years since an important historical event occurred: the meeting between the Mexica (Aztec) *tlatoani*, or "speaker" (a reference to the ruler's function as orator of the holy words and mandates of the deities), the divine king Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzín, and Spanish military leader Hernan Cortez. During the months leading to this meeting, each leader thought of the other as a divine being, but by the time they met, it was clear to both that the other was a very powerful individual, albeit only human. Not too long after this meeting, on the auspicious day 1 Serpent, year 3 House, which in the Julian calendar would be August the thirteenth, 1521, Mexico-Tenochtitlan finally fell to the army led by Cortez. Except that, the Spaniards -and Europeans in general- who fought this decisive war were few. Most of the people fighting on the Spaniards' side were actually Indigenous Mesoamerican warriors coming from kingdoms who had allied themselves to the outsiders. At the time of contact, the Mexica, as part of the Triple Alliance formed by Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan, exercised dominion over most of Mesoamerica. After learning of powerful elites who opposed Mexica dominance, Cortez forged alliances with those noble houses, aided by his Indigenous translator and partner, who is known as La Malinche. These people who helped and in fact did most to overthrow Mexica rule, were in turn betrayed and systematically disenfranchised later, as the Spanish gradually imposed control over the region. It is worth mentioning that the Maya area didn't completely fall to the Spaniards until over a hundred and fifty years later, and that the last unconquered Maya perceived their fall as occurring in accordance with their traditional prophecies and an auspicious transitional period in their calendar system. Also, it is well known that the diseases brought by the Europeans killed off a substantial amount of Indigenous populations throughout the Americas, debilitating societies at all scales years before the military defeat of the Mexica.

It is important to acknowledge that the political processes and socio-economic dynamics that were set in motion during those times by the colonizers (thievery on a grand scale, ravaging of the land, depleting resources, destroying and oppressing cultures and traditions, raping, torturing, and killing Indigenous people, etc.), are not just the events of the distant past. Europe's elites and Western society in general, even within Mexico, have profited greatly from the riches violently stolen from the so-called New World and beyond, with their descendants still benefiting from such relinquishment and its derived effects. But the devastating repercussions of these crimes have negatively affected Indigenous people throughout the Americas since European disruption in the sixteenth century. The impact of these great misfortunes continues to be felt today in the form of cultural regression, inherited trauma, along many other secondary outcomes and consequences of colonial death and destruction. Some reparations have been made, but for the most part, they have been more like minimal, symbolic gestures, and less like substantial contributions that effectively relieve those still suffering the consequences of this great historical tragedy. Some things that could be done are: returning land to Indigenous people, banning large industrial development or resource extraction projects in said land, returning important sacred artifacts and ancestral remains to the territories they were taken from, giving back substantial amounts of stolen riches such as gold and silver, and allowing for the self-governance and sovereignty of Indigenous nations. Of course, any of these options are too much to ask of Western elites, who make all kinds of excuses to deny anything that will take away their power. Unfortunately, these elites draw power from keeping Indigenous people systematically disenfranchised.

Some of the ideologies and paradigms that have been engendered from Western worldviews are very dangerous and have repercussions for all of the biosphere. Since the Enlightenment era, reason and science have been crucial sources for the development of modern Western mentality. Scientific knowledge does deserve credit for the benefits that have emerged

from it, which are many and of such significance, that some of them have benefited innumerable people and other living beings on a global scale. But with equivalent and sometimes perhaps greater measure, terrible suffering and nightmarish evils have come about from implementing the scientific method with ill intentions and selfish purposes, or when improperly managed by people in power who are too greedy or egocentric. Whether in purpose or by accident, a great amount of destructive capabilities have been derived from capitalist science, in the form of ever more effective weapons, toxic pollutants, rationalized marginalization, racist discrimination, and other means of harm and murder on a massive scale. When trying to conduct business, Western capitalist paradigms have no problem generalizing things, and if convenient, an absolutist attitude is applied. It is interesting that, in contrast to Mesoamerican signification systems, which prompt people to personify and consecutively regard existence with respect, capitalist science is fast to objectify not only things but people too, and anything else necessary in order to rationalize exploitation and maximize profits. Surely this is something others have done in the past, but it has to be acknowledged that for some time now, some of Western culture's ideologies, actions, and interactions have been extremely damaging on a global scale, and they have to be dealt with properly. Traditional Indigenous worldviews and ways to engage with the environment have always provided viable alternatives for living more properly with the other components and phenomena of the world, but they have been ignored, misunderstood, and rejected, often deliberately. Unfortunately, time keeps running out, and Western culture has no option but to listen to alternative perspectives and change its ways or perish and possibly take down most of the biosphere with it. As Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez and Maarten Jansen eloquently elucidate in their magnificent joint work, titled "Time and the Ancestors: Aztec and Mixtec Ritual Art:"

"We are writing now in a world and time of violence. The modern neo-colonial economy of global exploitation and abuse has caused widespread social injustice, unbearable suffering, massacres, war, and refugees. Specifically, Mexico seems to have become a failed state, in danger of becoming a failed community, as the country is in danger of sinking away into a night of horror. The entanglement of political corruption, organized crime and impunity has frustrated the development of true democracy and the rule of law. The continuous violations of human rights, generalized torture, murder of journalists and dissidents, in combination with total impunity, are the undisputable hallmark of this bitter reality. The forced disappearance and killing of students in Ayotzinapa (2014) is a telling example, the police firing guns at protesting civilians in Nochixtlan (2016) another" (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez, 2017).

In light of these dreadful circumstances, what is the relevance and value of the traditional ways of Mesoamerican peoples for us living now in this global society?

The concept of tradition is generally known among present Indigenous Mesoamerican people as "Costumbre," which can be translated as "custom" or "habit," and more eloquently, as "Old Ways." One should not limit one's perspective by considering traditions as heavy cultural burdens that have to be carried by people like valuable things to be maintained immutable and intact into the future. More than old and antiquated concepts, they are complex and effective modalities of operation, continuously developed and implemented by people not only to navigate life but to ultimately thrive. The Old Ways are understood more accurately when they are viewed as the systematic creation of social acts, as well as psychological and intellectual processes, all of which are orchestrated in unison with established signification systems and ideological constructs. In addition, they are also the production of diverse actions and forms of interaction (with anything ranging from people to other living beings, and even sacred essences and larger cosmic processes), that have demonstrated their efficacy and usefulness throughout long periods of time. The traditions are constantly shaped and adapted in accordance with the changing

historical and cultural contexts, through the loss, gain, and transformation of secondary and expendable aspects, while fundamental primary elements are generally conserved. This dynamic process is mediated by the social group that generates and maintains it, when people create, share, and transmit cultural components, values, and ideals. The ancestral Mesoamerican Old Ways have been inherited throughout the ages, transmitted from the most remote origins as quintessential systems of operation and cognition that allow the members of the culture to adapt reality to the group's particular needs, capacities, and preferences. The Old Ways also function as fundamental elements of the collective knowledge and wisdom gifted by the venerable ancestors to the newer generations, and are necessary for the people of the group to properly develop into active participants of society who, ideally, work together in order to achieve as much collective fulfillment of existence as possible.

Reclaiming integral aspects of the rich ancestral legacy that have been systematically oppressed or denied, but which belong to all Indigenous people by inherent right, has been a constantly arduous work in the ongoing processes of understanding and reintegrating previously lost facets of cultural and personal identity.

Countless visionary Indigenous people in Mesoamerica and beyond have gone through extreme adversity in order to conserve the ancestral Old Ways, especially since colonial era-derived racism, discrimination, marginalization, oppression, and outright ethnocide have pushed them to the limits of human capabilities, and continue to push their descendants up to our times. I feel the most profound gratitude for these virtuous human beings who have had the personal strength to endure immensely difficult tribulations, and who have had the nobility to selflessly make the costly but necessary sacrifices, so that important elements of the ancient traditions can be maintained for the flourishing of the generations of Indigenous people still to come, and to a certain degree, even for the general benefit of anyone genuinely and respectfully interested in learning. It is thanks to these honorable people that, even with the foul and destructive processes of globalization and capitalism spreading everywhere like a worldwide disease that threatens all life on Earth, we are still graced by happily receiving the precious cultural heritage of Mesoamerica. With the fundamental nobility, virtuousness, and splendor of their signification systems, as well as their inherent fidelity to transcendent and immanent processes and cycles of cosmic unfoldment, the resplendent Costumbres dazzle iridescently with stellar magnitude. By glimpsing into the majesty of the great mysteries revealed through the brilliant and magnificent Old Ways, the privileged inheritors of Mesoamerica's rich cultural legacy are effectively inspired to actively engage in the incalculably old work of the venerable ancestors and forerunners, particularly, the labor of perpetuating essential aspects of the traditions to then integrate them into contemporary operative and cognitive systems. Thus, the inheritors are thoroughly motivated to submerge into the profound depths of the ancestral Indigenous signification systems within the Costumbres, in order to find and reclaim the components of transcendent value. Even if the flame of ancestral identity is significantly dimmed in the inheritor's psyche, reintegrating these quintessential elements of Mesoamerican traditions into present cosmic models and modes of operation can catalyze the rekindling of the inner spark and revitalize the flame, to then illuminate previously obscured aspects of personal identity and reinvigorate the vitality of faded personal essence. This momentous occurrence generates a transfiguration of such magnitude, it can be equated with the death of an inheritor's inadequate and false identity: by thoroughly assimilating the fundamental ideals of the ancestors, the person is induced to shed the distorted images, flawed ideas, and erroneous conceptions held of themselves, to consecutively experience psychological renewal and a more consolidated consciousness, achieve a deeper understanding of who the person really is in relation to their existential circumstances, and essentially undergo experiential rebirth into an enhanced and more

genuine condition of being. Indeed, some of the prodigious elements of the ancestral practices specifically address the dynamics of traditional identity systems, and some of them focus on the processes that lead to people's thorough development into flourishing members of the community, and ultimately, into properly engaged constituents of the ever-unfolding living cosmos.

Octavio Paz brilliantly expresses notions of fulfilling personal renewal and existential revitalization, which in this case, are catalyzed through experiential unification with the transcendent moment of the now, or atemporal present, within a dream, in a number of verses of his prodigious surrealist poem, Piedra de Sol, or Sunstone, some of which I translate below:

… there is nothing in front of me, only an instant
rescued this night, against a dream
dreamed from superposed images,
barely sculpted against the dream,
torn off from tonight's nothingness,
free-handedly raised letter by letter,
while outside time runs amok
and slams the doors of my soul
the world with its butchery schedule,

only an instant while the cities,
the names, the flavors, what's been lived,
crumble on my blind forehead,
while the grief of the night
my thought humiliates and my skeleton,
and my blood walks slower
and my teeth loosen up and my eyes
get cloudy and the days and the years
their empty horrors accumulate,

while time closes its fan
and there is nothing behind its images
the instant plunges and floats
surrounded by death, threatened
by the night and its lugubrious yawn,
threatened by the gabble
of the lively and masked death
the instant plunges and penetrates itself,
like a fist is closed, like a fruit
that matures towards its own insides
and drinks itself and spills itself
the translucent instant closes itself
and matures inwardly, takes root,
it grows inside me, occupies all of me,
expels in me its delirious foliage,
my thoughts are only its birds,
its mercury flows through my veins,
mental tree, time-flavored fruits…

(Paz, 1957)

All aspects of Mesoamerican people's lives, and especially important ones like the agricultural cycle and the life cycle of humans, are understood and perceived as reflections or projections of cosmogonic processes. In traditional worldviews, the universe had been created and destroyed several times in the primordial past, until it was finally ready for the arrival of humans, resulting in the current era. Each time the world is created anew, the Earth's force of life is renewed, and consequently, everything is revitalized. Referred to as World or Cosmic Renewal in anthropology studies, this process of creation, destruction, and creation again, is conceived of as a central expression of the universally integrated operating system that sustains reality, and it is manifested in various cosmic processes and at different scales of observation. This very ancient paradigmatic concept is evident throughout Mesoamerica and survives to the present. Robert S. Carlsen and Martin Prechtel's research reveals that for the contemporary Tz'utujil Maya of Guatemala, this fundamental signification system is known as *Jaloj-K'exoj*. It is one of the quintessential principles of function and operation that drive cosmic cycles and processes, especially in regard to temporal transformations and changes. The term itself derives from two words, *jal* and *k'ex*, both of which can superficially signify "change," but in their original contexts, each word communicates particular types of change. *Jal* signifies visual change, which manifests as perceived differences through time, as in the case of a person's outward appearance changing from birth, growth, aging, and death. *K'ex* indicates a different kind of change, akin to substituting or exchanging a thing for something else. Except here, the newer thing, the replacement, is analogous to the older thing that was substituted. In regard to Mesoamerican temporality, the linear progression of time corresponds with *jal*, while *k'ex* is manifested through the cyclic nature of the calendars, as the dates ultimately recur after the completion of day-counting cycles. *K'ex* complements *jal* as a structuring principle of generational replacement: even though the living change throughout their lives and eventually die, their life energy, essences, and even identities are recycled throughout the generations, as they are transferred from the older organisms to the newborns. These notions are comparable to the idea of reincarnation, and they align with widespread traditional worldviews, in which life begets death, and death begets life. The previous Indigenous concepts constitute a concentric complex of complementary transformation, where successive changes (*jal*) occur in systematic concordance with cyclic processes of substitution and general renewal (*k'ex*). *Jaloj-K'exoj* serves as a guiding paradigmatic principle for assimilating and adapting to the changing conditions of life for Tz'utujil people. This signification system has been conceptualized after naturally occurring patterns in the environment, with emphasis on the life cycles of plants and on agriculture, as observed, understood, and integrated by the Maya. As evidenced by the extremely important maize, plants produce seeds that will grow and become like replacements for the original ones after they die, and the new generations eventually produce their own seeds, exemplifying the process of begetting new life and its continuation, from the original ancestors to their descendants. In turn, this process is also reflected in the human life cycle: when a baby is born, it is said he or she "sprouted", and at times more evocatively, that they "returned." When people die, their life force and identities regenerate and live on through their children, their children's children, and so on.

The *Jaloj-K'exoj* system evidences one of the central axes of cognition and operation within the Mesoamerican traditions, through which people consciously and proactively sustain a constant relationship of reciprocity with the environment at large, what in Western culture is called "Nature." For Indigenous people who partake in these ancestral traditions, living with such operating systems effectively inspires active participation in, as well as exalted celebration and

thorough integration of, the processes and cycles of the world that sustain existence, with special emphasis on the renewal of the force of life on Earth, what is denominated World or Cosmic Renewal. These characteristics of Indigenous worldviews compellingly guide people to navigate life with profound gratitude and respect for all substances, creatures, and phenomena that compose reality. Indeed, this is a more refined understanding of one's place, and a more authentic fulfillment of one's function, in relation to the other cosmic aspects and forces that make life possible. The cosmos is conceived of as a dynamic unity that constantly unfolds, a totality of divine being with all its multifaceted components and their respective relations undergoing continuous transformation, always going through states of development, always coming into being. In these worldviews, the concepts of being a person and what might constitute one, are not limited to signifying a "human individual," as in the Western world. As mentioned before, the quality of personhood is perceived to exist in varying degrees within everything, even within that which we would consider dead or inert. Indeed, the self is expanded to boundlessly encompass anything, especially that which is cherished, valuable, and significant. And in contrast with Western views, where the emphasis is placed more on concretely establishing what the self or anything else actually is, Indigenous traditions focus more on understanding the circumstances of existing in the world, along with navigating through the changing conditions of reality and the relations between its components. Transcendent personhood, essential agency, meaning itself, and all other properties of being, are not stable or definite characteristics or concepts. Rather, they emanate as emergent qualities from the complex dynamics of the universal network of relations, especially the relationship systems sustained between humans, non-humans, and their environments. Such attributes ultimately mediate at varying degrees how all cosmic components, phenomena, and entities exist and how they influence each other's unfolding existences.

A revealing manifestation of these core ideologies and modes of operation is the reconfiguration of populations, from most city-states into smaller-scale towns and communities, in the Maya area around the tenth century ACE in comparison with the previous few hundred years. Such a region-wide intensive shift towards more rural ways of life took place after the devastating collapse and decline of most urban centers. This Late Classic Period breakdown of city-states was for a long time simplistically misinterpreted as the sudden destruction of most of the Maya civilization as a whole. According to newer studies, however, some of the key factors that most likely contributed to this important instance of social transformation were: challenging climate conditions (especially prolonged droughts), wars, and overpopulation, alongside the great amounts of suffering, death, and general instability all these factors caused together. It should be noted that these factors are not unanimously agreed upon and the hypotheses of prolonged droughts and unsustainable resource depletion practices have been more concretely refuted by recent data. In any case, what disintegrated were the pre-established social structures centered in the city-states to maintain power among the ruling elites, when they could no longer be sustained. Such a drastic change occurred over a time period of a couple of centuries across most city-states, not all at once everywhere. The Maya people who survived this great catastrophic process were forced to move on, though they continued to maintain their traditions, and their descendants are still here. By abandoning practices that had contributed to the great city-state collapse process, and by perpetuating environmentally conscious practices, the Maya were able to adjust to the changing conditions of their world. Such resilience allowed them to not only survive, but also to thrive, and to continue developing as a literate high culture, at least until the foul process of colonial oppression and exploitation nearly destroyed them. Thanks to their perseverance and their remarkable adaptability skills, which even involve compromising some of the old traditional ways if needed, Maya peoples, and Indigenous peoples across the Americas, have been able to survive into the present, moved by their characteristic unbreakable will to

continue onwards and face whatever future fortune may bring. Western civilization can learn a great deal from the Maya and their effective abilities to adapt in the face of catastrophic circumstances, in order to more effectively address the global climate challenges developing in our times, like environmental degradation and resource depletion, hopefully before it is too late.

The ever critical and insightful Dr. Federico Navarrete, of UNAM's Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, lucidly expresses some of the previous ideas in an important interview for the last entry in the video series Nuestras Cosmovisiones, which I translate here:

"The values that had intended to govern us over the last 200 years, which are the values of modern Western culture, science, capitalism, and rational thinking, clearly do not serve us in this reality, because after all, it is those values, those forms of knowledge, and those forms of behavior that have triggered climate change and the environmental crisis we are living in; they have been the ones that have also triggered, indirectly, the Covid-19 pandemic that has permeated our lives; so then it is hard to think that capitalism and modern science, both of which have [nearly] destroyed the planet, now will be capable of saving it; it is like asking the drunkard to drive because they say that they promised to stop drinking; so then, what we clearly need in Mexico and in many societies in the world, is precisely the development of other forms of knowledge, values, and social systems; and I believe that precisely Mexico is a country that offers a lot of potential in that sense because in Mexico, since 500 years ago, the capitalist system, Western cosmovision, and European culture, have coexisted with, but have not been able to destroy, Indigenous cultures and the cultures of people coming from Africa; and those living Indigenous cultures of our country, of the originary peoples of the Mixe Sierra, the Huicholan Sierra, the Taraumara region, and in many other regions of the country (I only mention three of the most well know peoples), all are precisely living alternatives to live in the world; these communities of Indigenous people have been coexisting with and surviving capitalism for 500 years; and now us as humanity, the world as a whole, have to find a way to survive capitalism, because it is destroying our world; precisely the ones who know the path to survive capitalism, are the peoples who have been surviving it for 500 years" (Cosmovisiones: El Futuro de Nuestras Cosmovisiones, 2022)

The Waters of the Goddess in the Garden: The Underworld Water-Cloud Band, the Lady of the Moon, and the Deified Ancestors

The dark band with swirls at the bottom of the image in my sculpture is a portrayal of the Classic Maya sign for sea and ocean water current, the *polaw* glyph, integrated into the design (Figure 9). As meanings are elaborated further, this band of dark undulating water embodies the surface of the underworldly cosmic planes. Throughout Mesoamerica, the underworld realms have been conceived of as underwater and dark environments for the most part. In my sculpture, the *polaw* sign is conflated with the Classic Maya *muyal* glyph, which signifies clouds, in order to accentuate both the tangible and the intangible nature of the underworldly realms through the respective liquid and gaseous states of water. Such a combination of contrasting characteristics also alludes to the pan-Mesoamerican complementary associations between the lower dark underwater and underground planes on the one hand with dark rain clouds and the night sky on the other. There are circles colored in red, yellow, and green swirls arranged in sequence on the water-cloud band and also throughout the whole image. These circle series are adaptations of the Classic period *k'uhul* sign, which originates as an integral component of a full Maya hieroglyph, the *k'uh* logograph (Figure 10). *K'uh* itself signifies transcendent and immanent entities often referred to as "gods" and "goddesses," but who are understood more authentically when conceived of as deified personifications of ancestors, divine embodiments of important phenomena and forces that make up the living universe, and other sacred agents, whether they manifest as benign, malign, or anything in between and beyond. The *k'uhul* part of the glyph can stand on its own as an adjective, and it is implemented to qualify something or someone as divine, and to signify attributes of "holiness," "sacredness," and "transcendence." Among humans, *k'uhul* concentrates in one's heart and in blood, but is also associated with the lungs, and by extension, with the breath of vitality. In this form, *k'uhul* can be understood as something akin to the concepts of "soul," "spirit," or the psychological and animating elements that constitute the self as an individual agent of action and behavior, as comprehended in Western culture. However, unlike the Western concepts, the Indigenous animating essences are not only intimately personal and fundamental components within a person, but in addition, they are rather mysterious and are also inherently alien, qualifying as "others" to the person at varying degrees (and with some exceptions as in the experiential case of dreams and the work of ritual practitioners). As is the case across Mesoamerica, and among many other Indigenous traditions in the Americas, contemporary Maya people conceive of various sacred energies, forces, and powers, as evidenced by the research of Alfredo López Austin, Pedro Pitarch, Andrew Sherer, and several others. At once animate and animating, these essences compose a person, as in the case of the Tzeltal Maya concepts of the "bird of our heart," the *bats'il ch'ulel*, and the *lab*, where each plays complex roles in shaping the person's personality, health, destiny, and other aspects of life. Some of these animating essences exist at once with the person they are a component of, and at non-ordinary locations and dimensions of reality, such as a holy flowery mountain in the transcendent Flower World. *K'uhul*, or in present-day Tzeltal and Tzotzil Maya languages, *ch'ulel*, has long been highly cherished and understood as a sort of concentrated transcendent and immanent force, and as a multifaceted sacred energy or essence. It is in constant motion and perpetual transformation as it animates, invigorates, and sustains not only humans and other living beings, but also mountains, waters, and ultimately, the entirety of the unfolding cosmos with vitality. These Maya concepts are roughly analogous to the ancient Nahua *teotl* and its present-day counterpart *totiotzin*, as well as the *ií* of the Ñuu Dzaui tradition.

Figure 9a

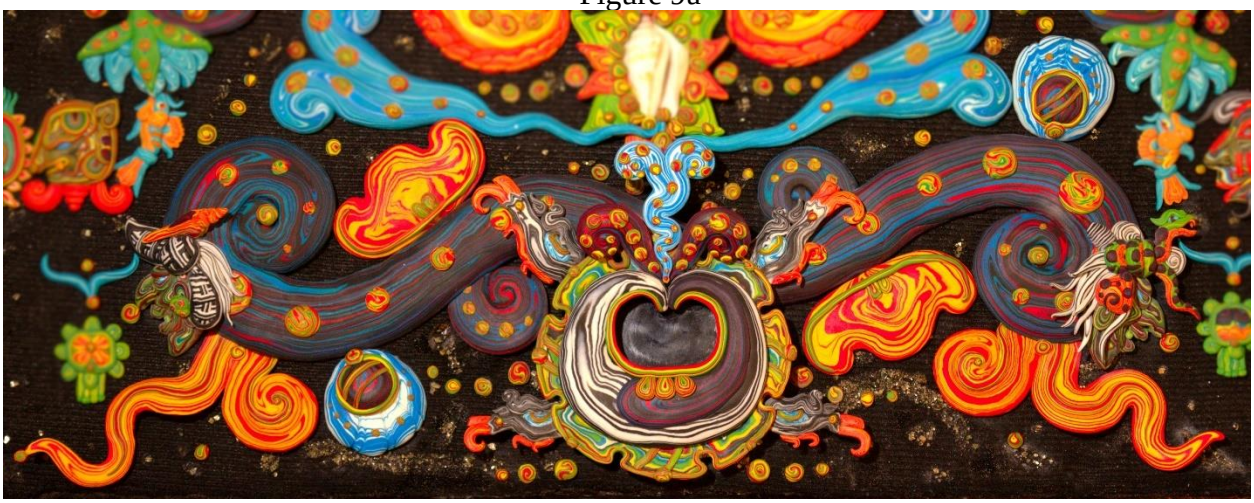


Figure 9b

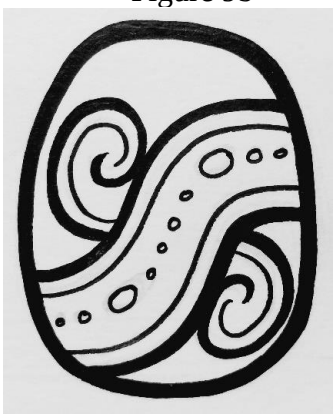


Figure 9c

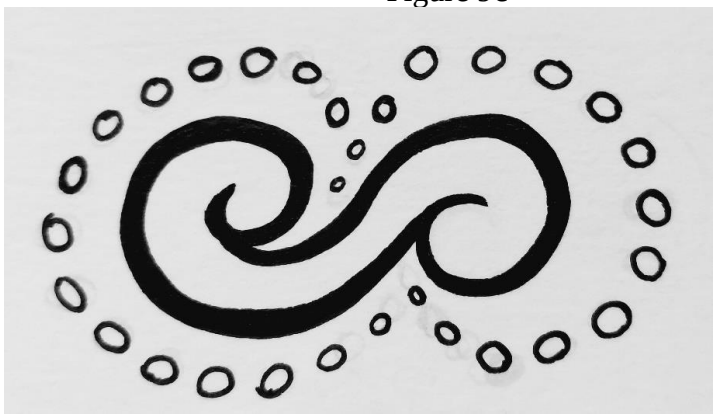


Figure 9. a) The underworldly water-cloud band in the sculpture. b) The *polaw* (“water band”) glyph. c) The *muyal* (“cloud”) glyph.

Figure 10. Examples of glyphs for *k’uh* (at left) and *k’uhul* (at right).

Tim Ingold brilliantly states a more recent and refined understanding of animism in his 2006 paper “Rethinking the Animate, Re-animating Thought”:

“...for many people, life is not an attribute of things at all. …[it] is rather immanent in the very process of [the] world’s continual generation or coming-into-being.

People who have such an understanding of life… …are often described in the literature as animists. According to a long-established convention, animism is a system of beliefs that imputes life or spirit to things that are truly inert. But this convention, as I shall show, is misleading on two counts. First, we are dealing here not with a way of believing *about* the world but with a condition of being *in* it. This could be described as a condition of being alive to the world, characterized by a heightened sensitivity and responsiveness, in perception and action, to an environment that is always in flux, never the same from one moment to the next. Animacy, then, is not a property of persons imaginatively projected onto the things with which they perceive themselves to be surrounded. Rather - and this is my second point - it is the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence. The animacy of the lifeworld, in short, is not the result of an infusion of spirit into substance, or of agency into materiality, but is rather ontologically prior to their differentiation." (Ingold, 2006).

As Ingold eloquently states, the property of being animate encompasses the complete network or field of ever-changing connections, relationships, and correspondences, which involves complex sets of performers who have agency at different magnitudes. Within such conception, agency itself is in turn a quality that intrinsically emerges from this dynamic network of relations. Building on the works of Ingold and others, Andrew Finegold writes a related insightful note about pre-colonial Indigenous traditions in his magnificent recent book, "Vital Voids: Cavities and Holes in Mesoamerican Material Culture":

"Mesoamerican cosmology was ultimately unitary and correlative. Everything that exists is interconnected: seemingly independent things or beings are manifestations of a single underlying and connective force that is always in motion and in a state of becoming. Matter and spirit are mutually expressive; just as matter can be thought of as being infused with life and energy, spirit gains expression through modifications to and proper configurations of matter. Like abstract concepts, deities - specific named configurations of the divine energy-in-motion that constitutes the world - could be discussed as if they had a real independent existence, but, like holes, they were only manifested in relation to a material host. This was the world in which Mesoamerican people existed and interacted, transformed their environment and participated in social and economic activities, created artworks and engaged in ritual behavior, waged war and mourned the dead." (Finegold, 2021).

Even though it is already implied in the previous quote, I would add the fact that these ancient cosmovisions correspond with present Indigenous conceptions of existence and reality, which are now interwoven with Western, African, and other traditions encountered and integrated after early colonial times.

As signification edifices are elaborated further, sacred essences and energies are revealed to be associated more with the qualities and characteristics of conscious living beings, such as having vitality, agency, and even systems of relations sustained among one another. Transcendent beings and essences are not ontologically distinct, nor are they considered to be intrinsically good or bad. Instead, their qualities fluctuate in accordance with the varying calendric dates and cosmic cycles that they can be associated with. Divine forces and vital essences exist intrinsically within every substance, being, moment, or any other phenomenon, so they are immanent in all times and places and are ultimately omnipresent. However, because they lay in a transcendent dimension of reality, these animate energies are imperceptible for the most part, and in order to perceive them, humans have to transcend ordinary modalities of experience. The universe is mediated by multifaceted and interconnected operating systems, which also moderate the transformation of sacred essence-beings along with the transference of forces of vitality across the diverse dimensions of reality, all driving the progression of ongoing

universal processes of becoming. As creation continuously unfolds and existence is rendered ever more consummate, such energies and essences perpetually transition throughout the divine living cosmos, sustaining its development as it constantly comes into being. The innumerable sacred essence-beings perpetually go through various transformational processes: they concentrate, disperse, divide, multiply, deteriorate, enhance, magnify, organize and reorganize themselves and one another. They can even express themselves as an individual and as a multitude simultaneously. Such delirious boundlessness derives from the fact that divine beings, forces, and essences, are ultimately limitless and indestructible. In turn, all of them are manifestations of a highly dynamic energy in constant states of unfolding, eloquently called "energy-in-motion," which is ever-changing, self-recycling, generative, and it composes the transcendent and immanent unity of sacredness that encompasses and substantiates all of reality. Natural phenomena and even social processes are thought to be mediated by the systems of dynamics and relations sustained between these sacred essences, as the latter permeate the multidimensional universe along with all its inhabitants and components. One of the main functions of the traditional concepts regarding animating essences within Indigenous systems of signification, is to elucidate important facets of the human condition through the profound relationships sustained between people and the rest of the cosmos. The inclusion of *k'uhul* icons in an ancient Maya image or text indicates qualities of holiness and the divine are present. Even though the oceanic current hieroglyph is directly read as *polaw*, the *k'uhul* circles infixed into the water band indicate the presence of a secondary, almost indirect expression, that would fully read as *K'uhul Polaw*, or "Sacred Sea." An alternative reading here would be *K'uhul Muyal*, or "Sacred Cloud," due to the conflation of the *polaw* and *muyal* glyphs. In Classic Maya art, water bands depicted with dots or circles were intended to signify generic liquids with bubbles and foam. Yet these icons simultaneously evoke, and at times specifically express, transcendent or sacred waters. Based on glyphic writing conventions, the water band in my sculpture includes *na* and *b'a* phonetic signs that together form the word *nahb*, which means "pool, sea" (Figure 11a-b). There are also *k'ak'* logographs, which signify fire, attached to the water band (Figure 11c). Together, both words form the term *K'ak' Nahb*, which can be translated as "Fiery Pool" or "Fiery Sea," and serves as a name for the primordial waters of creation. The term also alludes to narratives that recount the first dawn, which from the perspective of the Maya region, happened in the Caribbean Sea to the East, just as it happens every morning. According to these accounts, the fiery Sun first rose out of the eastern sea, evaporating water that would form clouds, which in turn would bring life-giving rains to the Maya area, just as it happens during the rainy season.

Stephen Houston and Simon Martin tell us that Classic Maya inscriptions and art evidence a fundamental conceptual relationship between a common order of being, phenomenon, or thing, and its unique, often primordial, exemplar. Both, generic and specific kinds, can be fused into a single hieroglyphic or/and iconographic expression, allowing for seamless substitution between one another in accordance with the intended meaning. The essence of the specific prototypical exemplar was extended to be part of the identity of any individual from its corresponding general category of being, phenomena, or thing. Conversely, any common

Figure 11a

Figure 11b

Figure 11c

Figure 11. a) *Na* syllabogram. b) *b'a* syllabogram. c) *K'ak'* hieroglyph.

individual from this general class referenced back to its corresponding exemplary manifestation, the latter of which was usually of transcendent order. Hence, the *polaw* glyph is implemented to signify seas and oceans in general, but by including the *k'uhul* icon, it visually connects to the concept of "sacred sea." More in-depth, this glyphic expression invokes the primordial exemplar, the holy waters from which the Mountain of Sustenance emerged, as evidenced in the works of Alfredo López Austin and others. The reasoning for this shared extended identity originates in creation narratives found throughout Mesoamerica, in which the present world exists as a sort of reflection of the primordial world as it unfolded during the day the cosmic creation process was completed. Very generally speaking, when the first dawn of the present era occurred back in the deep past, the pre-existing sacred essences condensed, expanded, collapsed, dispersed, and in general, underwent transformation. Such processes in turn generated all kinds of new things, beings, phenomena, and even other essences and animating forces that would compose the cosmos. All of these new manifestations integrated the first original essences into their own being. In the beginning, there was a deified first sea, a deified first mountain, a deified first tree, and so on. These prototypical exemplars were themselves transmuted in various ways, and most notably, others of their kind were eventually engendered. According to Mesoamerican accounts of creation, this process resulted in the emergence of all classes of cosmic manifestations and in the present configuration of the world. Despite these ramifications, diversifications, and temporal transformations, the essences and identities of the original beings, things, and other phenomena,

were maintained and extended to be integrated into their descendants, through processes of generational replacement, substitution, and recurrence, as in the *Jaloj-K'exoj* system mentioned earlier.

A revealing example of shared identities between different orders of being is expressed in a well-known but still enigmatic episode of Classic Maya cosmogony, which is prominently featured on the majestic Stela C from the site of Quirigua, Guatemala. Stelae, or stela in singular form, are tall stone slabs found throughout the Maya area, the surfaces of which are often evened out and embellished with relief carvings. The sculpted text of Stela C relates how three stones or stone stelae were ritually placed on the cosmic hearth by primordial deities, in order to commemorate the beginning of a new Long Count cycle of 13 Bak'tuns or 5,126 years. Before the stone placement ritual is mentioned, it is said that "the face-image changed," written as *jehlaj k'oj baah* in Classic Maya hieroglyphs. Although this phrase is quite enigmatic and still not fully understood, David Stuart insightfully elucidates that the intended meaning can be closely approximated through the phrase's association with the three stones. The image or face being changed is in all likelihood that of the cosmic hearth itself, which functions as a sort of fire mechanism or engine that powers the renewal and unfolding of the whole universe. By ritually placing, modifying, or replacing the three cosmic stones, the primordial deities gave the hearth a new image and through it, a renewed identity and a renewed state of being too. Because of the fundamental role the hearth plays in the universe, altering it in any way would produce changes of cosmic proportions. Therefore, not only the identity of the hearth was transfigured at that momentous calendric turning point, but ultimately the state of being of the entire universe as well, catalyzing a new era of cosmic unfoldment in the process. Furthermore, the very essence of the original exemplar, the pre-creation cosmos, was extended to become a central aspect of the identity of the newly created one, with the latter functioning as a new image for, and by extension a new condition of being for, the former. Note that this creation event did not happen *ex nihilo*, or out of nothing. The primary substances, essences, and creative energies necessary for cosmic renewal were already present in the deep past. It was the incorporation of the transcendent force of change that reconfigured the image and identity of the pre-existing components, essentially catalyzing the renewed unfoldment of all of existence. In many present-day Indigenous Mesoamerican communities, people still set traditional hearths with three stones that support a flat cooking griddle (comal) in the central part of their houses. These modest fire assemblages are conceived of as earthly recreations of the original cosmic hearth set by the creator deities during primordial times. Indeed, any earthly hearth and fire are in essence projections of, and in some contexts even analogous to, the first divine hearth and fire as manifested during cosmogenesis. In essence, the past is present. The traditional practices of constantly refurbishing, redecorating, and replacing ritual implements, as well as the conception of shared identities between common images or reproductions and their corresponding unique or original exemplars (the equivalence between a general signifier and its signified prototype), are very likely derived from analogous conceptions about primordial makeovers of cosmic magnitudes.

According to recent publications authored by Andrew Finegold, Alan R. Sandstrom, and others, Western distinctions between the signifier and the signified, between the symbol and the actual thing, being, or phenomenon that is represented and which exists autonomously in the world, are not present in Mesoamerica. Here, there is not such a stark differentiation between a symbol and that which the symbol represents: instead, the signified is indeed conceived of as being present through the signifier. Such a characteristic of images, portraits, and symbols in general partially derives from the fact that for the lived experience of Indigenous people's reality, especially in contexts of ritualism and spirituality (both of which permeate most aspects

of life), a signifier or symbol is ontologically undifferentiated, and at times even indistinguishable from, the original signified exemplar or referent that is represented through the symbol. In other words, the signifier or symbol can instantiate, embody, and render present that which is being signified. Even the elements of physical matter composing the symbol, the materials it is expressed through, display properties that have effects in reality, especially when they are configured in accordance with traditional Indigenous systems of signification. Although things possess agency in these modalities of conceptualization, it is humans who function as the agents that ultimately operate such things. In essence, things, objects, artifacts, and even works of art are created and implemented as "active interventions into the flows and relationships between people and the world they inhabit" (Finegold, 2021).

David Stuart convincingly shows that on one of the exquisitely carved faces of a Late Classic platform discovered inside temple XIX at Lakamha (Palenque), K'inich Ahkal Mo' Naab commissioned his master scribes and sculptors to depict the moment of his accession into *ajawlel*, "lordship/royalty," as it happened on a sacred Nine Wind date. The glyphs to the left of the king state that he appears there personifying (*ub'aahila'n*) GI himself. A high priest named Janab Ajaw, a possible cousin of the king, is said to personify Yax Naah Itzamnaaj, and holds the royal paper headband that is to be placed on Ajkal Mo' Naab's head. The head ornaments each wear are composed of imagery directly associated with GI and Itzamnaaj correspondingly. Moreover, the lengthy inscription at the sides of this whole scene provides calendrical and numerological correlations between the human event and a series of sacred events that occurred long before the creation of our current world. An emphasized incident involves the deity Itzamnaaj overseeing the installation of GI into divine rulership in a resplendent celestial domain of the cosmos during a sacred day named Nine Wind. Ajkal Mo' Naab's accession was not thought of as a lesser copy of the primordial event by any means. According to Stephen Houston, David Stwart, and Karl Taube, sculpted portraits can themselves be conceived of as extensions of the identity of the people portrayed, qualifying such portraits as true stone selves. By ways of visual, numerological, and textual correlations, these portraits functioned to merge together the identities of the people depicted with the corresponding deities they personified. K'inich Ajkal Mo' Naab and his high priest are presented in stone form as themselves, and also as embodiments of the divine GI and Itzamnaaj. Correspondingly, both celestial and earthly accession events are simultaneously depicted, conflated into a single lithic manifestation. Through the elaborate image, the divine forces from the remote past are made present. The liturgical recreation of the primordial accession served to sanctify the institution of rulership, give legitimacy to the ruler's claim to power, and endow the participants with the reactivated powers of the sacred event from extreme antiquity. Such emphasis on displaying royalty involved in ritual activity followed a long-established elite sculpture tradition, which was practiced in the Maya area from at least the Late Formative period with the rise of large socially stratified city-states. Just as in Ajkal Mo' Naab's royal platform, non-ordinary reality and primordial events are routinely featured simultaneously across Mesoamerica, either prominently or only in evocation, and in correspondence with the intended meaning, as a way to bridge together cosmic dimensions into a single expression.

Recent excavations and recoveries conducted by Projecto Tlalocan at the tunnel underneath the great Feathered Serpent Pyramid in Teotihuacan, Mexico, have yielded important new discoveries about ritual practices and worldviews, not only pertaining to the sacred city, but also to Mesoamerica at large. This tunnel entrance is located on the plaza in front of the pyramidal base, and its deepest chambers align with the axis of the pyramid's center. Originally, the culminating chambers were partially flooded, so that the watery conditions of the

Mesoamerican underworldly realms could be recreated for ceremonies and rituals within the tunnel. The investigation also yielded evidence that the tunnel's walls and ceilings, and even some sections of the floors, were darkened and coated with shiny metallic minerals, mostly pyrite. In ancient times, when people would enter this sacred space, the fire from their torches would reflect back from the innumerable small pyrite pieces, recreating the underworld's starry night sky. As mentioned earlier, the pyrite pieces applied to the black background around my sculpture are included as a reference to this practice. But the most spectacular discoveries were the prodigious contents ritually deposited within the tunnel and the inner chambers. Originating both locally and far and wide across Mesoamerica, more than 100,000 artifacts and items of the most valuable and diverse materials have been recovered. Ranging from large numbers of pendants, necklaces, and other sculptural works made of greenstones like serpentine and jade, hundreds of conch shells such as decorated shell trumpets, rubber balls for the Mesoamerican ball game, various iron ore mirrors (along with thousands of iron ore pieces and their former circular supports, which originally composed mirrors and similar objects), thousands of ceramic vessels and other ceramic artifacts, and remains of wood along with numerous seeds of various plants, among many others. All of these artifacts were of the utmost significance to the ancient Teotihuacanos, and were as important then as they are now. At the center of the inner chambers' floor, and in alignment with the center of the pyramidal temple above, the ancient ritual practitioners deposited the most extraordinary part of the offering, which most prominently features four statues portraying a male and three female figures. A clear emphasis on femininity is evidenced by these central figures, since the male is presented naked and smaller than the elegantly dressed females. All figures carried plant fiber bags filled with prime ritual implements: greenstone pendants, ear flares, and beads, along with pyrite mirrors. Master archaeologist Sergio Gómez Chávez, who leads Projecto Tlalocan, concludes that these bags are sacred bundles, and the figures are ancestor founding figures who had the special capabilities for geomancy and other significant ritual practices and mantic endeavors. Given the extreme significance of the whole underground space, Gómez Chávez and colleagues consider that these four figures embodied the original founders of Teotihuacan as deified ancestors. Furthermore, the fact that the myriad of valuable artifacts and objects were deposited throughout the tunnel and its chambers aligns with recurring accounts that characterize the underworld domains as locations of great abundance, rich in sacred essences and beings, and as places of primordial emergence and creation.

Within the Maya *Jaloj-K'exoj* process and other parallel Indigenous conceptions of cosmic renewal, the aspects that focus on generational replacement and transmission of the sacred forces of life, provide the closest approximation to the notion of rebirth. Otherwise, death is an absolute transformation that cannot be reversed. Of course, the vital forces and animating essences, which are the transcendent yet immanent components of any living entity, transition back to their original source (the sacred Mountain of Sustenance) to be recycled. But the physical body decomposes, and consciousness dissipates, similarly to the way Western minds understand the concept of the individual living organism's death. Various ethnographic and iconographic studies evidence the widespread distribution of an ancient Mesoamerican narrative that accounts for the fact that humans are unable to live again as their original selves after dying. According to Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos, heroic youths, who are associated with the origin of maize or the Sun and Moon, were fathered by a character who is conspicuously largely absent from their lives, so much so that it can be confidently deduced that the father's very absence is itself one of his main characteristics. The usual reason for the father being gone tends to be his assassination. Eventually, the heroic youths avenge their father, find his remains, and attempt to resuscitate him, but they inevitably fail to do so. Thereafter the youths establish that their father would stay

in the underworldly realm of the dead, but would be properly remembered and revered. Alternative versions of the account state that the dead father was transmuted into a deer and has to stay in the wilderness with the other animals. The first variant of the narrative relates the origins of death and essentially establishes the paradigmatic practices for the veneration of the ancestors and the dead at large. On the other hand, the second version equates the heroes' journey to find their father to the work of hunters looking for game. Throughout Mesoamerica, deer are related to lineage founders and even ancestors in general, as well as sexual proficiency. Generally, lack of speech among deer and all other wild animals qualifies them as limited and unrefined creatures, a status that derives from the fact that they originated in previous world eras. Although these characteristics destined deer to be hunted and killed for sustenance, such animals still have to be respected and venerated by humans, since they are analogous to the ancestors. Albeit in a more metaphoric way, the alternative accounts about the father's conversion into a deer are therefore also concerned with the origin of death and the worship of the ancestors.

One of the ways to express someone's death in Classic Maya languages and iconography was *och ha'*, "to enter (the) water," a poetic flourish evoking the transcendent journey that begins with a person's death, to then enter through the surface of water, and into underworldly realms. This concept is brilliantly integrated into the iconography of a Late Preclassic scene from the prodigious murals found in 2001 inside Structure Sub 1-A of San Bartolo, a small archeological site in Guatemala. Partially wrapped by a coral snake, the Maize Deity is depicted in a diving position and falling into a dark water band. The scene is widely accepted to portray the death of the Maize Deity as an action of water-entering. In Mesoamerica, the dark aspects of underworldly realms evoke wetness, coldness, death, the night sky, and other attributes that function as qualitative polarities that complement the concepts of dryness, warmth, renewal, and illuminated celestial realms. In a seemingly paradoxical fashion, the dark insides of sacred mountains were identified with a watery paradisiacal realm, which also had celestial associations, and was known in Central Mexico as Tlalocan during the Postclassic era. The theme of darkness also extends to include the notions of mysterious and remote ancestral origins, because the Mountain of Sustenance, the World Tree, the dawning Sun, and ritual practitioners of the ancestral spiritual traditions, all emerge revitalized from underworldly planes of existence, and they do so after going through processes of death, resurrection, and renewal. Virtually all traditional Mesoamerican creation accounts, past and present, narrate that divine and renewed life emerged from underworld domains. Even though these underworldly places are filled with dangerous and deadly forces and entities, they also retain the sacred powers of revitalization, and the essences of all things, called "heart-seeds" in Central Mexico from at least the Postclassic era and up until the present. When considering significant people who have passed away, it is important to remember that they are not simply relegated to the past as history, but rather, they become the venerable ancestors who have been deified and now inhabit dimensions beyond ordinary existence. The revered ancestors form integral aspects of Indigenous conceptions regarding the realms of the dead, underworldly domains, and also the functioning of the whole cosmos as well, because even after death, they remain active as essential agents within the ever-changing network of relations that encompasses all of existence. As mentioned before, representing something or someone is not viewed as an act of duplicating their appearance only. Reproductions, portraits, and anything else that is made to resemble the likeness of another, whether through visual art, performance, or any other medium of representation or recreation, are traditionally understood to intrinsically exist with part of the identity of that which they represent, primarily so in regards to ritualism. Such phenomena are made possible by the fact that reproductions at large share not only the appearance of the original referent but also its very

essence and identity. Thus, portrayals of the venerable ancestors catalyze their honorable presence in our world, so they can be meaningfully interacted with and perceived by the living.

The hieroglyphic sentence in my sculpture culminates with the words *u k'abiy Ix Uh*, which can be translated as "it was overseen by the Lady of the Moon" (Figure 2h-i). Such an expression communicates that the main occurrence, the emergence of the sacred tree from the mountain, was supervised by the supreme lunar deity, and by extension, that the orchestration of the divine event is attributed to her. "Moon Woman," "Lady of the Moon," Ix Chel, Chac Chel, and other variants serve as names of Classic and Postclassic Maya female divinities, all of whom can be considered to be direct aspects of, or at least related to, the paradigmatic figure of the Moon Goddess. In turn, this deity derives from a quintessential personified divine essence, who occupies central roles as a main participant during processes of world creation and renewal. In her various aspects and incarnations, the Moon Goddess is indeed the Maya personification of the sacred feminine part of the cosmos itself. The *ix* (or *ixik*) logograph is expressed through a profile female head that directly translates as "lady" and "noblewoman," and was implemented to preface women's names and titles in Classic Maya inscriptions. But also, because the glyph is the portrait of the young Moon Goddess, the characteristics of this generic sign are almost identical to those appearing in depictions of the lunar deity and her various avatars or aspects. In a similar manner to the case of the *polaw* icon, the *ix/ixik* glyph functions to signify women in general, but at the same time, it visually connects back to the prototypical exemplar and origin of womanhood, the venerable Moon Goddess herself. Hence, the identity of the Moon Goddess was extended to be part of the essence of any woman, and any woman in general, could reference back to the original exemplar, the first woman, the first goddess. Even her usual seated pose references Maya concepts of femininity, because women assume a sitting position in order to care for their children, weave, cook, and do other domestic labors. The Moon Goddess embodied the ancestral Maya woman, and as such, she was often depicted in direct contact with the Earth, seated inside the lunar crescent-cave, her home. Present Maya people still call the Moon "Our Grandmother."

The elder aspect of the Maya Moon Goddess is generally referred to as Goddess O, but she was known as Chac Chel or "Great Rainbow" in the Postclassic era, and likely in much earlier times too. She is sometimes portrayed with a skeletal lower jaw, long claws, and usually wears clothes decorated with crossed bones, as well as other signs related to the ancestors, the dead, and underworldly realms. Chac Chel is the prototypical grandmother figure, the exemplar patroness of midwives, and she is also a deity of weaving, wisdom, divination, and medicine, along with world creation and renewal. On page 74 of the Dresden Codex, one of the four Maya manuscripts known to have survived colonial destruction, the elder deity provisionally called God L appears assuming a war pose while holding weapons, expressing not just ideas of warfare in general, but more specifically notions of war in cosmic ritual contexts. Chac Chel is also present, and along with the Celestial Dragon (or Starry Deer Crocodile), she pours forth water. All is set against a solid red background. It is notable how Chac Chel pours water out of a vessel she holds upside down. Besides being evocative of femininity and fertility in general, this action also directly references ancestral ritual practices, especially rainmaking rites as performed throughout Mesoamerica. Among other associations, the Moon itself was also conceived of as a great vessel or jar, and in the rainy season, it poured its precious waters onto the Earth as a vital act for the growth of crops and the sustenance of all earthly beings. Largely interpreted as the advent of a world-destroying flood, this key image from the Dresden Codex just as likely portrays the prodigious renewal of the world by primordial deities, achieved through portentous rituals involving divine sacrificial blood obtained through cosmic warfare as well as the

conjuring of sacred rain clouds that would produce precious life-giving waters. The start of each year's rainy season is understood to be a sort of reflection or recurrence of these primordial events, when the first rains were manifested in order to reinvigorate and sustain the Earth's force of life during world creation. In Classic period inscriptions, there are several examples of exalted expressions implemented to address women in a reverential manner, and they include a rare glyph in the form of an upside-down vessel similar to the one held by Chac Chel in Dresden page 74, but marked with the *k'in* solar flower and at times even including icons for rain emerging out of it. These female reverential statements reference the creative ritual actions of the elder Goddess herself in primordial times, and serve to qualify important and respectable women as divine.

As proposed by some researchers, it is possible that the phases of the Moon were each associated with different Classic Maya lunar deities. According to these hypotheses, when the Moon was in its non-visible phase, the Maya thought the Moon Goddess had entered into her subterranean cave dwelling. Since this time period is associated with entering into the watery underworld realms, the Moon was believed to undergo a death stage and become skeletal. Chac Chel was quite possibly linked with the Moon's new and waning phases. In contrast, when the Moon passed through its waxing phase, the Moon Goddess was likely personified as a young and beautiful woman. Interestingly, it has been theorized that the full Moon was associated with the Lunar Maize Deity. This particular aspect of the general Maize Deity is an important entity from the Moon Goddess' domain. It is evidenced that in pre-hispanic times, agricultural duties were performed in accordance with the Moon's phases. Among the present Tzotzil and K'iche' people, maize harvest is conducted during the full Moon. The lunar glyph itself includes small circles on the lower area of the crescent as depictions of maize seeds, which evoked the essential involvement of the Moon's fertility aspects during the agricultural cycle. This close connection between the Moon and agriculture is expressed in Classic Maya art and writing, where the young Moon Goddess is closely associated with the Maize Deity. Both divine beings were very similar to each other: both were portrayed as idealized youths dressed in similar netted jade clothing, and both are involved in agricultural processes of renewal. Both of their portraits are almost identical, so much so that at times it is difficult to determine who is portrayed. It was even theorized in earlier investigations that both deities in fact merged together and that this Maize-Moon conflation resulted in a third compound gender, and a superior composite entity. Such fusions of gender and identity are fairly common, not only in the Maya area but across other Indigenous traditions throughout Mesoamerica. Here unfolds yet another manifestation of the multifaceted and unbound identity of personified divine forces who, when effectively personified by ritual practitioners, granted powers and capabilities usually reserved for deities and other non-ordinary beings. But in this specific case, as more recent research by Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos has demonstrated, the Lunar Maize Deity and the Moon Goddess were understood to be different beings. It is evident that the Lunar Maize Deity is a member of a larger group of divine lunar beings (including a lunar death deity, a lunar jaguar war deity, and the lunar rabbit), but the Moon Goddess was the highest-ranking deity among them, and it was she who presided over all the rest, reigning supreme as a queen over her subjects and her lunar realm.

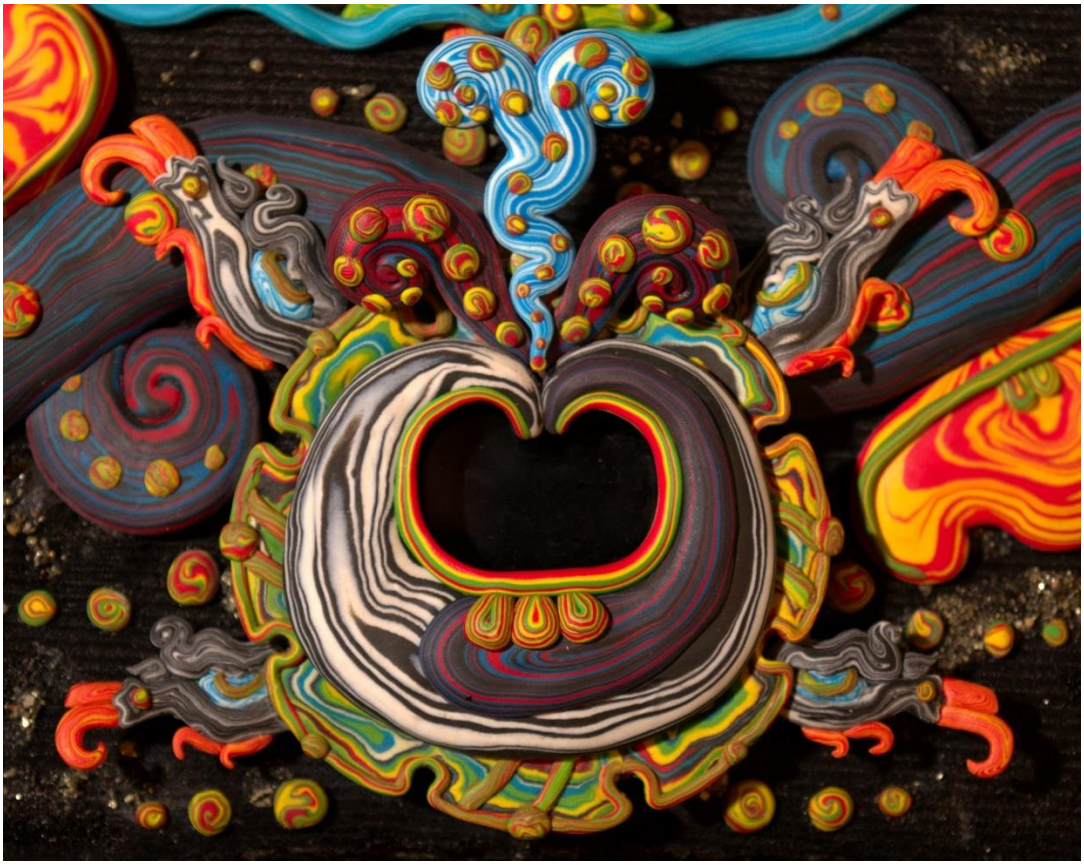


Figure 12. The Moon in the sculpture (note celestial cartouche surrounding the lunar hieroglyph, the four centipede heads projecting outwards, and the breath scrolls emerging from the top area).

A lobed celestial cartouche (also called solar cartouche), which can be conceptualized as an elaboration of the *yax* sign, meaning "new, first," but also "blue" and/or "green," partially emerges from the water-cloud band (Figure 12). The cartouche frames the hieroglyph for Moon, which reads *Uh* or *Uuw*, and which in turn encloses a small green obsidian mirror in the center. Four centipede heads project outwards from the lunar mirror assemblage. Traditionally, the Sun and Moon are configured into a polar but complementary primordial couple. The Classic Maya conceived of the lunar domain as a great watery cave inside the Earth that curiously also occupied the sky at night, and was set in contrast to the fiery celestial domain of the Sun Deity during daytime. It is worth noting that the realms of the underworld, in addition to being located underground, are ideologically interwoven with the starry night sky. As is the case elsewhere in Mesoamerican iconography, distinctions disappear at times, as the concepts overlap and combine with one another through the elaboration of signification complexes. For example, the Moon is just as related to blissful themes of fertility and birth as it is to more dreadful notions of disease and death. The Sun in turn is identified with life and rebirth, but it is also closely associated with concepts revolving around warfare and death. Similarly, even though earthly and lunar female deities are commonly associated with the western world direction, they are also associated with the primarily masculine eastern area, because the Sun and the other celestial bodies are perceived to emerge in that direction from the Earth, and are traditionally conceived of as being reborn there. The first pair of outwardly spiraling breath volutes in my sculpture emerge from the lunar crescent, expressing the notion that the force of vitality first originated from the primordial waters of creation and the cave-womb embodied by the Moon. The Moon crescent glyph is very

similar to the sign employed to name flooded caves, popularly called cenotes and *ch'en* by contemporary Maya people. Both hieroglyphs are curved and boney enclosures that contain circles or dots, the latter of which instantiate water droplets or bubbles and communicate the presence of precious water within said enclosures. In my sculpture, the obsidian mirror substitutes for these distinctive water icons inside the lunar crescent, since both mirrors and the surface of water converged as implements for scrying practices. These various correspondences derive from ancient signification systems, in which the Moon itself is conceptualized as a dark, cold, and wet cave, a prime underworld entrance, and more importantly, a primordial place of emergence. Furthermore, the Moon and flooded cave glyphs visually originate from the conventionalized bonny maws of a zoomorphic being, which is sometimes depicted with serpent characteristics but is usually identified as a deified skeletal centipede (Figure 13). Serpents, centipedes, and composites of both functioned in Classic Maya art as portentous conduits for the birth of humans, and very generally speaking, also as transcendent portals for the rebirth of divine beings and as transfigurative passages for sacred forces (see Figure 37). Paradoxically, but more in line with how dangerous they can be as carriers of poison and disease, centipedes and serpents are also feared as noxious creatures of the ground and are associated with filth, sickness, death, and by extension, underworldly domains.

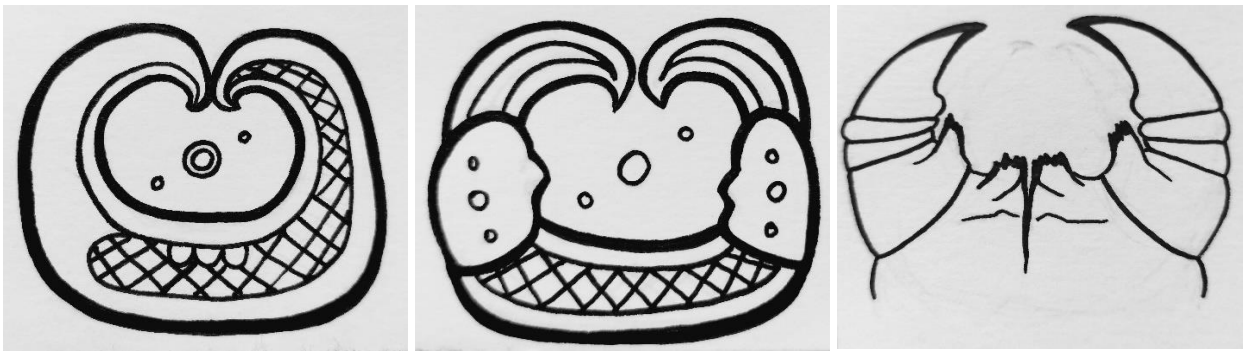


Figure 13. The *Uh* glyph (left), the *chee'n* glyph (center), and drawing of centipede maw (right).

Such seemingly contradictory metaphors linking the highly positive and benign concept of childbirth with such frightening and deadly creatures are indeed systematically concordant: although the importance of reproduction for the continuation of life is acknowledged and held in high regard throughout Mesoamerica, traditional views regarding sexuality and childbirth are not always all about positivity. Coitus is perceived in part as a dangerous, debilitating, and polluting activity, one of which humans have to be very cautious. In some areas, menstruation and childbirth are thought to produce, besides more benign outcomes such as fertility and new life, dreadful filth and potential disease. Death was a very real threat during pregnancy and childbirth in ancient Mesoamerica, due to widespread high rates of mortality for infants and mothers in labor. In present-day Mesoamerica, and even in non-traditional communities, the act of giving birth is referred to as "aliviarse" or "get well," characterizing pregnancy as a sort of disease that the woman is relieved from by giving birth. Serpents and centipedes are related to menses and female genitalia in general, and in the iconography of the Classic Maya, a birth or a rebirth could be portrayed through the image of a person or otherworldly entity emerging out of the maws of very large centipedes and serpents. The peculiar connection drawn between female sexuality and the threatening aspects of these creatures, especially the potentially poisonous or even deadly mouths of the latter as armed with pincers and sharp teeth, recalls the concept denominated by anthropologists as the "toothed vagina," or "vagina dentata," a recurring traditional theme appearing not only throughout the Indigenous Americas but indeed worldwide both in the past

and the present. Multiple folkloric and ethnographic accounts about powerful but dangerous women with toothed vaginas narrate, at times implicitly but others explicitly, how primordial agents, who are often male figures, remove the menacing teeth from the women's sexual organs, effectively disempowering them and exercising dominance over them. These rather wicked and antagonistic views revolving around femininity evidence the fundamental fears that men and patriarchal social institutions across the world have long expressed towards the mysteries of womanhood and particularly the immense power of women's sexuality. One of the most shameful and despicable recent consequences of such fears, and of the desperate attempts by the patriarchy in the US to control women, is the overthrow of Roe vs Wade by the US supreme court. Because this ruling essentially terminates women's rights to abortion, it was clearly executed to disempower women, but it is disguised in the preposterous excuse of saving unborn fetuses as argued by Christian nationalists. Hopefully, the right to access safe abortion services in the US is reinstated soon, because this unacceptable ruling puts women and young girls in great danger for the sake of imposing essentially asinine religious values.

The seemingly pessimistic Mesoamerican perspectives on female genitalia mentioned above are not exclusively negative nor derogatory. Another dimension of meaning is simultaneously present there, in which women are conceived of as inherent possessors of much more transcendent and immanent power to influence cosmic forces than men, and as owners of greater capabilities to operate the divine energy-in-motion. Menstrual blood is understood to be specially charged with very potent feminine energy, so much so that in some areas it is reportedly implemented in order to bewitch men, and if the severity of their wrongdoings against women justifies, men can even be emasculated. The superior abilities of women to influence divine energy in transcendent ways allow them to become very powerful sorceresses and healers. In Classic Maya art, royal and divine women are sometimes portrayed performing portentous childbirth rituals alongside enormous serpents, centipedes, and beings combining features of both. But the roles of these creatures as noxious and deadly agents seem to be nullified in these contexts, because they do not appear to be hostile at all toward the ladies. On the contrary, the mighty women are depicted fearlessly conjuring, controlling, and implementing these dangerous beings in order to deliver human and divine babies. Through the value edifices and signification constructs built around the mysteries of sex and childbirth, these images explicitly display women's great capabilities to dominate deadly agents of disease through ritual performance, and simultaneously evidence the women's power over their own sexuality and over newly born earthly and divine life.

Scholars like Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos and Alfredo López Austin encourage us to acknowledge that there is no concrete, definitive, or absolute version of Mesoamerican worldviews or creation accounts. Allowed by the multifaceted and boundless nature of the traditional signification systems, several variations of a recurring important account, which at times even seem to contradict one another, have existed side by side in the same cultural area, in both the ancient past as well as in the present. Different ontological qualifiers are implemented in each version, in order to highlight different aspects of cosmic forces, processes, and phenomena, and each varies according to the intended function and elaborations of meaning. Another reason for the coexistence of varying narratives is that, despite the significant differences between them, there are underlying core ideological or paradigmatic principles shared among all accounts, providing concordance not only regionally, but cross-culturally too. For example, in both Central Mexico and the Highland Maya area, there are corresponding Postclassic period narratives involving very important young goddesses of primordial origins. Prominent Central Mexican variants notably portray the young fertility goddess, named Xochiquetzal there, residing in a sacred garden-like location, a bountiful place of beauty, femininity, water fountains, luxuriant

flowering and fruiting plants, and abundance in general (namely Tamoanchan, a clear manifestation of Flower World). But the identity of the female deity fuses with the flowery place, so much so that it can be concretely asserted that she is an embodiment of the divine flowery dimension itself. Although both the Central Mexican and the Maya versions differ in many regards, they share an almost identical structure of signification. Very generally speaking, divine mandates regarding sacred trees were disobeyed by the goddesses or by other divinities. Significantly, the metaphoric elaborations implemented in the narratives of both regions are either explicit or very suggestive of sexual trespassing, and the divine women even end up giving birth to deities of high importance as a result. The transgressions were not thought to be bad or evil, and despite appearances, they are very different from the notion of sin in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The incidents were understood to be dangerous for the pre-established order of the universe, but were simultaneously conceived of as fundamental creation events of cosmic magnitudes. In past and present Maya creation accounts, which are parallel to many others found throughout Mesoamerica, there is generally a divine primordial woman, who is either identified as the Moon Goddess herself or as one of her aspects, but is usually associated with the Moon. Depending on the variation of the narrative, her father or both parents carefully guarded her inside a great mountain, or another kind of protective enclosure. The maiden eventually meets a divine hero, and later on, becomes miraculously pregnant. The child or children born from the ancestral mother eventually become the heroic divinities that bring order and harmony to the world, preparing it for the arrival of humanity. Through these pan-Mesoamerican accounts of creation, quintessential cosmogonic processes are explained, such as the beginning of reproduction, the establishment of sexuality, the origin of healing practices but also of sickness, and even the first dawn of the Sun and Moon.

One of the most widespread architectural structures involved in traditional healing practices, not only in Mesoamerica but also among other Indigenous peoples across the Americas, is the so-called sweat bath, sweat lodge, steam house, or steam bath house, known in Postclassic and present Central Mexico as *temazcal*, literally “vapor/steam house,” and in the Maya area during the Classic Period, as *pib naah*, literally "oven house." Throughout the ages, these ancestral buildings have been very important for healers and physicians, who have employed them to cleanse and heal people, not only physically but also spiritually, through the medicinal hot steam process. These extremely sacred spaces are quintessential for the prehispanic institution of midwifery, because in ancient times steam baths were principally implemented for childbirth, and also for treating women in pre and post-labor. However, the steam bath house itself has to be treated with the utmost respect and solemnity, since it can be as dangerous as it is beneficial. Main elder female divinities, often functioning as grandmothers or caretakers in creation accounts, have been very closely identified with steam bath houses throughout Mesoamerica. In fact, the bath house structures themselves are often considered to be the same as the goddesses, since the healing properties of steam baths are conceived of as earthly manifestations of the prototypical grandmother deity herself and her powers. The old goddess figure is often portrayed as an important cosmic creatrix, but also as harmful and antagonistic towards the same solar, lunar, and maize heroic youths that appear in the accounts of the missing father and the genesis of death. Some of the Hñähñu and Nahua variants of a widely distributed narrative about the divine aged woman describe the deadly retribution devised for her: the young heroes trapped her in the primordial steam bath house, and increased the temperature so much that she died and burned completely. An envoy (often a toad) is sent by the heroes to dispose of the deceased lady’s ashes, but the character ends up opening the ash container to take a look before completing the mission. Flies, wasps, and many other despicable insects and pests emerged from the bag, biting and stinging the curious character. The noxious creatures have

inhabited the world since these events took place. Other contemporary versions of this account narrate how the heroic youths established that the aged goddess would remain in the steam bath structure, essentially fusing the identity of the divine grandmother with the bath house itself. In one of the versions from Oaxaca, the youths state: "You will remain here, holy mother, and you will eat from what the children who will be born in the future give you. If they don't feed you, the children will die, everyone will come to you to have strength" (Chinchilla-Mazariegos 2017). This passage communicates the establishment of ceremonial steam bath structures in primordial times, along with the institution of ritual acts of feeding and bringing offerings to the sacred buildings. Such reverential offerings serve as a way to petition for favorable childbirths. On the other hand, these actions of devotion are intended to provide sustenance for the elder female deity, who is made present by the great powers of traditional steam bath practices. The ancient narratives connect the creation of diseases, poisonous insects, and undesirable pests in general, with the origins of the healing qualities of the steam bath and of medicinal practices at large. In a characteristic Mesoamerican manner, the archetypal grandmother deity is conceived of as being at once immensely benign and extremely dangerous.

The elder goddess from these widespread contemporary accounts is clearly analogous to the Postclassic Nahua "Grandmother of the Steam Bath," or Temazcalteci. Images of this important deity were set at steam bath houses, and she was especially venerated by midwives and healers. Temazcalteci combined and overlapped with other young and elder goddesses, like Coatlicue, Cihuacoatl-Quilaztli, Itzpapalotl, Tlazolteotl, Xochiquetzal, among others. In the literature, these Postclassic female divinities are grouped together as Central Mexican expressions of the fundamental concept of the Earth Mother Goddess, which has existed throughout the Americas from times immemorial and up to the present, evidencing Indigenous people's profound respect for the natural environment, and their intimate relationship with it. To mention a couple of examples from elsewhere in Mesoamerica, Chac Chel is the Maya counterpart of this principal divine figure and corresponds with Lady Nine Grass of the Ñuu Dzaui (Mixtec). Beyond this cultural area, there is the Quechua goddess Pachamama of South America, as well as Spider Woman or Grandmother Spider, who is present among many Native American nations (especially in the Southwest area of the US and Northwest Mexico, or Oasisamerica), and The Old Woman Who Never Dies or Earthmother, revered by the ancient Mississippian peoples and some of their current descendants, like the ϟΛZΛZO (Osage). The Postclassic Nahua of Central Mexico had a personification of this overarching deity, named Teteoinnan, "Mother of the Deities," who was also called Toci, "Our Grandmother," and Tlalli Iyollo, "Heart of the Earth." All these goddesses had several paradigmatic associations, such as grand creative might, the Earth's fertility, the sustenance of humanity, divine healing powers, sacred motherhood, and childbirth, as well as other feminine aspects of the cosmos at large. Significantly, the advanced age of these paramount deities attests to their transcendental knowledge and wisdom, which were maintained for their descendants, the divine ancestors of today's Indigenous people, who in turn have passed these sacred intellectual achievements onto the new generations in the form of the Costumbres, or Old Ways.

Another important aspect of some of these female deities as personifications of the Earth, namely their function as devourers of corpses, is evidenced by some of their superficially frightening portrayals during the Postclassic period, such as the fantastic Coatlicue Monolith from the Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, in Mexico City. During the Postclassic, Earth deities were often depicted with long claws, prominent teeth on wide-open mouths, and general skeletal imagery, along with severed or disembodied human body parts, especially hearts and hands. On the one hand, such seemingly menacing characteristics directly link the goddesses to the powerful but volatile Tzitzimime, specifically the Cihuateteo, otherworldly female beings

who could assist ritual practitioners in either damaging or curing people. Even in areas and times in which the multifaceted Tzitzimime are not present, Earth female deities are often associated with general Mesoamerican sorcery and curing practices of great antiquity that are still conducted today. On the other hand, the imagery of disembodied human body parts derives from the practice of burying the dead into the Earth as a way to feed them to her. One of the main purposes of humans is to gratefully sustain the living Earth's divine powers and processes of life renewal, because in turn the latter generously sustain humanity. In prehispanic times, the nourishment of the Earth was not only achieved through people's arduous ritual labors and offerings as in the present, but with people's own highly sacred self-sacrificial blood and their bodies too, along with the vital essences these contain and which eventually have to return to their original source, the ancestral Earth. Since all vital essences and energies had originated from the Earth in the first place, they had to be given back so that she could provide sustenance and nourishment for the continuation and renewal of all life.

Once again, I translate a few lines of the surrealist poem Piedra de Sol, in which Octavio Paz evocatively expresses a subjective experience of an oneiric meeting with the divine feminine aspect of the cosmos:

> …I have forgotten your name, Melusina,
> Laura, Isabel, Perséfona, María,
> you have all faces and none,
> you are all hours and none,
> you seem like the tree and like the cloud,
> you are all birds and a star,
> you resemble the edge of the sword
> and the executioner's cup of blood,
> advancing ivy, that traps and uproots
> the soul and divides it from itself,
>
> writing of fire on jade,
> crack in the rock, queen of serpents,
> vapor column, fountain in the boulder,
> lunar circle, rock of the eagles,
> aniseed, minuscule and immortal thorn
> that gives immortal sorrows,
> shepherdess of submarine valleys
> and guardian of the valley of the dead,
> liana that hangs from the border of vertigo,
> bindweed, poisonous plant,
> flower of resurrection, grape of life,
> lady of the flute and of lightning-flash,
> jasmine terrace, salt on the wound,
> bouquet of roses for the executed victim,
> snow in August, moon of the gallows,
> writing of the sea on basalt,
> writing of wind on the desert,
> testament of the sun, pomegranate, spike,
>
> …ghostly years, circular days

that arrive at the same patio, at the same wall,
the instant burns and one single face
are the successive faces of the flame,
all names are a single name
all faces are a single face,
all centuries are a single instant
and forever and ever
the future's path is closed by a pair of eyes…

(Paz, 1957)

The multifaceted identity of the primordial elder goddess unfolds much further still. As previously mentioned, this venerable divine grandmother is essentially the feminine half of what can be conceptualized as a transcendent supreme being, who along with its multiple aspects and personifications, orchestrated the creation of the entire universe in the deep past. It is generally understood that this principal deity manifests as a couple of immensely powerful old mages, one female and the other one male, but also as a single one of dual essence and boundlessly dynamic nature. The advanced age of these primordial divinities concords with the fact that cosmic creation occurred in extreme antiquity. As is the case around the world, old age is held in very high regard in Mesoamerica, as it brings knowledge, provides experience, and rewards with wisdom. But in Mesoamerica, aging also blesses with the transcendent capacities to effectively operate vital cosmic forces and influence over the divine energy-in-motion that makes up reality, faculties that endow sorcerers, diviners, and healers, with their special powers. Throughout the region, the very creation of the cosmos is itself considered to be the triumphant outcome of the ultimate implementation of these transcendent abilities by the mysterious creator deities, the first ritual practitioners. In addition, the universal magnitude of their creative capabilities qualifies the mages as archetypal artists, who are the begetters of all creativity and inspiration. A divine Indigenous figure that appears throughout the ages across the Americas is that of the weaver, who is virtually always female and is often linked to spiders, the natural weavers par excellence.

There is a long Mesoamerican tradition of depicting goddesses of various kinds, who are often directly related to fertility and cosmic creation, either with weaving attributes and implements or directly portrayed in the act of weaving. Weaving is an activity characteristic of female domains of production, and in the Maya area, it is intimately related to childbirth through various metaphors. Noteworthy is the notion that both processes, weaving pieces of cloth and birthing children, are evidence of women's generative powers and creative capabilities. The divine weaver is indeed the female unfoldment of the main creator deity, and she weaves-births the myriad of entities and elements that constitute the fabric of existence into being. Within this signification system, reality itself is conceived of as a prodigious cosmic cloth, the threads of which interconnect and substantiate all the aspects that compose the entire universe. Correspondingly, flowery songs recorded in early sixteenth-century texts from central Mexico, portray the principal deity, here named Life Giver, as a creator who simultaneously paints and recites earthly beings into existence. Such convention of speech conflates the sacred action of painting a book with the ritual vocalization of its contents, in a sort of synesthetic procreative expression where the melodic enunciations of ritual speech and the chromatic brilliance of flowery paint are undifferentiated. Thus, the creator paints-recites the universe into being as a great cosmic book-song. The Maya versions of the creative elders, Chac Chel and her consort

(possibly named Itzam), are at times portrayed as artists, in the form of a weaver and as a scribe respectively.

The pairing of the complementary male and female figures expresses the mysteries of sexuality and its fruitfulness, as manifested not only in pleasure and childbirth, but also in sexual corruption and diseases, and reflects the Mesoamerican notion that people only become whole when they form a marital union. Furthermore, the first divine couple can merge together into a complementary dual and complete being, often called "Father-Mother," or "Fathers-Mothers," or as the "Owner (of the Mountain, of Earth, of Wealth, or of Life)" by contemporary Indigenous people. On the other hand, the supreme pair can also divide further into a group of four primordial entities. In turn, the multiple aspects of these four partitions themselves unfold to become the foundation for the myriad of beings, forces, essences, and other manifestations that encompass the totality of divine expressions, all of which compose the entire cosmos. The universal creator's ability to manifest as either a single entity, a couple, or a multitude, is made possible not only by its immense powers, but also by the boundless qualities of the divine energy-in-motion, sacred essences, and cosmic forces that in turn compose such supreme being/s. Varying according to the necessary functions, the creator manifests in innumerable guises, with its presence and influence permeating throughout the multidimensional universe: from the generation of sacred cosmic essences and forces; the establishment of the four world directions, the cosmic center, and the three main cosmic levels; along with the institution of the calendar (and with it the beginning of time). The old supreme entity, who is at once many and one, is inseparable from its derived aspects, ramifications, and even from its creations, since the entire universe is infused with its identity. Through elaborate processes of transformation and complex relationship systems, the principal deity, in all its multifaceted aspects and innumerable manifestations, continuously engages in the transcendent maintenance and revitalizing sustenance of the ever-unfolding living cosmos as it constantly comes into being. In my sculpture, my portrayals of this supreme deity are attached to the extremes of the *polaw-muyal* undulating band in its dual Maya form, as the aged mages Itzam at left and Chac Chel at right (Figure 14). Itzam wears the knot of his characteristic net headscarf, a scribe's paint container made from a cut conch shell, and an ear ornament marked with three dots, the latter of which associates him with the notion of the Earth turtle and world centrality. Chac Chel wears an abstract jaguar ear ornament, a weaving spindle, and perhaps more remarkably, a serpent knotted to her hair. The reasons for attaching the portrait heads of the primordial male and female creators to the water-cloud band are their main qualities, which characterize them as polarizing but complementary to one another, and also the fact that both are primary personified expressions of the same divine and unitary energy-in-motion that substantiates all of existence. The elder mages are presented as the extreme aspects of the same continuum, the gaseous waters of being from which everything emerges.

Figure 14a

Figure 14b

Figure 14. The Maya supreme creator deities as a pair of elder mages a) Chac Chel and b) Itzam.

The Resplendent Darkness: Flowery Mirrors, Sacred Scriptures, and Traditional Ritual Practices

Flowery mirrors are placed at the bottom part of the image in my sculpture, to the sides and below the underworld water-cloud band (Figure 15). Both of these icons are based on ancient Maya medallion-like mirrors, commonly composed of a flower with an infixed *ak'bal* glyph (meaning "darkness") and a characteristic jeweled stamen emanating downwards from the blossom (Figure 15c). The *ak'bal* mirrors originate as an attribute of the so-called Principal Bird Deity, the Maya variant of an important avian character that recurs throughout Mesoamerican cosmic creation accounts. This icon is also one of the main components of the hieroglyphic name and portrait of one of the principal Classic Maya deities, provisionally called Itzamnaaj or Itzam-Kokaaj, held as an idealized aged ruler of the celestial divine realms. In Classic Maya iconography, the Principal Bird Deity can merge with Itzamnaaj into a conflated divine figure. Significantly, Itzamnaaj is evidenced to be an aspect of Itzam, who was conceived of as a sort of archetypal and exemplar specialist of traditional Maya ritual practices, and one of the main divinities who participated in the latest creation or renewal of the world. In my sculpture, the Principal Bird Deity perches on the breath volutes emanating from the central flower of the eastern World Tree, alluding to the otherworldly quality of the participants and of the scene at large (Figure 16). As traditionally depicted, my bird wears the *ak'bal* mirror on the forehead and a three-pointed element hanging from a jade-bead necklace, and it displays the distinctive feathered serpent heads as wings. Present throughout the ages in Mesoamerican images, bird-tree configurations often indicate directional sacred trees or the cosmic center, the World Tree itself as *axis mundi*.

Figure 15a

Figure 15b

Figure 15c

Figure 15d

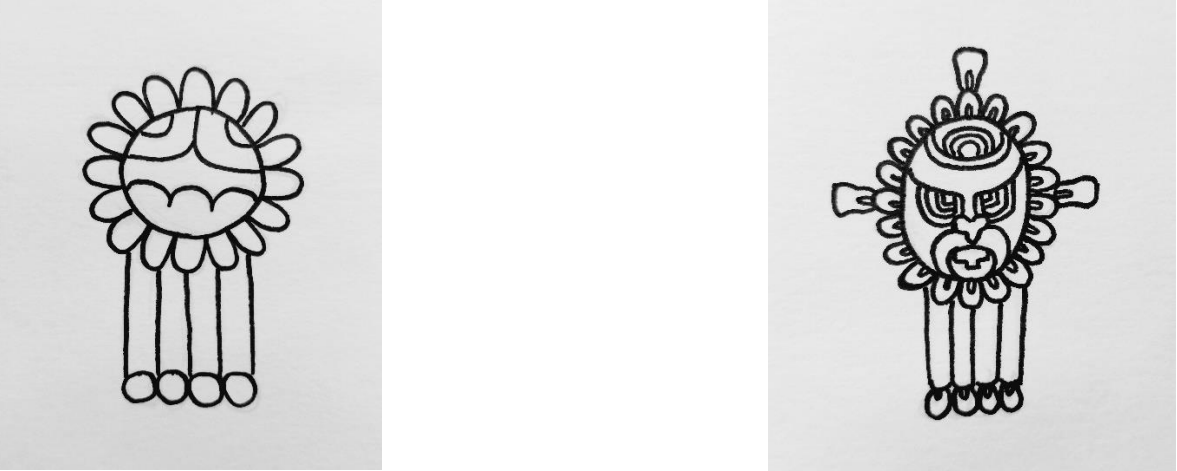


Figure 15. Images of mirrors: a) flowery mirror with the *k'in* (sun) icon inside, b) flowery mirror with the regular *ak'bal* (darkness) icon inside, c) *ak'bal* medallion, d) medallion with personified polished stone icon.

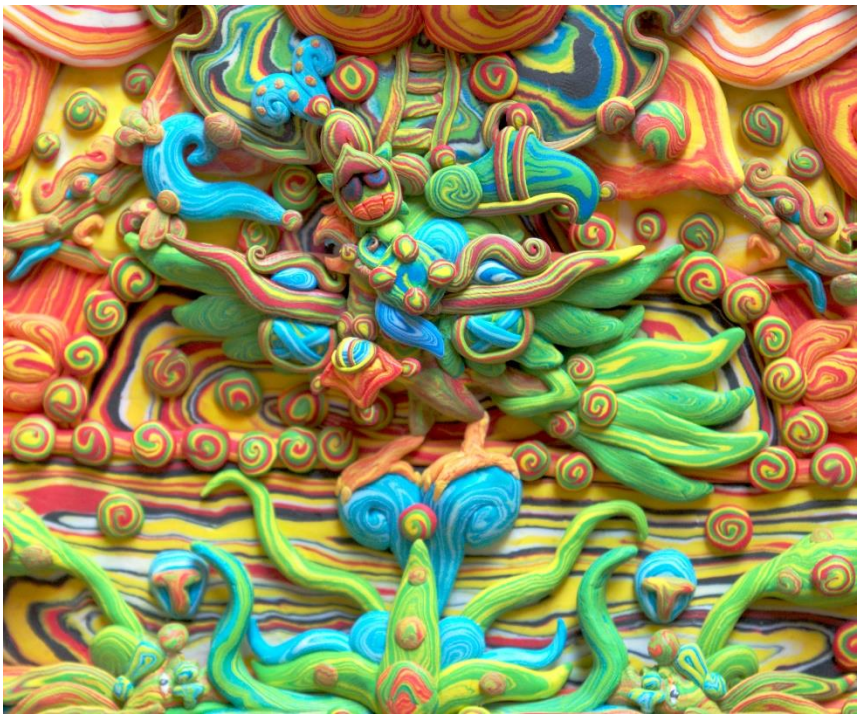


Figure 16. Principal Bird Deity singing while standing on the central tree's breath scrolls.

The flower located to the right side of my sculpture's water-cloud band is a classic portrayal of this iconic mirror, as a floral cartouche enclosing the *ak'bal* glyph in the center (Figure 15b). More than providing negative attributes, the *ak'bal* glyph here color-codes the center of the flower, which depicts a powerful divinatory mirror made from dark obsidian glass. The flower on the left side is modified to include the *k'in* ("day, Sun") glyph in place of the normal *ak'bal* (Figure 15a). This is done so that the left flower portrays a pyrite mosaic mirror, which can be conceptualized as a qualitative and complementary polarity to the obsidian mirror. When both *k'in* and *ak'bal* glyphs are placed together, they evoke cyclic celestial movement,

which is exemplified by the Sun as it passes through underworldly realms during the night and the sky realms during the day. In fact, the Moon and the Sun are themselves associated with the capabilities of mirrors because both celestial bodies, like mirrors, function as passageways for the transit of sacred beings and forces. In order to allude to this notion, I have placed polished stones within the two main solar and lunar glyphs in my sculpture. The four-petal solar flower, which is set above the pyramidal platform, encloses a small jade mirror. There is a lobed celestial cartouche emerging from the water-cloud band, with the full Moon hieroglyph (*Uh/Uuw*) enclosing a small green obsidian mirror at its center. The placement of this central mirror at the bottom of the image and the other two mirror icons to the sides implies the three of them are located within, and originate from, the dark watery depths of the underworldly realms. Again, the themes of darkness and underworldly realms are intended to evoke much more than death and negativity here: more directly, they allude to the profound and mysterious transcendent powers attributed to mirrors (especially those made from obsidian). Nonetheless, both benign and malign dimensions are indeed simultaneously present within these signification systems revolving around mirrors. Just as in the case of sacred essences and forces, the extraordinary powers of mirrors can yield either benefit, ruin, or anything in between, depending on how properly they are engaged with and deployed, as well as on the intentions and capabilities of the ritual practitioners involved.

Divinatory mirrors have been of high importance for traditional ritual practices in all of Mesoamerica from extreme antiquity to the present, and they get honored with complex signification systems built around them. To capable specialists, they are not simply inanimate objects. Instead, with their extraordinary attributes and qualities, mirrors are considered to be powerful animate media that allow ritual practitioners to acquire divine vision and inspired contemplation of transcendent dimensions. They can be deployed as powerful intermediaries for scrying, as vehicles for communicating with the ancestors and other divine beings, and as passageways for contacting special forces, phenomena, and realms of the multidimensional cosmos. Thus, mirrors are conceptualized as prodigious apertures for accessing the constantly transforming network of relations that encompasses all of existence. Because of these functions as portals, mirrors exist as cave-like openings set in between the earthly world and non-ordinary planes of existence. People are depicted engaged in conversation in a curious scene painted on a Classic Maya ceramic vase pictured in Mary Miller and Simon Martin's great book "Courtly Art of the Ancient Maya" (Plate 17 of that work). But in remarkable addition, a mirror talks as well (or rather, an otherworldly being speaks through it), and it emits a speech scroll that playfully points to the hieroglyphic caption accompanying the scene. Several flowery *ak'bal* mirrors appear in the fantastic Late Preclassic Maya murals from Structure Sub 1-A at San Bartolo, Guatemala. One of them is depicted as if it were independently floating in front of a Principal Bird Deity, in one of the directional world tree scenes. *K'uh* circles set in the form of rain icons fall from underneath the mirror, and large breath volutes emanate from its front area. The flowery mirror is thus presented breathing as a living being, and as a transcendent portal, it simultaneously emanates sacred essences. In ancestral elaborations of meaning, mirrors are associated with the reflective surface of water, and scrying can be equally done either with stone mirrors or containers filled with water. From the Preclassic Olmec traditions onwards, divinatory mirrors were even identified with the very center of the world, substituting for the primordial waters as the great portal from where the sacred mountain and tree of creation emerge. Itzamnaaj and the Principal Bird Deity wear the flowery *ak'bal* mirror at the center of the brow as part of an elaborate headband, indicating the associations shared by both deities regarding divination and ritual practices, and perhaps even evoking notions of cosmic centrality. Also at the San Bartolo murals in Guatemala, the *ak'bal* mirrors from the floral headbands worn by the Principal

Bird Deities are composed of nearly identical circular forms and color patterns as the *ak'bal* elaborations from the mouth-cave of the flowery Mountain of Sustenance from a nearby scene. This visual convention serves to associate the mirror's mystical powers with the notion of the mysterious and remote origins of people and sustenance from the deified mountain. I have included two *ak'bal* icons to the sides of the zoomorphic mountain in my sculpture, and they are located between the jaguars and the large flowers that enclose quartz crystals. These icons are colored like the *ak'bal* mirror worn by my Principal Bird Deity, as a reference to the imagery and meanings depicted on the San Bartolo murals just mentioned.

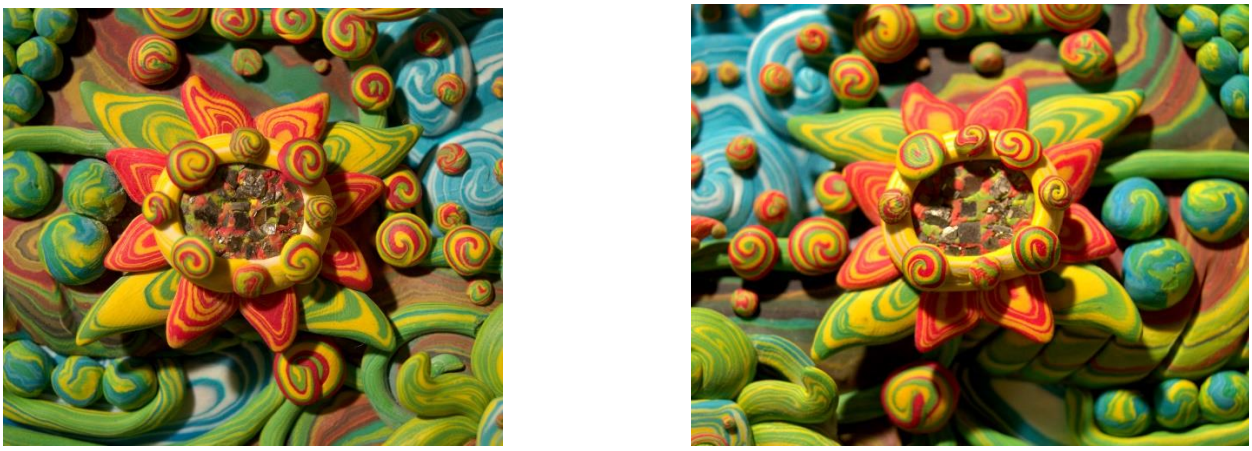


Figure 17. The rustic pyrite mirrors on the sculpture.

For the most part, the discussion has been focused on mirrors made from dark obsidian glass. Other equally quintessential mirrors in Mesoamerica are set with ceramic or wooden backings, the front surfaces of which are inlaid with iron ore plate mosaics, usually composed of polygonal pyrite tesserae. A remarkable example of this kind of scrying mirror was excavated in Bonampak, Mexico. In my sculpture, two very rustic flowery pyrite mirrors are placed to the sides of the offering vessel from which the Flowering Tree emerges (Figure 17). Various studies by Andrew Sherer, Michael D. Coe, Mary Miller, Simon Martin, and others, show that for the Classic Maya, one important application of these kinds of media, among their extensive deployment in a great variety of ritual practices, was to be set inside tombs, often positioned near the feet or head areas and facing the body of the deceased. At times ceramic containers substitute for mirrors within the burials. Whether it was through the imagery depicted on them (which includes mirror and sacred essence icons), or their contents (related to fire making and the flow of divine energies of vitality), vessels were implemented to stimulate the mobility of transcendent and immanent forces, just like mirrors would. A person's death, especially when it was someone of high importance or significance like a royal person or a spiritual leader, created a social void, a great disruption of balance that prompted complex and fervent ritual behaviors among the living. Even though these customs are prominently evidenced in elite burials, such mortuary ritual processes were also practiced by the common folk, albeit more modestly. To a significant degree, rites of this nature were part of more elaborate ceremonial performances conducted in order to transform the body and the complete internment into a true manifestation of the cosmic center, a living image of the *axis mundi* itself as it originally emerged in the prodigious form of the first sprouting corn plant during world creation times. Therefore, the transfigured burial arrangement functioned as a primary point of connection between the underworldly domains, the earthly plane, and the celestial realms, as well as a principal link between the deep past and the contemporary moment. Through such properly ordered

arrangements and ritualism, practitioners effectively recreated in their own times the exemplar divine rebirth of the Maize Deity as a personification of the *axis mundi* from extreme antiquity. Consecutively, the sacred essences and forces of vitality from the recently deceased person, now converted into a deified ancestor, could properly transition into other states of being and other dimensions of the universe. In later sections, there will be further elaboration regarding the Maize Deity and its connection to the human life cycle, notions of death and rebirth, as well as to cosmic order themes. The reflective capabilities of mirrors qualify them as implements of luminescence and are thus inherently related to Flower World signification systems. Other implementations of mirrors happened during fire drilling and fire-making rituals, but also during communication at a distance: the properly channeled heat from the Sun can be employed to start fires, and the focused resplendency of sunlight and moonlight reflected on mirrors can be applied to communicate over large distances (and indeed, faster and more discreetly than sound).

According to the work of various people, such as Karl Taube, in Mesoamerica, reflections have long been conceived of as powerful manifestations and as prodigious points of connection with transcendent domains of existence and non-ordinary cosmic dimensions. The altered image of a viewer, as reflected back from the lustrous surface of gems and polished stones, is similar and simultaneously different from the person observing. These kinds of reflections can be deployed to trigger introspection, and in special circumstances, can even serve to catapult master ritual practitioners into rapturous ecstatic trances and transcendent states of supra consciousness. With the proper capabilities, reflections empower these master specialists to effectively interact with otherworldly sacred forces, access prodigious possibilities, and obtain wondrous abilities, all of which can even enable them to temporarily embody the deities themselves. Because of their immaterial nature, reflections are intrinsically related to numinous qualities: they are parallel to the concept of luminous sacred essences and are polarizing but complementary to the notion of a person's shadow. Not only literally observing images from mirrors is accounted for here, but also self-reflection as the intellectual practice of contemplating, examining, understanding, and communing with one's internal or psychological cosmos, in order to eventually revitalize, empower, and enhance oneself.

Ethnographic studies reveal that for present Mesoamerican practitioners, mirrors are capable of somehow recording information. This special capability is conceived of as being similar in nature to the faculties of the human senses and mind, when they experience, process, and assimilate the inner and outer cosmos. In the traditions of the contemporary Wixáritari people, the mara'akame apprentices complete pilgrimages to different sacred places and shrines as part of their training to become masters. Mara'akame can be translated as "person who knows to dream," and operates as an honorary title for healer-singers, people who act as wise guides for a proper and dignified life, as specialized divination and ritual practitioners, as well as many other social and spiritual endeavors. The novices get assistance from their ritual implements, including mirrors, which function as intermediaries for communication with the divine forces and entities residing at the locations visited during training. Simultaneously obtained are transcendent energies that magnify the trainee's own powers. The imprint of the understanding acquired gets inscribed into both the apprentice's mind and the mirror. But the training's objective is not centered on only acquiring knowledge. The emphasis is placed on applying the ancestral methods of development and going through the processes that grant knowledge. Value is placed more on the actions and experiences of the apprentice going through the transformative journey, which eventually rewards unfoldment of the self, transcendence into higher conditions of existence, and consecutively, the prestigious title of master mara'akame.

In antiquity, the act of engaging in self-reflection was analogous to the act of reading a sacred book of destinies, because both practices converged in their objective of attaining vision and understanding regarding humans in relation to the mechanisms of the living universe as it continuously comes into being, and the workings of the ongoing unfolding of cosmic creation. Furthermore, it is even possible that in Mesoamerica, the activity of reading information from books could have been developed from the much older practice of reading ethereal images and studying visions from mirrors. In other words, books themselves and the very act of reading, might have been inspired by, and created after, the traditional practice of reading and interpreting reflections from mirrors along with the extremely ancient art of scrying. Books and their implementation are themselves part of old customs long established during Mesoamerica's Formative era. Mark Zender tells us that there is material evidence of paper-making tools from about 1500 to 1000 BCE. These tools for beating plant barks and fibers were deployed for the large-scale manufacture of paper, which was almost certainly implemented for early forms of writing. This is in fact the original writing system in Mesoamerica, developed by the ingenious and innovative ancient people of the Olmec era (at around 1000 BCE), and the groundbreaking catalyst for the other writing systems that would be extensively implemented later, like the hieroglyphic and pictographic systems of the Maya, Beni Zaa (Zapotec), Ñuu Dzaui (Mixtec), and Nahua. One of the most transcendent pieces of remaining Indigenous literature is the holy Book of The Dawn of Life of the K'iche' Maya, the Popol Vuh. Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos and Allen Christenson's research evidence that, by modifying the Spanish alphabet, the wondrous Popol Vuh was written from its oral form in the K'iche' language during the colonial period, and it relates a prodigious version of the K'iche' account of cosmic origins. The Indigenous K'iche' writers state that they wrote the epic in this way due to the absence of the *nab'e wujil*, or "original book," where they could access and observe the ancestral creation narrative. Significantly, the authors of the Popol Vuh conceived of the mysterious original book as an *ilb'al*, or "instrument of seeing." For K'iche' people today, this same term is applied to telescopes, binoculars, eyeglasses, and also crystals, the last of which are implemented by ritual specialists in order to see beyond ordinary reality. Indeed, the writers understood that the original scriptures enabled specialized practitioners to not only comprehend the immediately visible information that was directly painted or written, but with the proper capacities, development, and wisdom, it was also possible to attain knowledge well beyond what is depicted on the pages, and essentially gain insight of transcendental order by perceiving the otherwise unseen aspects of the cosmos.

Ethnographic studies reveal that present practitioners can attain knowledge by reading special books they possess in the waking world, or by reading sacred scriptures in transcendent cosmic dimensions, the latter of which can be accessed through dreams and other extraordinary means. Parallel conceptions appear across Mesoamerica, where books are evidenced to have long been classified together with other powerful ritual paraphernalia that can provide visual and cognitive enhancements for specialists. Although it is now common to refer to Mesoamerican codices as books, and the complex imagery depicted on them as writing, these traditional manuscripts could be operated as much more than simple documents that store information. Codices were expertly created in ancient times, often by groups of master sages and artists, as multifaceted media deployed by specialized practitioners for a variety of purposes, including divinatory gambling games akin to *patolli*. Just as in the case of sacred bundles, codices could also function as integral parts of transportable altar settings implemented during ritual performances of divination and healing, either inside temples, on top of mountains, within the depths of caves, or at other holy places in the environment. It is tempting to assign precise values or identities to places, events, deities, and other phenomena portrayed in Indigenous manuscripts.

However, as Katarzyna Mikulska and others insightfully elucidate in recent studies, these images are evidenced to have been conceptualized as contextually fluid, temporarily defined, and highly complex compositional mosaics made from a dynamic corpus of graphic components that not only crystalize and reveal varying meanings, values, and qualities, but also beget apertures for further elaborations of significance and for deepening comprehension of cosmic unfoldment. The complex information depicted in ancient scriptures and other media of divine vision could potentially enable specialists to accurately visualize non-ordinary reality and even primordial events from creation accounts, along with divinities and ancestors, and to contemplate all with equivalent or superior degrees of experiential fidelity to those that characterize immediate sensorial perception. Indeed, during pre-colonial times, the highly evocative and meaningful contents of these media were implemented by master practitioners for the enhancement of their visionary capabilities. Through their powerful mind's eye, these ritual specialists were able to behold and comprehend the profound depths of the meanings and ancestral values that unfold from traditional graphic mosaics, which in turn spring from the prodigious Old Ways. Such marvelous understanding would ultimately bestow transcendental wisdom and power upon the privileged few who had what it took to wield them.

Even the materials a codex was composed of, including amate tree fibers or animal hides and organic pigments, were highly valuable and very sacred in their own right. This was especially true of pigments, which were infused with actual plants and colorful flowers, literally prime flowery matter. Such botanical materials endowed the precious manuscript with their highly esteemed inherent qualities, like the brilliant and vivid colors of flowers, which ultimately originate from Flower World itself, and were even conceived of as manifestations or materializations of it. In ritual contexts, speech, song, and general performance, are all like flowers, in the sense that they are ephemeral, but also beautiful, powerful, and generative: "Mesoamerican works of "art" were perceived as sharing the same essence of what they depicted, so that a pictorial manuscript would have physically embodied its own oral enunciation… Thanks to [the flowery matter of organic pigments utilized to paint books], the precious but volatile words of ritual speech (songs, spells, calendric divinations, etc…) would have been materialized in the enduring, colorful pages that we can still appreciate today" (Domenici 2021). Significantly, the elaborate imagery portrayed on sacred scriptures was understood to be imbued with the actual transcendent power and divine essences of the very entities and concepts either directly portrayed on the pages, or those only alluded to metaphorically and in between the lines. Through the ontological aperture provided by these elaborations of signification, specialists were able to invoke these great powers and beings during ritual performance, making them manifest through oration, prayer, and song, by deploying special terms and ritual language. Thus, practitioners would personally summon these forces and entities, inviting them to partake in rituals and assist in acts of healing, sorcery, and divination.

H'ilol or *H'ilel*, is a contemporary Tzotzil Maya term for the expert practitioner of the ritual traditions, and it translates directly as "seer." Erik Velásquez García's research shows that this designation is clearly descriptive of the special capabilities of such a person, as someone who sees beyond what ordinary existence allows. Such specialists can gaze into the depths of mountains where the ancestral sacred essences reside, and are able to perceive divine aspects of reality, by prodigiously transcending not only the normal capacities of sight and the senses but of the mind too. These wondrous abilities are facilitated and amplified through empowering instances of enhanced consciousness and transcendental perception, both of which are usually achieved in ritual settings. An important point worth emphasizing is that, in this system of

signification, the act of seeing is clearly meant in a proactive sense, as in thorough observation, and it is associated with marvelous feats of witnessing the unseen, understanding it, and consecutively, attaining knowledge and wisdom of transcendent order. Thus, by extension of meaning, *H'ilol* implies the practitioner is also a "witness," a "clairvoyant" even, and therefore, also a "knower," or "person who sees and (therefore) knows." Far from being overlooked as passive or mundane as it often is in Western quotidian experience, eyesight is a very powerful and generative faculty to the Maya: "[the eye] not only receives images from the outer world, but positively affects and changes that world through the power of sight - in short, it behaves as an 'emanating eye' that establishes communion between internal will and external result… among the Yucatec Maya, ethnography tells us sight had an 'agentive quality' through 'willful act(s)'..." (Houston and Taube, 2000). Indeed, light itself, as closely identified with eyesight, is also agentive. Light, along with the celestial bodies from which it originated, was even portrayed traditionally in art as eyes and eyeballs across Mesoamerica. Astronomically aligned architecture and people witness the Moon, Sun, stars, and other celestial bodies traversing the sky as perceived from the Earth. Complementarily, the luminous celestial bodies themselves are witnesses, gazing back at the earthly plane with their prodigious light, which in turn serves to bridge the distant heavens with the world of humans.

Every major ritual aspect that can possibly be included, from the meanings involved, adequate timing of events and actions, music and singing, lucid dreaming, paraphernalia like sacred bundles and psychoactive sacraments, and even the very ways in which the traditional practices themselves are performed, all serve as the means employed by practitioners to bridge together a variety of aspects of experiential reality. Such diverse components of liturgy provide prodigious psychic referents and enhancements, which are actively implemented by master ritual specialists, allowing them wondrous access to supreme power. In turn, these master ritualists innately possess the extraordinary might and cognitive abilities required for the effective concentration, proper mobilization, and triumphant manifestation of sacred cosmic forces and spiritual energies conjured in rites, along with their intended effects. Throughout Indigenous communities in Mesoamerica today, the transcendent and immanent forces and powers possessed by master ritual practitioners can be inherited from parents, grandparents, or other relatives and previous generations, but they cannot be learned by just anyone. In general, the unique capabilities necessary for someone to be able to properly wield sacred powers, become mighty healers or sorcerers, navigate extra-dimensional time and space, and transcend normal existence, are determined by who the person is from birth. Researchers sometimes consider ritual practitioners to be powerful because of a special kind of knowledge, understanding, or wisdom they might possess, which in part is true. But even this arcane knowledge is granted to specialized ritualists because they are essentially born different from regular humans in the first place. Even the fundamental composition of their bodies is different, and they are oftentimes considered to be of a higher order of being than the rest of the population. Few privileged people are born with the exceptional preconditions that, as inalienable components of their very identity, provide the intrinsic potentiality for becoming master practitioners of ritualism. In order to fully develop and be able to freely unfold their transcendent powers, these special people do need to properly learn and train, usually under the supervision of experienced ritualists, but some can even do it on their own. It is at this turning point of non-ordinary flourishing that special knowledge and wisdom come into play. But a significant aspect of this particular kind of knowledge has little to do with learning information, which is generally what would be popularly understood as gaining knowledge in Western culture. This arcane Indigenous knowledge is more like an extra sense, an additional faculty, or a special divine gift that is bestowed upon the few who are different from birth, and it lays beyond the range of possible capabilities or experiential

domains available to the common person. Some of this special knowledge can be compared to the ancient Western paradigmatic principle of *gnosis*, which has been poetically referred to as "knowledge of the heart." *Gnosis* is very difficult to explain, because it has to do more with a person's rarefied experiences in relation to consummate conditions of being than with learning and understanding information through the mind, reason, or intellect. It has been conceptualized as a kind of boundless understanding of oneself and one's particular circumstances of existence, which unfolds understanding of the divine nature of the cosmos, and ultimately of reality as a unified whole. But this is only an approximation. Like *gnosis*, the special Indigenous knowledge I am referring to here cannot be written or taught, it can only be mysteriously attained through the intersecting domains of experiential, existential, and intellectual excellence. But unlike *gnosis*, which is available to anyone applying the proper methods of development, the arcane Indigenous knowledge is only available to those prodigious few who are born different, and they can only learn it by themselves and on their own terms.

Successfully conducted ritual performances enable practitioners to transcend the boundaries that distinguish the present earthly realm from divine existence in non-ordinary (and often primordial) times, and allow such specialists to partake in direct, immediate, and in-depth communion with life's most profound mysteries. Whether authentically perceived through enhanced sensorial capabilities, or accurately experienced through the immense power of the mind's eye, the transcendent and immanent mysteries and their power can be made manifest through effective ritual behavior with such a degree of fidelity to perceptual reality, that the momentous occurrence can seem to be even more qualitatively real than normal experiential existence. In other words, these manifestations of the great mysteries are at times so vast, long-lasting, and so authentically real, they can appear to be infinite or eternal, or of certain and unequivocal existence, as in the case of sacred visions. Alternatively, the mysteries can seem so ephemeral, elusive, and so imperceptible, that their existence is barely evident, and the act of witnessing them can even be of uncertain occurrence, like a mirage. The Postclassic Nahua of Central Mexico even conceived of the Mysterious Deity, Tetzauhteotl, who was a deified personification of omens and of wonder. In general, master ritual practitioners experience transcendent empowerment by entering into profound states of imaginative contemplation, rapturous ecstatic trance, and transformative divine perception, as well as fulfilling states of expanded, refined, enhanced, and even consummate consciousness. It is these mysterious states of transcendence that provide the aperture necessary for empowered specialists to fully utilize the extraordinary capabilities that inspire respect and admiration but also abhorrence and fear, such as experiential transfiguration. In accordance with the master practitioners' mighty capabilities and the commitment expressed by the patients, participants, or assistants involved, performing rituals successfully can enable the experiential manifestation of the desired outcomes when practicing either divination, sorcery, or healing.

Generally speaking, traditional ritual practices provide transcendent power, and those who are capable of wielding such grand power are allowed access to extraordinary understanding and abilities, such as boundless perception and transformation into one's co-essence. According to well-known Indigenous traditions found throughout the Americas, everything from people, otherworldly beings, animals, plants, mountains, caves, rivers, architecture, ritual implements, and anything else in the world, with special emphasis on that which is of high significance, all are conceived of as intrinsically possessing what is termed in the literature as "animating essences." Among these are the so-called "spirit companions," "alter egos," or "co-essences," which can be defined as personified, animate, and even agential sacred forces. These inherent and immanent co-essences exist in intimate connection with their complementary earthly

companions (such as humans), with whom they share destinies and even identities, but they simultaneously inhabit transcendent domains of reality for the most part. The fact that earthly beings share transdimensional existence with their co-essences means that what happens to one affects the other, whether it be revitalization and fulfillment or harm and death. Co-essences and their powers can be generally accessed during dreams, and particularly through special ritual practices. In different present Maya languages, the ancestral expression *wahy* and its variants encompass diverse but related notions, such as "to sleep" or "to dream," along with "cenote" (a natural watery sinkhole common in the Yucatan Peninsula region), but also engulf meanings like "spirit companion" or "co-essence," and "personified spell." The last three terms just mentioned form part of very complex systems of conceptualization, and the effects of such essences on people's lives, the community, and the environment at large, can range from being qualified as beneficial, healing, and empowering, to being feared as dangerous, malign, and at times even deadly. Related concepts are applied throughout Mesoamerica, like the Postclassic Central Mexican concept of the *nahual*, which is still implemented today to refer to the notion of "co-essence," and also to the ritual practitioner who is capable of transforming, but who, due in good part to Orthodox Christian influence, is often demonized as being ill-intended or accused of evil deeds.

Thanks to the abundant pre-hispanic corpus of iconography pertaining to people, animals, and other non-ordinary beings performing feats of transformation, as well as the extensive ethnographic work with contemporary Indigenous cultures regarding parallel themes, it has long been known that the ancient and current Indigenous traditions across the Americas integrate the faculty to change into something else, often into one's co-essence, as a prominent but highly esoteric practice. From Olmec expressions of the Formative era, anthropologists identify a series of small anthropomorphic sculptures carved out of jade and other precious stones, and they nickname them transformation figures. These figures seem to be iconographically coded to present the gradual transfiguration of a human ritual practitioner into a jaguar-like being. The more human-like examples are shown kneeling down, with facial features that reflect concentrated contemplation. Then there are figures raising a leg as if the practitioner started to stand up, and facial features exhibiting more feline characteristics. The culmination of the process is marked by the figures of jaguars and felines resembling jaguars standing upright on their hind legs, the human completely transformed into a jaguar. When terms like transformation or shape-shifting are implemented, the conception is not exactly that the ritual practitioners literally transform their physical bodies in the way that the Western (or scientific) mind would understand. Highly esoteric ritual techniques of ecstasy are traditionally deployed to reach existential liminality and other parallel states of being, which empower the mightiest specialists to transcendentally project their psyche across dimensions, in order to experientially reconfigure themselves and perceive existence from the perspective of their divine co-essences, and in that extraordinary modality, effectively navigate through the multifaceted domains of the living cosmos. The effects of such special capabilities can be somewhat comparable to what happens when a person becomes conscious during a lucid dream and intentionally commands their consciousness, along with their co-essences, through the dreamworld, effectively directing what happens there during the oneiric experience. Nevertheless, states of being are remarkably fluid within Indigenous signification systems, constantly shifting, changing, and manifesting in complex and subtle manners. The most powerful practitioners of the ancestral ritual/spiritual traditions can acquire the ability to turn into an animal, plant, element or force of the environment, and even undergo transfiguration and become deified, temporarily existing as living images of any of the innumerable personified aspects of the divine energy-in-motion itself (or as commonly called, deities). One of the colonial period Yukatek Maya terms implemented in

this esoteric system was *walk'esahba ti' Dios,* which translates as "to turn over into God," and roughly means "to metamorphose into a divinity," or "to become deified."

In ancient times, the power and efficacy of liturgical performance derived from various sources, such as the fundamental boundlessness of the sacred essences and forces implemented, appropriately chosen calendric periods and dates to conduct rites, the magnitude of power and expertise of the ritual specialist, befitting organization of signification and proper configuration of paraphernalia, as well as direct ritual precedents set either in primordial times by divinities or in historic times by ancestors, among others. The last source of ritual power on the list is included because in a way, ritual practices at large, especially evidenced in Maya rites of the Classic period, were thought to be akin to continuations or recurrences of past incidents that had such a magnitude of impact and significance, that the actions themselves were perpetuated in states of timelessness and in transcendent orders of existence, to be mirrored by the living. It was understood that reverentially repeating these special acts, usually at key calendar dates that correlate to those of the original rituals, caused the experiential occurrence of forces, effects, or phenomena that would correspond to those manifested during the ancient prototypical events. In addition, these actions and their latent power were provided with continuity and renewal when they were successfully reenacted by practitioners in their quests to access the possibilities available in those non-ordinary planes of existence. Indeed, according to David Stuart, it is the very ritual acts that appear to exist in ideal form, in transcendent dimensions of reality, and as atemporal reflections of quintessential divine activities, which in turn established social harmony or cosmic order. Recreating such sacred actions was an effective way to engage with vast patterns and processes of universal operation, in addition to catalyzing reactions of cross-dimensional cosmic magnitudes. Even though they were established in remote times or places, the original ritual acts, along with their effects, are nonetheless made present in the immediacy of experience each time patterns of proper ritual practice are followed and performed by capable specialists. Thus, present-day ritual practitioners still perform at archeological sites, because the ancient systems of conceptualization and even the old forms of traditional ritual conduct are considered to be equivalent to their own. Transcendent dimensions of existence are known in the literature with terms such as non-ordinary time and space, the supernatural, the unseen, the beyond, the otherworld, and the netherworld, among others. According to Alfredo López Austin, they express a peculiar quality: everything that has ever happened can be accessed there, as well as everything that can possibly happen. This includes any probable configurations of reality, from its initial organization or creation, to its alternate unfoldings, and even its eventual disorganization or destruction. The only exception is everything that is happening now, since all of that occurs here in the earthly (and regularly experienced) cosmic domains.

As stated before, since the remote Formative period and even up to the present, sorcery, healing, and any other ritual endeavors or divination practices, have been mediated at varying degrees in accordance with the workings of the sacred calendars and the varying positions of celestial bodies, along with other dynamic factors. In ancient times, the metaphors, concepts, and significations elaborated around timekeeping and dates were all essential for liturgical practices. During ritual oration and when casting spells, day names were implemented by practitioners as arcane monikers that labeled paraphernalia, sacred places, and significant features of the environment. Depending on the date on which important incidents occurred, ranging from the birth of a royal child to a common person falling ill, it was the work of ritual practitioners to prescribe proper procedures and predict results. In general, the inherently divine qualities that permeate through any temporal segment, such as a named day, produce a variety of fundamental sacred essences and forces, some of which can empower capable practitioners.

An important implement that Maya ritual specialists concentrate from otherworldly domains to augment their power, is the divine cosmic dew called *itz*, which, along with *chu'hul*, is one of the prodigious manifestations of the universal sacred energy-in-motion, and it is still invoked in the lowland Maya area. On the one hand, the term means sweat, tree sap, milk, and other droplet-forming liquids, including blood. However, in one of its more significant forms, *itz* manifests as a sort of dew that emanates from the celestial realms, as a transcendent substance of great power and sacredness. For contemporary highland Maya people, *itz* is an integral component of terms applied to signify the institutions of divination, sorcery, and healing. Aj Itz, meaning "He/She of *Itz*," is the designation still applied to identify specialized ritualists in various present communities. It is possible that Chac Chel's consort was named Itzam, or a close cognate of Itzam, a word that can be translated as "*Itz* worker," providing the creator goddess' consort the title of ritual practitioner, and in fact the two deities were the very first ones in existence. Alternatively, present Yukatek-speaking Maya people refer to a ritual specialist as *hk'iinil wiinik* ("Sun person"), and as *hme'en* ("doer, person of [effective] action"). The latter term is very revelatory, because not only does it prominently showcase the highly regarded quality of practitioners as people of action and hard work, but in a deeper sense, it also alludes to the great impact of these powerful people's specialized activities, the magnitude of which reaches cosmic domains of transcendent order. As Kelley Hays-Gilpin insightfully relates in "It's Raining Feather-Flower Songs," her brilliant epilogue to the groundbreaking volume "Flower Worlds: Religion, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Mesoamerica and the American Southwest": "The world (particularly its human components) is constantly moving, adjusting, slipping out of balance, being brought back toward balance, and shifting or drifting off again. In greater Mesoamerica, ritual practices and paraphernalia, with all their deeply meaningful imagery and materials, are about ordering things properly, arranging things in the world to achieve balance… flower worlds manifest values of cosmic balance, respect for ancestors and family relationships, and relationships with other-than-human persons including plants, animals, mountains, lakes, and streams. Ritual practices get the attention of divine powers and bring them into communion with humans." (Hays-Gilpin, 2021).

Figure 18a

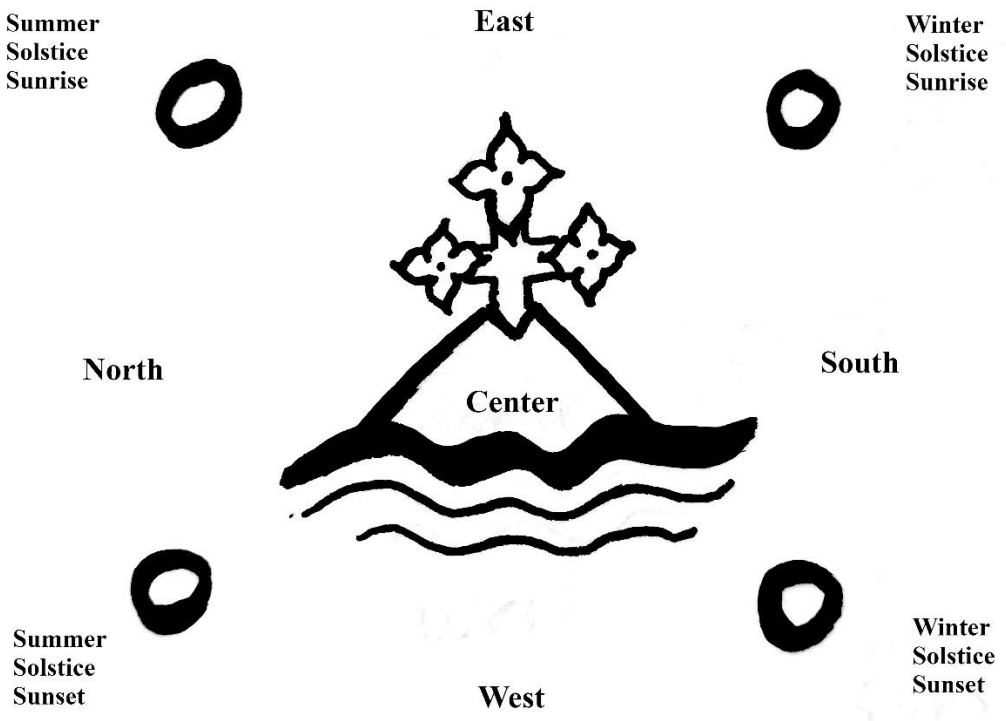


Figure 18b

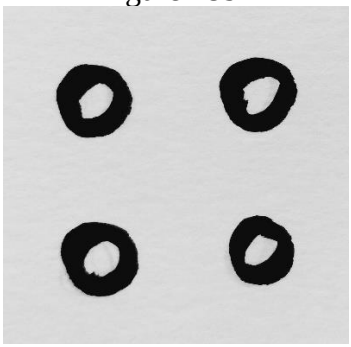


Figure 18c

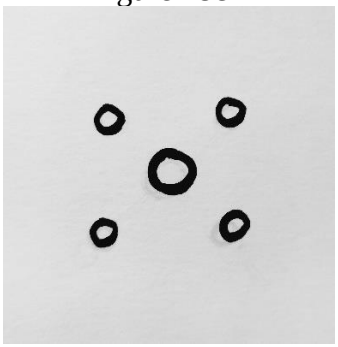


Figure 18d

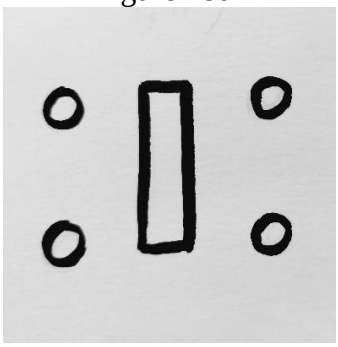


Figure 18e

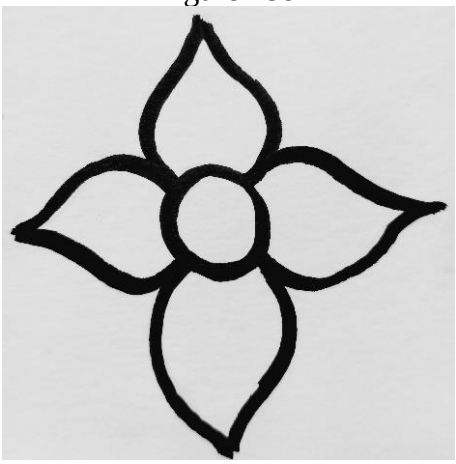


Figure 18. Mesoamerican cosmograms: a) more complete cosmogram with solstices included; b) quadripartite cosmogram; c) quincuncial cosmogram; d) quincuncial cosmogram with bar/tree/pillar occupying the world center; e) quincuncial cosmogram in the form of a flower.

As evidenced by pan-Mesoamerican conflations of the life cycles of humans and of maize, numerous significant cosmic processes, like the movement of divine forces, the development of generative essences, the transformation of states of being, the continuous unfolding and coming into being of the sacred energy-in-motion that forms the fabric of reality, along several others, occur consistently throughout seemingly non-related domains of existence and at various scales of observation. Based on this overarching universal principle, the whole gamut of quadripartite or quincuncial organization can be deployed to conceptualize anything, from micro to macro scales, into a cognitive portrayal of ordered time and space, or as commonly known in the literature, a cosmogram. At basic levels of functionality, Indigenous cosmograms across the Americas are implemented for organizing spaces based on the regularly varying positions of celestial bodies, resulting in quadripartite or quincunx motifs, which in turn allow the structuring of calendric cycles in spatial arrangements (Figure 18). The spatial organization into four parts and a center serves to establish human spaces, such as the community, the house, or the planting field as qualitatively ordered ones, and to contrast them with places of chaos, disorder, or non-ordinary order, such as wild forests and otherworldly realms, all of which reflect a fundamental system that guides conceptions of, and interactions with, the multidimensional environment at large. Other polarities that emerge from this differentiation, usually in regards to ritual endeavors, are public versus private settings, outer (or surface) levels contrasting inner (or in-depth) ones, along with that which concentrates sacredness and that which does not so much, among others. The mere presence of a quadripartite form implies an anchoring center as *axis mundi* and fifth direction: even when the *axis mundi* is not directly portrayed, the quadripartite arrangement's empty space, the central void, still functions like the *axis mundi* itself, because as a readily available aperture, it effectively enables the passage of sacred essences and forces of vitality from one dimension of the living cosmos into another. One other important element that, like the void, completes the quincunx in a quadripartite arrangement, is the presence of a witness or viewer. Different Maya cultural expressions associate a human body's head and navel with concepts of world centrality. In concordance with ancient Indigenous traditions, the Maya routinely abbreviate the notion of the universe and compress it into a microcosm, conceptualizing it, among a variety of other ideas, as

a human body. Conversely, the concept of the body, and by association also the idea of the self, is boundlessly unfolded and expanded to encompass the entire cosmos as a personified universal unity or macro body. This all-encompassing principle of cosmic organization is prominently reflected in ritual structuring systems.

Across the Americas, Indigenous cosmic creation events functioned to establish the proper conditions so that humanity could emerge into existence, and in general, these primordial occurrences served to configure reality into its present state. Throughout Mesoamerica, the creation of the cosmos is itself considered to be the triumphant fructification of the ultimate performance of ritual acts in the deep past. Such a wondrous deed was orchestrated by the mysterious creator deities who, as the exemplar first ritual practitioners, successfully implemented the transcendent capabilities of influencing cosmic vital forces and operating the sacred energy-in-motion that composes existence, effectively catalyzing the universe we are a part of now. Indeed, the supreme creator deities functioned as immensely powerful old mages and boundlessly wise ancestral beings who established traditional ritual practices in extreme antiquity. As explained in previous sections, the universal magnitude of their creative capabilities also qualifies the first elder mages as archetypal artists, who are the begetters of all creativity and inspiration. In addition, all generic ritual practitioners and artists reference back to the original ones from primordial times, and conversely, the identity of the original exemplars boundlessly extends to form part of the identity of any generic ritual specialist or artist (and the latter two merge together in practice at times). A divine Indigenous figure that appears throughout the ages across the Americas is that of the weaver, who is virtually always female, and is often linked to spiders, the natural weavers par excellence. There is a long Mesoamerican tradition of depicting goddesses of various kinds, who are often directly related to fertility and cosmic creation, either with weaving attributes and implements or directly portrayed in the act of weaving. Woven cloth has long been essential for political, social, economic, ritual, and spiritual endeavors, which are not mutually exclusive domains of operation. Indeed, fabrics permeate the lives of elites and commoners alike, past and present. Nevertheless, fabrics and weaving are considered to be far from mundane, and are saturated with cosmological associations of profound significance. Weaving is an activity characteristic of female domains of production, and in the Maya area, it is intimately related to childbirth through various metaphors. Noteworthy is the notion that both processes, weaving pieces of cloth and birthing children, are evidence of women's generative powers and capabilities. The divine weaver is indeed the female unfoldment of the main creator deity, and she weaves-births the myriad of entities and elements that constitute the fabric of existence into being. Within this signification system, reality itself is conceived of as a prodigious cosmic cloth, the threads of which interconnect and substantiate all aspects that compose the entire universe. In early colonial literature from Central Mexico, inspired Indigenous poets portray the creator deities as one being, referred to as the Giver of Life there. Within these wonderful texts, Giver of Life is spoken of as a scribe and singer, who paints but simultaneously also recites the cosmos into existence, synesthetically experienced as a universal sacred book-song. Among these early sixteenth-century writings, it is also said that a *tlacuilo*, meaning "painter-scribe" in Nahuatl, obtains his or her wisdom directly from the Giver of Life. The term *tlacuilo* refers to someone who writes through painting in the Postclassic Central Mexican variant of Indigenous literary traditions. In a way, painter-scribes put their own selves on the pages of the books they painted-wrote, because in order to moisten brushes or to clean them from the organic and often flower-based colors, the artists wetted them with their mouths, effectively applying their own saliva on the radiant pages. Correspondingly, the moistening of the cosmic brushes would be done through the Giver of Life's own mouth while painting-reciting

the universe. As a consequence, the Giver of Life's very being and essence are integral components of the ever-unfolding cosmic book-song. The universal creator's ability to manifest as either a single entity, a couple, a group, or even an innumerable multitude, is made possible not only by its transcendent powers, but also by the boundless qualities of the immanent divine energy-in-motion, sacred essences, and cosmic forces, all of which in turn compose this supreme being, who is at once many and one, at once the orchestrator of cosmic unfoldment and the very cosmos itself. Varying according to the intended functions, the creator manifests in innumerable guises, with its presence and influence permeating throughout the multidimensional universe.

When considering Mesoamerican creation accounts and concepts of cosmogenesis, it is not exactly correct to think of a sort of creation from nothing, in the way Western culture would popularly understand the theory of the Big Bang. Throughout this monograph though, I still use the term creation and its variants for clarity purposes. In concordance with traditional Indigenous systems of signification, the world we see today, with its innumerable inhabitants and aspects, along with the entire universe, has always existed, but it always goes through processes and states of organization, chaos, and new organization, constantly transforming as it unfolds and more effectively comes into being. In a very real way, the world or cosmos we are a part of is constructed with what remained from the previous one, which in turn was put together with the vestiges of an even earlier one, and so on. From a slightly varying perspective, universal creation is not only a past event from extreme antiquity, it is also a fundamental component of ongoing cosmic processes of disorganization and reorganization, which are always occurring, happening even in present times. In direct concordance with this overarching principle of generative universal unfoldment, creative expressions in the earthly domains of humans are also ongoing manifestations. This description is not merely a metaphoric or poetic flourish: no artistic production is considered finished when an artist or artisan has concluded materializing her or his vision, because the emergent power found in all art is constantly activated and renewed by viewers or other agents who engage with such works, often in ritual contexts. Furthermore, artistic expressions are imbued with animating sacred energies and vital essences, which originate from the creator's hard work (equivalent to sacrificial and self-sacrificial labors), the materials implemented, and the meanings included, as well as all other relations, processes, and settings in which the expressions would be encountered or deployed (with their varying social, spatial, and temporal values). An image or text manifests its emerging inner vitality (what Stephen Houston has called the "Life Within") in the presence of a viewer, who by witnessing or engaging with the art, sparks its renewed unfoldment as a living social agent who, like the rest of the cosmos, constantly comes into being. In a remarkable perspective from these traditional systems of meaning, it was actually human beings themselves who in primordial times created or reorganized the world, and who, after performing rituals of transcendent magnitudes (such as the Postclassic Nahua account of the birth of the Sun and Moon in Teotihuacan), underwent transfiguration into ancestral divine beings. In other words, humans became deities. As part of the same model of conceptualization in which present cosmic dimensions are perceived as transmutations of previously existing ones, what we call deities were originally humans who became deified. Correspondingly, humans could be disguised deities who come to the earthly plane. Deities are made manifest through properly configured and ordered earthly materials, and especially through ritual actions, and it is humans that embody deities, momentarily making them present. In this signification system, the work of humans is to maintain the current order of the cosmos and to prevent its destruction as much as they possibly can.

It is tempting for Western mentality to apply a functionalist approach to try to rationalize Indigenous systems of spirituality, liturgy, and in general, to separate and reorder otherwise inherently intertwined ideological complexes into distinctive categories and classes of concepts.

Such methods of study can be problematic, since forms of spirituality and ritualism from all eras and places regularly implement diffuse notions that boundlessly overlap, conflate, polarize, and merge with one another, making them difficult to rationally conceptualize or logically simplify, at times even within the ideologies where they originate. Before even trying to address traditional ritual customs and spirituality, it is imperative to acknowledge that, contrary to Western biased and ignorant notions of "superstitious" and "irrational" behaviors among Indigenous people, the actual practices in their proper contexts (as mediated by historical, economic, and political factors, along with other variables and agendas) are founded in highly esteemed values, traditions, complexes of signification, and systematic ideological constructs with concordant sagacious methods of action and interaction, as evidenced by their continuous efficacy throughout the ages. The surreal and mystical qualities of ritual and spiritual practices partly derive from their ineffable mysteries, their traditional arcane teachings, along with their paradoxical rationales and at times contradictory formulations, all of which actually do express concordance within the systems in which they are deployed. In order to understand the deeper significance and functionality of these mysterious modes of operation, it is imperative to take into account the cognitive purposes and perceptual effects that the very acts of practicing the ancestral forms of liturgy and spirituality, in conjunction with the implementation of their corresponding traditional signification systems, have on the practitioners and other participants during ritual performances. As explained earlier, the great depths of these transcendent mysteries boundlessly unfold in the immediate experience of practitioners as they perform rites, as they enhance their capabilities of perception and understanding, and as they become ever more powerful through transformative development.

Even with all the insightful understanding and useful technological developments derived from the scientific method, there are many enigmatic things and phenomena that science is not able to explain nor account for, and at times it even denies their existence. When scientists do attempt to elucidate the nature of such mysteries, the explanations offered are often flawed, mediocre, or biased, and as such, do not produce accurate comprehension that concords with reality. Throughout most of the history of ethnographic and anthropological studies, Indigenous conceptions of reality and understandings of the world have been shortsightedly considered by academia to be incorrect or equivocal knowledge, using words like "myth" and "primitive thinking." In more recent and decolonized studies, however, scholars have come to appreciate the fundamental values of ancestral Indigenous wisdom, which are now rightfully recognized to originate from careful observation of, and intimate relationships with, the environment at large, with all its components, cycles, processes, and its other inhabitants. In the end, as much as in the beginning, reality exists as a universal unity encompassing the entirety of the cosmos, and each cultural tradition understands it in accordance with its own signification systems and cosmovisions. Federico Navarrete insightfully communicates that ancestral knowledge provides plausible clarifications and elucidating explanations for all kinds of things, beings, and phenomena across domains of existence. Such traditional wisdom generates oral narratives, cosmogonies, worldviews, and innumerable other cultural expressions, all of which are systematically pragmatic, completely coherent, and perfectly concordant with the experiential reality of the people who maintain, renew, and pass down said wisdom. Material remains that are indicative of ritual practices in Mesoamerica can date back to the Early Formative era, around 2,500 BCE, but by those times, the practices themselves were already ancient, originating in the remote Archaic era, which dates as early as 8,000 BCE, and possibly much earlier. Besides other immediate practical purposes, these traditional practices are fundamental aspects of the Costumbres, or Old Ways, and are integral means through which Indigenous people exemplify their worldviews and assert their shared values. Along with oral traditions, ritual practices also

function as essential communication avenues for the older members of the community to educate the younger ones on the sacred wisdom and ethical principles of the venerable ancestors. Whether the setting is modest and private, or lavish and public, ritual performances serve as a prime media through which signification systems and collective memory are effectively transmitted across the ages, from one generation to the next, for people's preparation, well-being, and ideally, their flourishing as properly engaged constituents of the developing cosmos. Ritual practices make both the Old Ways and the ancestors manifest in the earthly realm, gracing the living with insight, inspiration, and strength, so that they can in turn live as much as possible in respectful, grateful, and harmonious ways, in regards to the essential aspects and dynamic processes of the unfolding universe that make life possible.

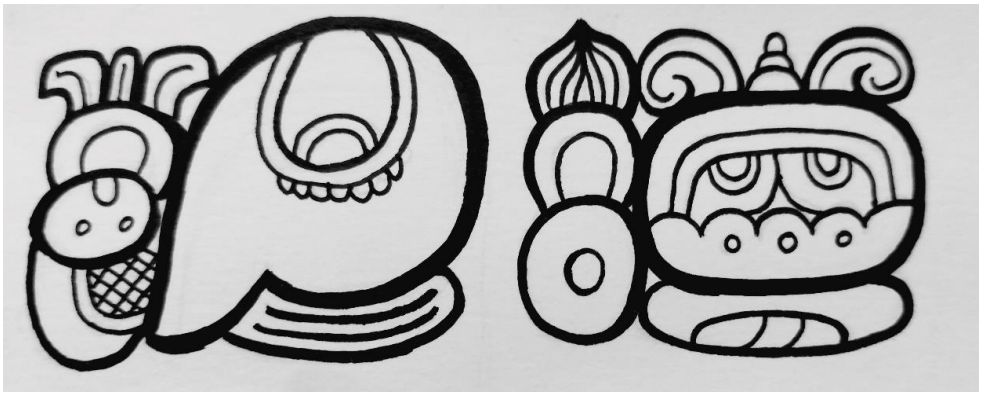


Figure 19. The difrasismo *ch'ab ak'ab* in the phase *tu-ch'ahb ti y-ahk'abaal*, "her/his creation, her/his night."

From at least the second century BCE to the early colonial period, the complexity of power, either in political, creative, or spiritual (and cosmic) form, was expressed among the Maya through the lexeme *ch'ab ak'ab* (Figure 19). This difrasismo (Spanish term roughly meaning "couplet, diphrase, diphrasis, diphrastic couplet, or hendiadys") is composed of two distinct words, *ch'ab* and *ak'ab*, which can be respectively interpreted as "creation, penance, generation, genesis" and "darkness, night." Hence, the variants of this expression can be translated along the lines of "creation, darkness," "genesis, night," or "generation, night." Among the Maya of the Classic period, this deeply evocative difrasismo was associated with self-sacrificial bloodletting ritual acts. But through metaphoric elaboration, the idiom merges two essential principles of cosmic operation (which highly contrast or polarize one another while also being intimately related in some ways, and ultimately complement each other), yielding a multifaceted concept associated with notions of strength, force, power, and victory. Pérez Jiménez and Jansen reveal that in Central Mexico, the comparable Nahua difrasismo *yoalli ehecatl*, or "night, wind," also refers to more than what is directly suggested by each word individually. The poetic term alludes to the mysterious qualities and transcendent powers that characterize immanent sacred essences and animating forces of the living cosmos, and ultimately encompasses the profound depths of meaning attributed to such aspects of the divine energy-in-motion. Similar examples can be found throughout Mesoamerican literature and iconography, where the juxtaposition of concepts that simultaneously polarize and essentially complement one another, produces a more elaborate and useful signification construct. For instance, as part of the fantastic sequence of world creation from the Postclassic Codex Yuta Tnoho (Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus 1), master Ñuu Dzaui (Mixtec) scribes and sages portrayed the anthropomorphic form of the divine Plumed Serpent, Quetzalcoatl, being born from a large flint-

stone blade on the sacred day Nine Wind, a date that also functions as the deity's name throughout this prodigious manuscript and the Ñuu Dzaui region in general. Right before this important birth scene, a male-female pair of unnamed skeletal deities are depicted, both of whom are visually equivalent to, and likely aspects of, the creator couple portrayed a few pages earlier. These unnamed skeletal deities are scattering tobacco and burning copal as ritual offerings that commemorate the sacred birth event of cosmic magnitudes. The immediate information presented by the imagery pertains to Quetzalcoatl's portentous birth from the primordial flint blade, overseen by the creator divinities. But a capable specialist, developed enough to perceive the deeper dimensions of meaning, could understand the concepts evoked in metaphor and metonymy: in this case, the notion that the transcendent and immanent forces of cosmic vitality and unfoldment (all embodied by Nine Wind Quetzalcoatl) are effectively activated, handled, and implemented, through properly conducted ritual practices (evoked by the blade for self-sacrificial bloodletting), all of which are achieved by respectfully following the ancestral teachings (exemplified by the skeletal deities in ritual action). Such is the systematic coherence in these remarkable combinations of attributes of death and darkness with concepts related to creativity and the force of life. Generally speaking, they signify the cycle of death and life that is manifested as the transcendent process of cosmic renewal, which is exemplified by the *Jaloj-K'exoj* system discussed earlier. But if interpreted with a focus on the context of ritual, the concept of death evokes the ancestors who have passed away, while elements of life and creativity connote the acts of practicing the traditional Old Ways properly and effectively by the living. In other words, what's presented is the combination of the guiding force that is the ancestors' wisdom, with the inspired vision of their descendants, along with their will to practice the traditions and maintain them for the benefit of the newer generations.

John M. D. Pohl and Jeremy Coltman's introduction to the volume "Sorcery in Mesoamerica" relates that key conception regarding power, as engulfed by the traditional *ch'ab ak'ab* difrasismo, is manifested by the fact that those who acquire power embody social order, but simultaneously, become more susceptible to impunity. Those who are given great power, whether it be of political or spiritual nature, can inherently express moral ambiguity, along with greater possibilities of abusing that power. Thus, it is essential that people in positions of power are responsible and are held accountable for the consequences of their actions, so that wickedness, corruption, and evil can be prevented as much as possible from degrading social and cosmic order. Ideas of spiritual might found within the Maya *ch'ab ak'ab* system of meaning are consistent with overarching Mesoamerican notions about ritualism, in which evil, goodness, and power in general, are only transferred by ritual practitioners, not directly created or destroyed by them. There is another slightly related paradigmatic axis of operation for Indigenous ritual practices, namely, the deep-rooted notion that problems and misfortunes can be resolved by what generated them in the first place. When dealing with crimes, the punishment of the perpetrators is not the main priority. Rather, emphasis is placed on finding a balanced solution that accommodates the people involved in the case, as well as in the restoration of social cohesion so that people can function in harmony as a community as much as possible. Furthermore, ethnohistoric accounts reveal that community healers who would normally be in charge of curing people could radically change their usual modalities of operation, so that they could function as powerful defenders and even killers if necessary, in order to protect the community during times of conflict. Disembodied hands, heads, hearts, bones, and other body parts, often associated by researchers with grizzly death, originate in imagery related to Mesoamerican sorcery and curing practices of great antiquity. Such a superficially grim facet of ritual systems also associates the latter with the complex Tzitzimime, as personified by the male Macuiltonaleque and their female counterparts, the Cihuateteo, all of which are otherworldly beings who could assist ritual

practitioners in either damaging or curing people. In general, the volatile Tzitzimime are linked to a variety of concepts, including ritual intoxication, divinely ordained punishment, draughts, disease, and death, but also the arrival of rain clouds, fertility, divine protection, and even healing. Even though the Tzitzimime come from Postclassic Central Mexico, these transcendent entities, along with the feasting and ritual practices associated with them, have direct antecedents in traditional Classic Maya divinatory feasts, the Akan entities, and other *wahy* beings, as well as in much more ancient behaviors of household ritualism in Mesoamerica. Remarkably, some aspects of the Tzitzimime are still present within ritual and divination systems practiced in certain Nahua communities today.

Acts of divination, and especially sorcery, have been associated with gambling and gaming practices in both large-scale and private settings, from the remote Formative period and up to the present. Such recurring conceptual relationships from across the Americas derive from the recurring Indigenous notion that, when divination or sorcery are performed, an inherent wager simultaneously occurs: just as it is possible to obtain significant benefits, fulfill desires, and earn great blessings, there are also risks of suffering severe misfortune, loss of something highly valuable, and even death. In addition, ritual practices, along with Flower World concepts, are significantly linked to deeply rooted divinatory feasting traditions, and all have been of great importance for establishing and maintaining harmonic social cohesion in Mesoamerica and the American Southwest from ancient times to the present. Of course, social cohesion is not always successfully obtained, as disputes and conflicts among people often threaten to disrupt social harmony and balance. Studies by John M. D. Pohl and others reveal that there is a particular sense of humor that characterizes even the most sacred and solemnity-oriented Indigenous ritual practices throughout the Americas, which evokes surreal manifestations and otherworldly qualities, as well as obscure and arcane aspects of existence. Ritual humor's power stems from the seemingly disparate juxtaposition of that which is absurd, preposterous, and loathsome, with that which is extremely reverential, solemn, and deserving of profound respect. Public ritual performances, like those conducted during divinatory dances and feasts, along with other important ceremonial occasions, include the essential work of jester, buffoon, and clown-like figures who often also operate as musicians. As the antithesis of society's highest ideals and values, they function in general as instigators and producers of chaos: clowns engage in shocking displays of parody, which include public exhibitions of such outrageous actions as overindulgence in food and alcohol, sexual exposure, eating garbage or other filth, publicly revealing infringement and violations of social norms by people of the community, as well as other abhorrent forms of behavior. Such chaotic and repulsive behavior balances the otherwise dominant seriousness and solemnity of most ceremonies and rituals. The roles of clowns and jesters themselves might even be performed by the most respected and highest-ranking members of the community. There are analogous divine clown figures throughout Mesoamerica. For example, from at least the Late Preclassic and up to the Postclassic periods in the Maya area, there were the Akan and the so-called God M complexes of deities. Ixtlilton, an aspect of Xochipilli and messenger to Xochiquetzal, is present in Postclassic Central Mexico. Both Xochiquetzal and Xochipilli are the youthful aspects of the supreme couple of cosmic creator mages mentioned earlier, and both had diverse attributes and avatars. Ixtlilton functioned as a divine patron of buffoons, clowns, artists, scribes, singers, healers, ritual intoxication drinkers, and ritual practitioners in general. These associations with clowns were surely shared cross-culturally in the ancient Americas. The Mesoamerican iterations of the clown archetype correspond with figures like the "ash-mouths" in contemporary Hopi, Zuni, and other Pueblo cultures.

Sacred Animals: Wind Conch Shells of Vitality, Serpent Passage Cords, and Watery Jaguars of Fire

Figure 20. Small conch shell with breath scrolls emerging from it.

A flower, with an actual spiral conch shell at its center, lays right above the Moon hieroglyph (Figure 20). Out of the shell's opening emerge two double breath volutes (read as *ik'*) marked with *k'uhul* circles, as an integrated hieroglyphic expression that reads *k'uhul ik'*, "Sacred/Holy Wind" in ancient Maya writing. This expression is related to the glyphic name of one of the divine personifications of benign winds, Ik' K'uh. In their important joint book, "Reading Maya Art," Andrea Stone and Mark Zender present insightful information about traditional Maya concepts of wind, breath, and vitality. The concept of the breath as a life force is integrated as part of the elaboration of meaning constructed around *ik'*, which is fairly parallel to Western concepts of "the breath of life." Mesoamerican people have long conceived of the cosmos as a seamless dynamic system, and of themselves as functioning components of its multifaceted unfolding. What's more, cycles and processes of universal magnitude are equated to those that occur at human scale, and the breath of a person's body corresponds to the winds that move through the world. Ideas of breath and wind as animating cosmic forces and essences of vitality are shared throughout Indigenous cultures. Wind is elevated to divine status, partly from being one of the main natural forces involved in the processes that bring rain and moist breezes, which in turn are essential to make life possible. In addition, wind carries ethereal elements, such as the sweet scent of copal and the pleasant aroma of flowers, along with harmonious sounds and music. Spiral conch shells are often depicted in art with sound or breath scrolls emerging from them, and are indeed associated with themes of musical forces and vital breath essences. Since they originate in the sea, these kinds of shells are inherently associated with water, and their spiral shapes recall the forms of wind and water swirls. Furthermore, the aquatic connections of these shells extend to include the notion of the watery underworldly realms, along with the words and wisdom of the venerable ancestors. Birth was another important association of these kinds of shells among the ancient Maya. In art, a person being pulled out of a large conch shell could suggest child engendering. Significantly, the inscriptions on the prodigious sculpted tablets of the Group of the Cross at the sacred Maya city of Lakamha (Palenque), Mexico, associate these shells with Matwil, an important watery location of ancestral and even divine origins. The city's ancient patron deities, provisionally called GI, GII or Unen K'awiil, GIII, and together, the Palenque Triad Deities, are said to "touch the Earth" at Matwil, as they arrive reborn into higher orders of being during primordial times. It is interesting that the Classic Maya seem to have

emphasized the benign aspects of wind in their art, because, across past and present Mesoamerica, wind's dreadful qualities have also been acknowledged and feared, as it can bring destructive storms, droughts, and even carry diseases.

During the Classic period, spiral conch shells were crafted to make paint containers in the Maya area. As an honorific emblem for painting and scribal arts, the Maya composed a motif that includes a book decorated with jaguar pelt and a shell paint pot resting on top of it. At times, depictions of valuable jade beads are included. By visually linking books (and writing, by extension) with precious jewels, which are themselves associated with the divine breath of life, this icon poetically evokes the extremely high regard in which the literary arts were held by the Maya. Scribes were very prestigious court members and highly influential thinkers, functioning as sages who led the development of both arts and sciences, prominently literature, painting, philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and divination, among others. Painted on Classic Maya ceramics, important creator deities and ancestor figures are often depicted holding books, writing on them or interpreting them, and even engaging in intellectual discussions in which they seem to educate apprentices. In fact, scribes are often depicted with extraordinary qualities and divine attributes, because the art of writing, those who practiced it, and inspiration itself, were considered to be of a very sacred and mystical nature. This cultural conception is evidenced in an elegantly carved bone from the royal tomb of Jasaw Chan K'awiil (called burial 116 in the literature), in the sacred city of Yax Mutul, present-day Tikal, Guatemala (Figure 21). The surface of the bone is finely incised with the image of the open maw of a zoomorphic head, likely an otherworldly centipede or serpent, or a combination of both. A human hand delicately holding a stylus brush emerges from the open maw of the zoomorph and appears like a hieroglyph or emblem, not only invoking the otherworldly origins of the wisdom of the venerable ancestors, but also effectively emphasizing the prodigious genius, creative virtuosity, and divine inspiration of master practitioners of the scribal arts. As stated before, the open maws of centipedes and serpents operated as transcendent portals to otherworldly realms, but also as sacred birth passages. The message is multifaceted, but is concisely rendered in a powerful image: for the Maya, writing and painting (and by extension, the other high arts) have non-ordinary, even divine origins.

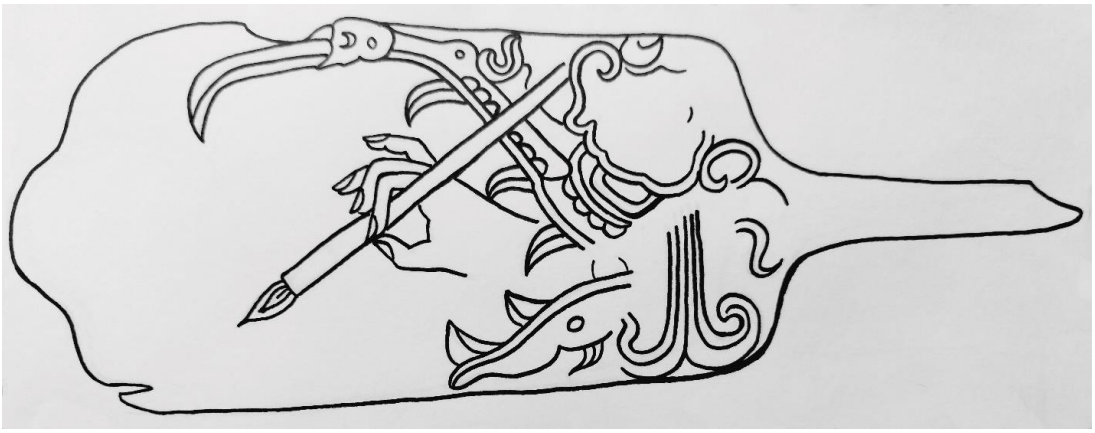


Figure 21. Drawing of carved bone from the ritual offerings deposited withing the royal tomb of Jasaw Chan K'awiil.

Throughout Mesoamerica, large spiral conch shells were also carved into ritual musical instruments, usually functioning as trumpets or flutes. Karl Taube notes a prodigious rendering of the Postclassic Central Mexican account of the genesis of music, painted as part of the

marvelous ritual sequence from Codex Yoalli Ehecatl, or Codex Borgia. The identified narrative begins on page 35, where Tescatlipoca and Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl travel on a road painted light blue. Each deity wears a transversely-cut conch shell, which is Quetzalcoatl's characteristic *ehecacozcatl* or "spiral wind jewel." The road they walk winds through architectural spaces, which are engulfed in night's darkness but also teeming with ritual activity. Initially, the sibling deities receive a sacred bundle from the dying solar divinity, Tlalchitonatiuh, who sits inside a conical wind temple topped by a plumed serpent (interpreted as a wind temple). On the next page (36), one of the most significant events of the whole ritual sequence takes place: assisted by Xolotl, Quetzalcoatl's twin, the group opens the sacred bundle. It is worth noting that, although the bundle is unfolded in darkness, there are many disembodied eyes colored white and red floating throughout the dark areas. Eyes are common Mesoamerican icons that signify celestial bodies, often specifying stars and planets, and are also implemented to qualify things or beings as luminescent. A flute and a drum lay atop the undone bundle cloths, and from this assemblage, several streams of wind burst out. More importantly, a great spiraling stream of music and wind emerges from the unwrapped bundle, spanning three pages. This serpentine stream carries other flutes and drums, rattle-like articles, other implements for dance (like a ritual dance staff) and music, along with colorful birds, butterflies, and flowers. All of these implements are directly associated with Flower Worlds, especially when they appear together, as in this case. The stream ends on page 38, culminating on the head of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl and revealing the whole spiral to be Ehecatl itself, manifested as a great musical wind serpent. On page 37, the deity of flowers, music, art, and the dawning Sun, Xochipilli, sits inside a flowery temple playing music with the same drum and flute that appear on the open bundle on page 36, a scene that ultimately culminates the direct manifestation of Flower World in the ritual sequence. An episode of the Ñuu Dzaui (Mixtec) variant of this account is found on the mural fragments of Mitla, Oaxaca, and a couple of versions from Central Mexico were recorded during early colonial times.

Significantly, these kinds of spiral conch shells are main emblems of a quintessential pan-Mesoamerican deity famously known by the names given to it in Postclassic Central Mexico, such as Quetzalcoatl (which can mean "Feathered Serpent," or "Precious Twin"), Ehecatl ("Wind"), or Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, who is also known as Coo Dzavui in the Ñuu Dzaui region, and in the Maya area, as Gucumatz and K'uk'ulkan. The beaked anthropomorphic form of this wind deity has antecedents in Classic Maya variants, and more in-depth, originates with Olmec expressions from the Early Preclassic period, at least three thousand years into the past. Even if forcefully transformed after pre-hispanic times, ideologies regarding feathered serpents are still important for Indigenous people who practice their ancestral spiritual traditions in our days across Mesoamerica, the American Southwest, and beyond too. As clearly evidenced by the variety of highly significant contexts where Quetzalcoatl appears, some of which are mentioned throughout the present work, the magnitude of influence this divinity's associated philosophical edifices and signification systems have had on Mesoamerican cultures is incalculable. During Postclassic times, Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl figured prominently as a deified ancestor, the divine personification of benign and malign winds, the provider of wisdom, writing, and the arts, and a main participant of the last great cosmic renewal as the giver of life itself, providing sacred corn and even divine blood to create humanity, among many other attributes. Another name for this venerated entity in the Ñuu Dzaui (Mixtec) area was Nine Wind, which originates as an important day name from the sacred 260-day Mesoamerican ritual calendar. Remarkably, this same date was the calendar name of the day when GI was reborn during primordial times. GI was a very important but enigmatic Classic Maya solar divinity, whose actual name remains undeciphered. It is worth noting again that GI's birthplace was Matwil, a sacred location associated with spiral conch shell imagery, and by extension, birth and divine rebirth. Other

central characteristics shared by both deities revolve around cosmic renewal narratives: the two of them, in their respective creation accounts, fight and slay a great cosmic crocodilian dragon, whose body is utilized to create the Earth and heavens on top of the primordial sea; the Maya GI is the divine personification of the dawning Sun that rose resurrected out of the watery underworld domain, marking the completion of the latest world creation event; and according to the Central Mexican tradition, Quetzalcoatl either catalyzed or even embodied some of the fundamental principles that brought forth world renewal during the last creation (such as winds bearing rain clouds, the reinvigorated force of vitality, among other sacred cosmic forces). All these correlations suggest that both deities, although distanced by temporal, spatial, and cultural variants, might have originated in a common ancestral divine figure from the remote Preclassic era. However, it is more likely that the ideological complexes associated with these and other divine agents across Mesoamerica are of such extreme antiquity and importance, that it is these signification systems themselves that catalyze the emergence of figures akin to the sacred Feathered Serpent, Quetzalcoatl.

Figure 22. Abstract portrayals of modified Spondylus seashells in the sculpture.

The red and yellow wing-like shapes on the sides of the central spiral shell are abstract recreations of modified *Spondylus* seashells, which were cut in half, spines broken off, and finally polished, in order to be prepared for crafting small sculptures and jewels, and for general deployment in ritual endeavors (Figure 22). The circles on the shells are the *k'uhul* patterns, which mark such implements as sacred. The red color of the shell's inner layers was associated with the force of vitality and especially with blood, which was conceived of throughout Mesoamerica as one of the most precious and divine substances in the cosmos. In their unworked form, these shells were set as part of offerings that were placed in tombs or buried as part of caches in rituals organized for the dedication of buildings or stelae. Because these items come from under the sea, and because they are ultimately remains of formerly living beings, they were intrinsically associated with the watery underworld domains. *Spondylus* shells were also associated with GI, who wore them as ear ornaments. More importantly, this kind of shell was placed on a special plate or vessel for important self-sacrificial rituals (referred to as the Quadripartite Badge by anthropologists), which was worn as a headdress by the same deity. Because aspects of the World Tree are portrayed emerging out of this special plate, its presence in art also alluded to the birth of these most sacred trees, as well as related themes of divine emergence and cosmic renewal. Moreover, in arrangements where the shells hold jade articles, *Spondylus* shells were included to embody the surface or container from which the breath of life, instantiated by precious jade, emerges revitalized and renewed. Further evidencing their generative powers, these kinds of shells were even associated both with male and female genitalia, and were worn in the groin area as part of elaborate ritual regalia.

In all of Mesoamerica and across the Indigenous Americas, as is the case across the world, serpents have long been main foci of conceptual amalgamation par excellence, and have been among the most important paradigmatic sources for the elaboration of meaning in a great variety of past and present cultural expressions, such as spirituality, ritualism, philosophy, politics, literature, mathematics, among others. Due to the characteristic skin-shedding processes of their development, and because they emerge from their underground hibernation places during the beginning of the rainy season, serpents have long been associated with concepts of fertility, revitalization, and resurrection throughout Mesoamerica. Serpent imagery was extensively integrated into astronomical iconography throughout the region. Within Classic Maya hieroglyphic writing and iconographic systems, the word for "serpent," *kan* or *chan* is homophonous to the words for "sky" and the number "four." Indeed, the three concepts were related to one another through the multivalent significance they shared in regard to cosmic order, along with other complex meanings that interweaved them together. Very generally speaking, prodigious channels through which beings and forces of all kinds could transit, were conceived of as being like the bodies of serpents and centipedes, and allowed passage between otherworldly dimensions and our earthly realm, as well as access to the past, to primordial eras, and generally, to non-ordinary or transcendent temporal domains. As previously stated in the water-cloud band section, serpents, centipedes, and composites of both, functioned in Classic Maya art as portentous conduits for the birth of humans, and as transcendent portals for the rebirth of divine beings and the transfigurative passages of sacred forces between cosmic domains (see Figure 37). Centipedes and serpents are also closely associated with female sexuality and childbirth. In contrast, but more in line with how dangerous they can be as carriers of poison and disease, centipedes and serpents are also feared as noxious creatures of the ground, and are associated with filth, sickness, death, and by extension, underworldly realms.

Figure 23. The glyphic expression *lok' k'uhul ik'* integrated into the sculpture.


Figure 24. The *ak'bal* glyph set into the side of the mountain and detail of serpent's body showing similar colors and patterns as that of the *ak'bal* glyph.

In my sculpture, two serpents emerging from the mouth of the animate flowery mountain function as versions of the *lok'* glyph, which translates as "to emerge / to depart." What emerges from the mountain's mouth, and the mouths of the serpents, are breath scrolls marked with *k'uhul* circles. Altogether, these components are an elaboration of the hieroglyphic expression *lok' k'uhul ik'*, or "sacred breath/wind emerges" (Figure 23). These serpents are deliberately colored like the *ak'bal* or "darkness" glyphs, with dark circular markings on the green upper part and orange belly scales, because the *ak'bal* sign itself is based on the section of a serpent's body as seen from a side view (Figure 24). Numerous other glyphs, icons, concepts, and even practical implements, like descending plumed serpent columns for buildings, also originate from serpent imagery. In a remarkable example, as part of the structure of the Temple of the Inscriptions at Lakamha (Palenque), ancient master architects integrated a sort of tube, a sealed and hollow space, stone-lined with the stairway leading to the royal tomb of K'inich Janaab Pakal. The "tube" starts at the beginning of the stairway inside the temple atop the pyramidal structure, continues through the stairway, and terminates down into the sarcophagus of the dead king, where it takes the form of a serpent. Anthropologists give this curious structure the name of psychoduct, a physical portrayal of a powerful serpentine conduit that functioned as a passage for transcendent communication with otherworldly realms, like the worlds of the ancestors and deities. In the case of the Temple of the Inscriptions, the psychoduct serves to connect the deceased Pakal with his successors and the people of his earthly kingdom. All four sides of Pakal's sarcophagus lid are graced with a lengthy and highly poetic hieroglyphic inscription, which mentions a divine ancestral serpent at a key point in its narrative. It is likely that the ophidian psychoduct is a lithic embodiment of this mysterious ancestral serpent.

In a great variety of cultural expressions from across Mesoamerica, the Pueblo region (or Oasisamerica), and even beyond, ranging from portable art and monumental sculpture to ritual performance and oral traditions, divine and often feathered or horned celestial serpents have long been evidenced to function as transcendent vehicles. In the Maya area, such ophidian agents transport rain clouds, along with the Sun and the Moon so that they can rise out of underworldly realms and into the paradisiacal eastern skies during their celestial motion as perceived from the Earth. Serpents are also related to wind phenomena and concepts revolving around the breath of life, and in some cases, the reptiles themselves embody this sacred breath. Horned serpents in particular have been present throughout the Americas from very early times and up to our days,

often conceptualized as powerful but ambiguous and volatile divine beings who, like the feathered serpents, have important functions in phenomena of geological and meteorological nature. Serpents with horns or antlers can be of assistance in healing and divination practices, but can also cause illness and harm through sorcery. In art, serpents are at times associated with the functionality of cords and ropes in a large variety of contexts, where ophidians substitute for cords, and vice versa. For instance, depictions of the Great Goddess Chac Chel in the Postclassic Maya codices show her wearing a knotted serpent on her hair, as I portray her in my sculpture, and at times also serpent belts on her waist area. To the ancient Maya, divine twisted ropes provided the heavens with structural integrity and support, and just like the sacred sky serpents, served to facilitate the movement of the Sun, Moon, and perhaps other celestial bodies too. Large stone monuments in the Maya area, such as altars and stelae, were often ritually bound during the Classic Period as part of celebrations that commemorated the transition of certain calendric periods, especially the beginning of a new *k'atun*, or 20-year period. Beyond their practicality, or their diverse functions in political, social, and economic endeavors (all of which are often ontologically undifferentiated domains in the region), ropes, fabrics, and cloth were all routinely deployed in ancient times for tying and wrapping ritual paraphernalia, including anything from portable sacred bundles and rubber balls to monumental sculptures and even buildings. These fabric elements were also incorporated in sacrificial acts, not only when the blood of others was shed, but most notably when it was one's own. Special clothing, ropes, and cords formed essential parts of attire related to bloodletting rites, accentuating the humility, piety, self-sacrifice, and spiritual submission of bound ritual practitioners who drew their own blood as a major offering. In funerary contexts, the deceased would be wrapped and bound into a sacred mortuary bundle, in preparation for the transition into the otherworld (or world of the divine ancestors).

In their introduction to the volume "Sacred Bundles," Julia Guernsey and F. Kent Reilly explain that when ropes, clothes, or any other elements made of woven fabric, wrap and tie significant implements of liturgy, they function as veils that protect such implements from irreverent or disrespectful viewing, and also as powerful bindings that contain or secure sacred essences and vital forces properly. Correspondingly, the fabrics or ropes that make up ritual wrappings or bindings, can themselves be as charged with sacredness as the contents they cover or tie. In addition, the very acts of tying or wrapping, and especially the acts of untying or unwrapping sacred bundles, are rare ritual occasions of utmost significance. Accessing the special contents bound by ropes or concealed within bundles requires the orchestration of major ritualized events of liberation or revelation. From times immemorial and up to the present, sacred bundles (called *tlaquimilolli* in Postclassic Nahuatl) have been particularly quintessential components of liturgical practices and spirituality for Indigenous peoples across the Americas, often associated with ancestral origins and the divine powers of cosmic renewal. Sacred bundles, ropes, cords, as well as other cloth and fabric elements, have long been featured prominently in iconography throughout the Americas as major ritual implements. In the Mesoamerican area, such marked emphasis on acts of wrapping and tying in ritual contexts is evidenced in art from the Olmec era, originating in the remote Formative period. Since they have to be woven together to be made, traditional clothes, cords, ropes, and all other elements made from fabric, regardless of their function, are inherently related to longstanding Indigenous weaving practices. Weaving is an activity related to female domains of labor, and in fact, femininity itself serves as an ontological bridge between cords and serpents. In present Maya homes, twisted ropes hang from a house's ceiling to assist women in labor, and are referred to as birth ropes. These twisted fabric birth ropes share close conceptual linkages with celestial umbilical cords, which are transcendent passages for the rebirth of deities, for traveling to and from otherworldly domains, and for the

flow of sustenance between cosmic realms. Among Maya signification systems, and in resonance with others from across Mesoamerica, serpents, fire drilling cords, birth ropes, umbilical cords, and celestial umbilical cords, all can overlap in appearance and in signification.

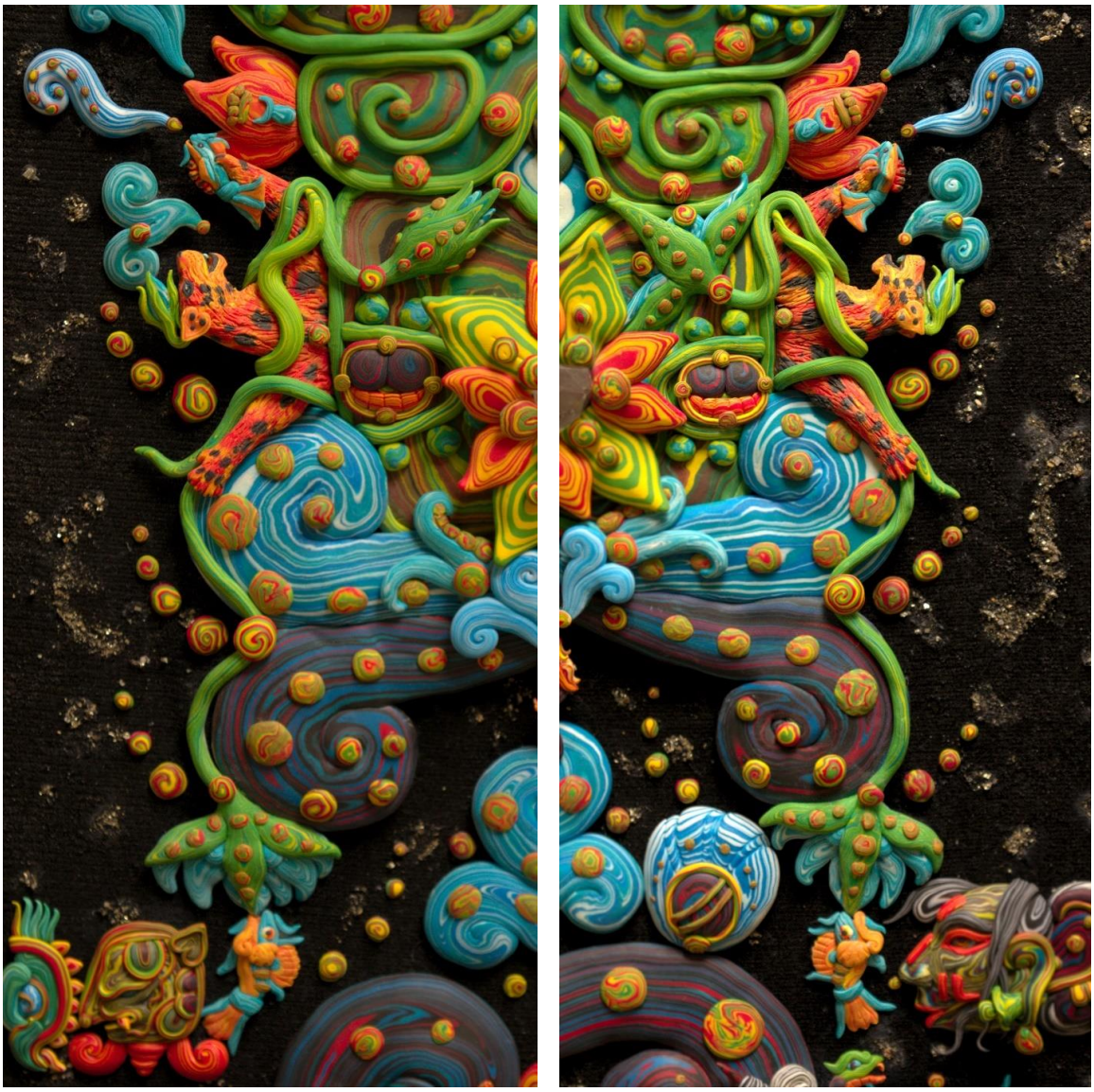


Figure 25. Jaguars emerging from the sides of the mountain with water lilies.

There are two jaguars emerging out of the sides of my image of the flowery Mountain of Sustenance (Figure 25). From the top of their heads emerge water lily sprout leaves. These vegetative elements are a defining characteristic of the powerful feline *wahy* zoomorph commonly named Water Lily Jaguar in the literature. In my sculpture, each jaguar has a water lily hanging down from one of its front paws. Fish nibble at the ends of these water lily flowers. In Classic Maya art, fish nibbling on water lily flowers are allusions to the exuberant life of aquatic ecosystems, but very likely had additional significance regarding ritual practices and spirituality. Water lily leaves and flowers were implemented in images to express one of the most important and precious substances in the cosmos: water. The actual hieroglyphic name of the Water Lily Jaguar is spelled with a *Ha'* syllable, which takes the form of an abstract water

lily flower and means “water,” for the highly possible full reading of this entity’s name as “Water Jaguar.” Jaguars are the mightiest and most respected land animals in the Mesoamerican and South American regions: they can weigh up to 200 pounds and are able to take down any terrestrial animal in their habitats, but are also great swimmers who can even hunt crocodiles out of water. Harpy eagles, which are among the largest and mightiest raptors in the world, are traditionally honored by several South American Indigenous cultures with the epithet “jaguars of the sky.” Because jaguars can be found at cave accesses, have a tendency to hunt at sundown, and because they are well adapted to nocturnal conditions in general, they are often associated with sorcery, transcendent beings, and with underworldly cosmic realms. Along with serpents, jaguars are among the main paradigmatic sources for the amalgamation of meanings, and are primary foci for multiple associations between diverse concepts that often systematically complement one another, such as wilderness and culture, water and fire, darkness and light, sorcery and healing, death and life, along with liminality and traveling through the various cosmic dimensions, among others. Throughout the long history of Mesoamerican societies, and up to the present, multifaceted meanings constructed around jaguars have occupied central roles in regard to warfare, politics, and spirituality. In Central Mexico, some of the highest Mexica (Aztec) military offices were occupied by the eagle and jaguar warrior orders. Out of all the animals, jaguars were deployed the most as part of the names of Classic Maya nobility. In Maya iconography of all eras, entities who wear jaguar heads, ears, mittens, and full-body jaguar skin suits, were either conceived of as having jaguar attributes, or the wearers themselves were thought to have transformed into otherworldly jaguar-like beings. Practitioners of the ancestral Mesoamerican spiritual traditions have long had otherworldly jaguars as some of their greatest animal companions or co-essences, and if the practitioners are powerful enough, they are believed to be capable of even transforming into these feline entities.

Figure 26. Glyphic portraits of solar deities: K’inich Ajaw (left), the jaguar night sun (center), and GI (right).

One of the most important deities of the Classic Maya pantheon is the so-called Jaguar God of the Underworld or Jaguar War God, whose actual name is still elusive. In portraits of this enigmatic deity, basic facial characteristics are shared with GI (divine aquatic personification of the resurrected morning Sun) and the general Sun deity, K’inich Ajaw. The three beings have very similar large eyes, scalloped eyebrows, and hooked-style noses (Figure 26). According to specialists, these shared traits visually indicate the three of them are related. A defining feature of the jaguar divinity is the presence of the “eye cruller” motif and jaguar ears. Indeed, just like GI and K’inich Ajaw, the jaguar entity is also a solar deity, but with nocturnal aspects. The Jaguar War God personifies the Sun during the night, transformed into a fierce deified jaguar for its journey through the dark underworld domains. In primordial times, this being was involved in a still obscure world creation event in which the Maize Deity dies in a cataclysmic flood, and

was also a main character in a divine cosmic war involving stars and other celestial bodies. Given their unmatched efficacy for hunting and killing prey on land throughout Mesoamerica, jaguars are more than appropriate for instantiating the qualities of ideal warriors. Correspondingly, warfare has long been equated with predation in the environment across the Americas. By winning battles and wars, kings and queens were influencing political order, but also approaching a status akin to an apex predator, and in addition, they were also augmenting their divine status by contributing to establishing and maintaining cosmic order.

The Vase of the Stars, a remarkable example of Maya painted ceramics produced during the Late Classic period, displays what seem to be several otherworldly warriors marked with star glyphs, all led by the Jaguar War God as they present captives to a group of maize and lunar deities who rest on a large, stepped throne structure. Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos suggests the unique image is a key fragment of a Classic era Maya narrative regarding the genesis of warfare, which was established as an essential cosmic enterprise through a primordial war involving the stars, the Sun, the Moon, and the other deified celestial bodies. Such interpretation fully concords with other accounts from across ancient Mesoamerica, in which stellar deities and related celestial beings are often correlated with themes of warfare and confrontations of cosmic scale. The significance of warfare's divine origins functioned to sanctify and institute in the human world the fundamental means through which victims would be slain and captives obtained for sacrifice, all in order to provide deities with essential nourishment. In a sense, one of the main purposes of humans is to sustain the divine powers and processes that in turn sustain humanity. In the past, this was not only achieved through people's ritual offerings as in the present, but also with their own highly sacred blood partially shed in self-sacrificial bloodletting, the bodies of the dead, and the vital essences these contain, all of which transformed into nourishment for the divine Earth, deities, and ancestors. Beyond its sacred establishment in primordial times and its major role in divine sustenance, the importance of war in ancient Mesoamerica rested in its efficacy for imposing political and economic dominance, just as is the case among most other cultures across the world from times immemorial. As an integral part of the prodigious Group of the Cross architectural complex at Lakamha (Palenque), the Temple of the Sun displays Earth and mountain visual elements. The latter has led specialists to interpret the structure as a specific recreation of a sacred mountain, and its inner chamber as a cave, a meaning perhaps shared to an extent with the other two temples that compose the Group of the Cross. In short, the central iconographic compound displayed on the temple sanctum's tablet features a shield with the face of the Jaguar War God, together with two crossed spears culminating on flints at their upper ends. This graphic element is an elaboration of the well-known difrasismo or couplet *tok' pakal*, which directly translates to "flint, shield" but signifies war and warfare in general, and which has cognates across Mesoamerica. Fire is another main component of the themes featured at the Temple of the Sun. Although fire is mainly alluded to through the solar associations it shares with the Jaguar War God, it is also directly portrayed just below the deity's face on the tablet's central iconographic compound, as well as other images and texts throughout the temple's sculptural program. Elsewhere in the Maya area, fiery jaguar paws appear sometimes in art and writing, usually as part of the names of royal figures. The meaning of these icons is likely related to the concept of a "burning" pain, as felt after being hit by the well-clawed paw of a jaguar. Another possibility is that these particular images are linked to sorcery and pyromancy, since jaguars are themselves associated with such themes.

Besides being a divine personification of the nocturnal Sun with associations of warfare, underworldly travels, and ferociousness, the Jaguar War God is closely linked to pyromancy and fire in ritual contexts. Referred to in the literature as "cruller," the cord that winds under the Jaguar War God's large eyes, and which twists and curls on the deity's forehead, evokes (and is

likely related to) chords implemented in fire-drilling rites. Throughout ancient Mesoamerica, these kinds of fire-making rituals were integrated into several traditional forms of ritualism that invoked dawning and the emergence of revitalized sacred essences. Known as the ritual of the New Fire in Postclassic Central Mexico, fire-drilling was conducted to celebrate significant calendric period endings and beginnings, due to the rite's conceptual association with the renewal of cosmic cycles and the beginning of time itself. Acts of fire drilling were considered to be transcendent in nature because they were related to primordial events of cosmic creation and renewal, in which analogous ritual actions were orchestrated by deified ancestral beings. Fire is prominently featured in creation accounts, as in the well-known Postclassic Nahua narrative of creation at Teotihuacan, in which all the deities were incinerated to renew the world and prepare it for the arrival of humanity. Fire itself is perceived as one of the most powerful substances in the universe. The preeminence of fire significantly resides in its high status as one of the mightiest and most effective agents of transfiguration, routinely deployed as a transformation medium for the production of vital smoke and gaseous essences out of all kinds of ritual implements and sacred substances. In contemporary Mesoamerican fire rites, the prodigious smoke and aromatic scents from burned offerings ascend transmuted into fulfilling sustenance for divine ancestors, deities, and other transcendent beings, as has been the case among other Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas from times immemorial. Ceramic censers, plates, and other kinds of containers have long been among the most commonly implemented supports for ritually burning offerings throughout Mesoamerica, and are therefore thought to be highly sacred in their own right as vehicles for transformation.

Fire and warmth, both of which ultimately originate from the Sun in Mesoamerican cosmovisions, are intimately linked to the sacred forces of life and vitality, along with their renewal, as contrasted with coldness, which is associated with death, disease, and the extinguishing of the flame of life. Maya hieroglyphic texts of the Classic era narrate particular fire rituals destined for built environments with the words *och k'ahk'*, or "fire enters." Such rites were conducted to purify architectural spaces, including houses, tombs, and temples, in order to ready them for their proper utilization, but also to vivify and regenerate them with the animating vital essences that fire emanates. Also during the Classic period, censers and censer stands were sometimes portrayed as the spiky trunks of young ceiba trees in the Maya area. Along with maize, ceibas are among the main plants that traditionally embody the Cosmic Tree among Maya people. Like the divine ceiba trees, censers facilitate the transfer of sacred essences and forces of vitality, as well as communication with beings and dimensions of transcendent order. Around a hundred richly embellished ceramic censer stands have been found throughout the Group of the Cross complex. This extraordinary architectural space, composed of three pyramidal bases with highly decorated temples above each, was conceived of as an earthly recreation of the primordial three stones set on the cosmic hearth during world creation times. Further context for this significance is found in a previously noted enigmatic episode of Classic Maya cosmogony, which was featured on the majestic Stela C from the site of Quirigua, Guatemala. The sculpted text relates how three stones or stone stelae were ritually placed in the cosmic hearth by primordial deities, in order to commemorate the beginning of a new cycle of 13 Bak'tuns or 5,126 years, referred to as the Long Count. Presumably, this great hearth was set aflame through the first fire-drilling ceremony, and it operated as a sort of universal engine, powering the process of cosmic renewal in extreme antiquity. As an essential part of the ceremonial center of Lakamha, The Group of the Cross was created as a monumental hearth, and it was effectively activated as such during rituals in which multitudes of censers would be set ablaze, emanating large quantities of copal smoke that would elevate to the heavens.

Besides the abundance of applications for ritual practices and spirituality, fire's multiple possibilities for practical functionality are of the utmost importance to past and present Indigenous people, as has long been the case throughout the world for all of humanity. However, it is worth emphasizing that within Indigenous modalities of operation, there is no ontological differentiation between foci of aesthetics, ritualism, practicality, spirituality, or signification, since they are not mutually exclusive from one another. Contemporary Maya farmers prepare fields by burning overgrown plants, weeds, and unfruitful crops before the planting season, just as was likely the case for the ancient Maya. As previously stated, steam bath houses have long been implemented for healing practices and for assistance in childbirth across Mesoamerica and beyond. Hot stones or direct fire have traditionally been deployed to warm up the inner space of steam baths, in order to evaporate water and induce people to profusely sweat inside, catalyzing the healing process. Large varieties of ceramics for storing and serving food and water, for ritual implementation, and for many other purposes, have long been a main focus of mass manufacture throughout the Americas and elsewhere. Obviously, an integral part of this production process is heating earthenware at high temperatures inside traditional kilns, which take various forms. Naturally, fire is constantly present in homes, for cooking food, heating up beverages, and warming up against cold weather. In many present-day Indigenous communities, people still set traditional hearths with three stones that support a flat cooking griddle (or comal) in the central part of their houses. Just as in the case of the sumptuous Group of the Cross buildings mentioned in the previous paragraph, some of these modest fire assemblages are also conceived of as earthly recreations of the primordial cosmic hearth set by ancient divinities during world creation times. In traditional creation narratives found throughout Mesoamerica, the present world exists as a sort of reflection of the primordial world, as it unfolded during the day the cosmic creation process completed. Correspondingly, any earthly fire is in essence a projection of, and in some contexts even analogous to, the first divine fire as manifested during cosmogenesis.

Jaguars are good examples among the many Maya hieroglyphs and icons that indicate similar cases of shared extended identities in the archeological record. Just like the *polaw* and *Ix* glyphs, the *bahlam* jaguar portrait head evidences the essential association between a generic or common category of being, phenomena, or thing, and its singular exemplar or prototype. This feline head is explicitly the portrait of Water Lily Jaguar, with the distinctive water lily tendril or leaf sometimes placed on top of the head (Figure 27). But in writing, the same glyph actually functions as a general term for "jaguar." The *Bahlam* head visually anchors back to the prototypical individual, and at the same time, it works as an expression that refers to jaguars in general. In this way, the essence of the divine Water Lily Jaguar extends to be part of the identity of all jaguars, and correspondingly, any common jaguar functions as a reference back to the prototypical exemplar. Depending on the accompanying glyphs or images, a subject could be revealed to be, at varying degrees, either more like a generic individual, or more like the exemplar prototype. And even then, both specific and generic classes could still seamlessly substitute for one another.

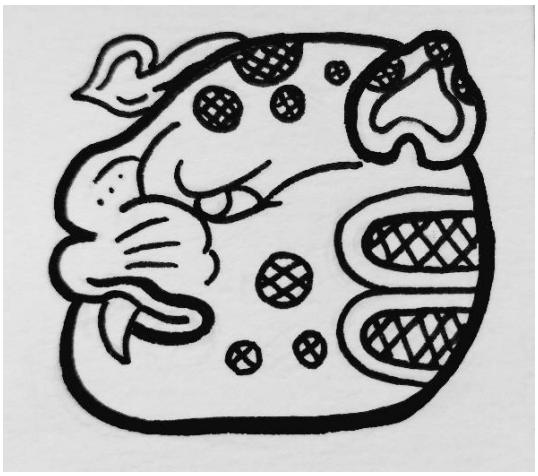



Figure 27. Jaguars with water lily tendrils: detail of sculpture (left), *bahlam* hieroglyph (right).


Figure 28. The expression *tzak*: Details showing both jaguars holding fish with their paws (above), and *tzak* hieroglyph (next page).

Figure 28. (continued).

In my sculpture, each Water Lily Jaguar grasps a small fish with one of its front paws (Figure 28). This gesture instantiates the expression *tzak* (the so-called "fish-in-hand" glyph) and it gets translated as "to make manifest," "to make appear" or "to conjure." Fishing is conceptually related to rainmaking, as evidenced by various images of Chahk in the act of holding or catching fish. A remarkable example can be found in the late Preclassic Izapa Stela 1, in which an early iteration of the general rain deity for past and present Maya peoples, Chahk, is depicted standing on a water band and in the act of fishing. There, Chahk carries a fish with what appears to be a netted basket, while water flows down from the latter. In addition, there is a larger netted container on Chahk's back, with a large fish or shark attached to it, along with large amounts of water flowing down from it, and large scrolls, likely clouds, emanating from it. Because of these associations with acts of fishing, the *tzak* glyph also evokes rainmaking feats by ways of conjuring clouds loaded with water. The spirals emerging from the mouths of the fish in my sculpture are depictions of the standard pan-Mesoamerican sound scrolls, and they carry the *k'uhul* circles, which as previously stated, signify sacredness or holiness at large. The jaguars grasping these fish actually function as a hieroglyphic expression integrated into the image, the reading of which can be: "Water Lily Jaguar conjures the sacred word/song." The act of conjuring elusive otherworldly beings, deities, and ancestors was analogous to the difficult task of grabbing slippery fish with one hand, out of the aqueous underworldly domains and into our realm. For the Classic Maya, Flower Mountain, which was a version of the divine Mountain of Sustenance, was a transcendent location inhabited by divinities and ancestors. Because it was the *axis mundi*, the center of the world, it was also a point of connection between the three vertical levels of the universe: underworldly, earthly, and celestial planes. These characteristics made Flower Mountain ideal for conjurations and communication across cosmic domains in general. Additionally, the image of the jaguars holding fish with their paws, not unlike people would with their hands, adds a humanizing quality to both big cats and alludes to the special capabilities of powerful ritual practitioners, more specifically the ability to transform into otherworldly jaguars and other animal-spirit companions. Furthermore, both feline figures mirroring each other recall the theme of the divine twin agents that recurs in traditional Indigenous creation accounts across the Americas, past and present.

The Human-Made Sacred Landscape: Pyramid-Mountains, Plaza-Seas, and Underworld-Ballcourts

Figure 29. Detail of two-dimensional pyramidal platform with drawn outline.

An abstracted, two-dimensional pyramid rests on top of the animate mountain in my sculpture, behind the flowering tree and the bird (Figure 29). The pyramid includes four flowers similar to those on the sides of the mountain, in order to indicate that this pyramidal structure is a recreation of Flower Mountain. More precise terms to refer to these structures would be pyramidal bases or pyramidal platforms because Mesoamerican pyramids culminate in platforms, not in triangular points at the top like the well-known Egyptian pyramids do. For clarity purposes, I still implement the generic term pyramid throughout the present monograph. The general function of the platforms was to support constructions employed as temples, sanctuaries, and other highly sacred spaces built at their summits. What remains of most of these ancient pyramidal buildings are only shadows compared to their original appearance, when they graced and dominated urban landscapes as they embodied holy mountains. Mainly painted in vibrant red and white, and embellished with colorful murals and sculptures, these magnificent structures were visible from long distances, shining like giant resplendent jewels. Throughout Mesoamerica, pyramidal bases and related edifices are among the most complex buildings in terms of both significance and architectural intricacy. Briefly and generally speaking, pyramids connect the three general levels of the universe through their vertical orientation: the underworldly realms below, the middle earthly plane, and the celestial domains above. The four sides that typically constitute the horizontal shape of pyramids allude to the quadripartite arrangement of the world. These organizing concepts correspond to the principal components of the wide-ranging Indigenous quincunx icon, a cosmogram that, in one of its most abbreviated forms, is produced by arranging four points at similar distances from a central anchoring axial point or bar. The term “sacred city” is not merely an exalted title utilized by researchers in an attempt to praise or glorify ancient cultures in the archaeological literature. The planning of pyramids, ball courts, plazas, and entire cities was often guided in ancient times by the above-

mentioned fundamental principles of sacred geometry, among other mathematical codes and ideological systems, all based on traditionally informed perceptions of existence. It is these elements of organization, along with the proper performance of intended ritual functions within constructed spaces, that could successfully activate divine harmonic concordance between built structures, significant positions of stars and other celestial bodies, processes of cosmic renewal, traditional systems of meaning, and the people who effectively engaged all of them together into immanent experiential manifestations of transcendent reality. All of these characteristics rightfully bestow the title of sacred city upon most Mesoamerican urban centers, not only in an honorary sense but also as a concise expression that invokes their complex significance as reflections of cosmic order.

In their various joint works, Julie Gazzola and Sergio Gómez Chávez tell us about the *Altepetl*, from the Nahuatl language meaning "Water Mountain," which is an expression that was applied during the Postclassic and early colonial eras to refer to anything ranging from small towns to large cities. The term is present in varying forms throughout Mesoamerica, but the concepts they encapsulate are virtually the same. Reasoning for this kind of denomination derives from the fact that any urban setting was understood to be an earthly reflection or projection of the sacred Mountain of Sustenance in the form of a water mountain, as it rose from the waters of creation at the beginning of time to generate life and the conditions for the appearance of humanity. In ancient times, the pyramid as Water Mountain stood as an idealized abbreviation of the entire town or city. Even today, the structure and layout of towns and cities across Mexico and Guatemala evidence this notion: the main or central features of urban areas are usually composed of a church, often built atop or near remains of ancient temples, palaces, or other important features of the local landscape, and a large plaza constructed next to or in front of the church. Ethnographers and anthropologists tend to classify groups of people in Mesoamerica based on their specific language or cultural affiliations. Indigenous people's own conceptions of their identities, on the other hand, revolve around the notions of the local community and landscape, with a special emphasis on the collective devotion to the local divine patron figure, which can be a traditional deity, a Christian saint, or a combination of both. This pattern of traditional social conceptualization has long been reflected across the region. Throughout the ages, mountains have been conceived of as giant containers of water from which rivers, mist, and rain clouds emerge, as well as the prodigious spaces inside of which sacred essences and forces of vitality are recycled for their reincorporation into the rest of the world. Just as the mountain functions as source and repository for vital waters and sacred essences, the main pyramid, palace, or temple of a community came to be understood as a place for the emergence and residence not only of spiritual forces but of political power too, as well as a divine space where authority was legitimized by the elite. However, the concept of the sacred Mountain of Sustenance is extremely ancient, as its presence can be traced back to the remote Formative era, and likely originated thousands of years before the advent of the first large urban centers and highly stratified social organization.

Within Mesoamerican architectural complexes, it is common to find pyramids built near plazas, and at times one or more ball courts are constructed nearby. Each structure has its own specific meanings, in relation to local history, politics, and even economics, as well as other interwoven domains of social activity and interaction. They also evoke spaces and events from creation accounts, and ultimately embody them in the human world, especially during ritual performances. In regard to general Mesoamerican world creation narratives, pyramidal platforms are manifestations of the sacred Mountain of Sustenance, plazas recreate the surface of the primordial waters from where the mountain emerges, and ball courts or underground tunnels incarnate underworld locations. Some of the remaining architecture from several archaeological

sites still evidence characteristics that anchor back to these master narratives, like water imagery found at plazas, or mountain iconography placed on the facades of pyramidal bases. Because these constructions were designated as key features of the primordial landscape, their presence sanctified urban spaces. Due to the complex concepts involved, even the alignment of these buildings with one another, with features of the landscape, or with important positions of celestial bodies, facilitates further elaborations of signification. In my sculpture, abstract depictions of a pyramid, a plaza, and a ball court are aligned and placed on the zoomorphic mountain's head (Figure 30). Below the pyramid, and behind the Quadripartite Badge and tree, is a ball court. The perspective is that of a viewer located at one end of the court, looking in the direction of its central alley. The blue volutes set behind the tree and framed by the steps of the ball court are elaborations of the *pollaw* glyph, which signify sea or ocean currents, as previously stated. These water volutes are projections of the primordial waters of creation as portrayed in the lower part of the sculpture, and substitute for the plaza, with the latter being conceptually positioned past the court alley. Beyond the water-plaza, the pyramid stands further in the background. All is presented two-dimensionally, so that the pyramid appears to be set right above a flooded ballcourt. This juxtaposition evokes the flooded tunnels and caves on top of which many Mesoamerican pyramidal structures are built. Architectonic elements configured in accordance with this pattern fundamentally transform the space they occupy into a cosmogram, an earthly replica of the vertical cosmic model as conceived of in the region, with the underworld tunnel or cave underneath the sacred mountain-pyramid.

Figure 30. Detail with outline showing the position of the pyramid, plaza, and the ball court.

Traditionally, ball court alleys are often set at a lower level than their surrounding area, which serves to accentuate both their lower cosmic position in relation to the earthly plane and their important function as portals into otherworldly realms. Nearly all Mesoamerican archeological sites have ball courts, and some places have several. The presence of the so-called Mesoamerican ball game goes as far back in time as the earliest structures created by the Olmec people about three and a half thousand years ago, if not earlier. Present versions of the traditional

ball game are still performed today in a few places. It has been documented from Central America all the way to Oasisamerica, both ethnographically and archaeologically. In ancient times, the activities conducted in related spaces were less like sports, and more like complex ritual spectacles. The holy Book of The Dawn of Life of the K'iche' Maya, the sacred Popol Vuh, relates, among other cosmogonic accounts, sacred and prototypical ball games in which two generations of divine hero twins confronted the dreadful deities of death in their dangerous ball court, at their underworldly realm of Xibalba, or "Place of Fright." Heavily synthesizing the complex narrative, the second set of twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, finally defeat the death divinities after overcoming numerous deadly trials and tribulations. Their momentous victory resulted in the limitation of the powers of death, destruction, and disease, as well as in the establishment of the cycles of life, death, and rebirth. The latter are exemplified in the human world through the generational and agricultural processes, and all are expressions of universal renewal systems akin to the Tz'utujil *Jaloj-K'exoj* model. As evidenced by the previous account from the Popol Vuh, the original ball court was a characteristically underworldly locale in which the confrontation of the divine forces of life and death determined cosmic order in primordial times. Earthly replicas of the first ball court manifested it as sacred underworldly spaces in the urban landscapes they were part of, while human ball players personified divine complementary forces when ancient versions of the original and primordial confrontation were recreated.

Instead of placing a temple on top of the pyramidal platform in my sculpture, I added the Classic Maya portrayal of the morning Sun, to indicate the building's alignment with the rising star (Figure 31). I made the typical *k'in* ("Sun" or "day") hieroglyph in the form of a red and yellow four-petaled flower, and it holds a jade stone in the center. This icon is enclosed in a multicolor celestial cartouche as elaborated from the *yax* glyph (meaning "new, first," but also "blue/green"). The full expression, *Yax K'in*, can refer to sunrises in general, but simultaneously, it serves as a reference back to the first dawn, when the Sun rose resurrected during primordial times. I previously noted that in Mesoamerican visions of the cosmos, the general path of the regularly varying positions of the Sun, Moon, and other celestial bodies, as perceived from the Earth, horizontally divides the world into four parts. One way such a quadripartite arrangement gets conceptualized is by linking the extreme points of dawn and dusk during the two yearly solstices. A more common method through which this partitioning can be achieved is the combination of the points in the horizon where sunrise and sunset generally occur during the daily cycle, with the general sides perpendicular to the zenith of the path of apparent celestial movement (see Figure 18). This second approach yields an arrangement that most closely resembles the Western concept of the four cardinal directions, but within Indigenous ideologies, both daily and yearly cycles can be conflated to compose an eight-part cosmogram. In any case, it is these four world partitions that are among the main bases for the four-sided template that most architectural structures and urban centers follow throughout Mesoamerica. Clearly, the most important directions in this system are the areas where the celestial bodies appear to generally set in and rise from the horizon, as seen from the Earth. For the Classic Maya, the red color of the *k'in* flower alludes to the world direction where dawn happens, but also precious blood, sacredness, and the fiery realm of the Sun in general. There are three triangular solar rays, colored red and yellow, projecting from the *Yax K'in* element. As sometimes depicted, out of the sides of the *yax* cartouche in my sculpture emerge "square-nosed serpents," which function as the animate rays of energy radiating from the Sun. Visually, these are composite entities, partly flowering plants, partly bejeweled serpents. In Classic Maya art, they embodied the life force as a sacred celestial (but mainly solar) essence that emanated out of precious phenomena such as flowers, and occasionally even the Quadripartite Badge, but also out of significant people such as venerable ancestors and transcendent beings. This vital energy was dispersed throughout the

cosmos, sanctifying and permeating it with divine essences, in a parallel way to the concept of *k'uhul*. The floral form of the Sun in my sculpture is elaborated further behind the cartouche to become the celestial realm, the whole sky portrayed as an enormous flower. Out of the top of the celestial flower emerges a double curving band, which embodies the flower's aromatic fragrance and essence. On the blue and white petals, there are small floating flowers with their respective double-band aroma elements. The whole upper area of the sculpture is elaborated to evoke some of the most important Indigenous paradisiacal realms in Mesoamerica, Oasisamerica (the Southwest of the US), and beyond, which are generally called Flower Worlds in recent literature, and are sacred dimensions full of delightful phenomena and multisensorial beauty, like flowers, colorful songbirds, chromatic brilliance, and pleasant music. There will be more information about Flower Worlds in the last sections of this monograph.

Figure 31. The four-petal sun and the floral sky set above the pyramid.

Painted or sculpted graphic elements in architectural constructs can function as much more than aesthetic enhancements. By adding strategic imagery to pyramids, temples, steam bath houses, tombs, and other built spaces, these can be conditioned as places that indefinitely facilitate the effective performance of ritual acts and ceremonial practices, and thus, transform them into sanctified environments of atemporal ritual potentiality, or eternal performances. According to Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez and Maarten Jansen, the Late Classic architecture and murals that compose Tomb 1 from San Juan Ixcaquixtla, in southern Puebla, illustrate these traditional modalities of engagement with constructed places. The tomb's entrance is located in the western part of the central chamber, and the most significant mural is located in the eastern area. There are five seated people depicted on the other murals, two on the north wall, and three on the south wall. The five of them are likely members of local royal houses, and all face

towards the main figure in the east wall, who in turn is portrayed from the waist up and facing frontward towards the entrance or viewer located inside the space. This focal personage, who is identified as a deified female ancestor, holds flint blades and is surrounded by rays of light and green feathers that radiate outwards, characteristics that attest to the woman's divine condition and power. The murals are akin to pictures, long-lasting images of the actual ceremonies held within the tomb that, along with other features, transform the space into an exemplary setting of perpetual ritual potentiality. Accordingly, the height of the open space within the chamber is reduced enough so that fully grown living persons entering the tomb would have to be on their knees or squatting, and thus would be physically prompted to assume a position akin to the very actions depicted on the murals to the sides. The open space serves to facilitate ritual action for the living, thus contributing to converting the architectural complex into an eternal performance: when visiting the tomb, people have no option but to humbly bend their knees and bow in reverence, to join the ancient participants who conducted the original ritual long ago but who are made present through the artwork, and to pay respect to the divine ancestral woman, who rises in brilliance and splendor the East, just like the Moon and the Sun do.

Large numbers of constructed spaces throughout the Americas were created as sacred eternal performances effectively preserved in states of timelessness, such as the magnificent offering assemblages inside Spirit Lodge at the site of Spiro in Oklahoma, the kivas embellished with prodigious murals at the site of Pottery Mound in New Mexico, or the previously mentioned Group of the Cross at Lakamha (Palenque) in Chiapas, Mexico. Out of the thousands of Mesoamerican architectural complexes that were built as exemplary environments of perpetual ritual potentiality, and which were utilized as sanctified stages to liturgically make manifest accounts of creation, the Ciudadela compound at Teotihuacan is revealed to be among the most spectacular of all. This large area was a massive cosmogram, a human-made reproduction of the universal template, specifically the early cosmos, when the sacred mountain emerged from the primordial sea in times of creation. The compound was built, destroyed, and rebuilt through roughly three main construction phases starting at around 1 ACE, each time magnifying the size and complexity of the previous edifices above ground level. All these projects revolved around and above an older tunnel that culminated in a triple chamber space. As mentioned before, this tunnel recreated the conditions of underworldly cosmic domains in the architectural space. During the final major construction phase of the Ciudadela, the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent was built right above this underground space. Like the Pyramid of the Sun before it, the Feathered Serpent Pyramid was fashioned after the holy mountain of creation in the form of the water mountain, the Altepetl. The tunnel's final chambers align with the central axis of the pyramid. A scepter-like wooden sculpture was found set on the ceiling of this central area of the chambers. Although partly eroded, this rare example of preserved wood has a still distinguishable feathered serpent head at one end. As a direct portrayal of the holy Feathered Serpent, this scepter might be related to the idea of the deity as an embodiment of sacred power, and as such, it would have likely been implemented to legitimize political power. As previously explained, more than 100,000 artifacts have been found throughout the tunnel. A large plaza extends around this main sanctuary. The drains at the Ciudadela were ritually blocked to allow for controlled flooding of the plaza, in order to recreate the surface of the primordial waters in the compound.

With the few surviving sections of its elaborate original sculptural program, the Feathered Serpent Pyramid is evidenced to have been one of Teotihuacan's most fantastic recreations of the sacred Mountain of Sustenance, the "First True Mountain." Large, feathered serpents swim or fly over water currents, the latter of which are filled with conch shells of various kinds. Some of the serpents carry the head of the primordial crocodilian dragon deity,

which is emblematic of the creation of the world and of the first day on the ritual calendar. The heads of some of these great feathered serpents emerge from possible large flowers, flowery mirrors, or earspools, the three being closely associated through elaborations of meaning. Clearly, the sculptural program of the Feathered Serpent Pyramid was made to communicate visual allegories, which can be tentatively interpreted as follows: the mountain is either covered in water as it rises out of the primordial sea, is completely made of water, or its inner aqueous contents are revealed; the feathered serpents swim or fly on the mountain's surface as vehicles for life-giving waters and renewed vital forces, and as bringers of the head of the defeated cosmic crocodile; the defeat of the primordial crocodilian dragon marked the end of universal chaos and a new beginning of ordered existence, which manifested through the sacred mountain's birth, renewal for cosmic temporal cycles, and the establishment of the 260-day ritual calendar itself; the numerous serpent heads emerging from the flowery mirror-portals incarnate sacred forces of vitality, creation, and power, all of which transcend normal time and space as they emanate from the primordial event, abundantly flowing into the earthly realm. The Mountain of Sustenance embodied the *axis mundi*, the center of the universe, and its emergence connected the lower worlds, the earthly plane, and the celestial realms, unifying and centering the temporal and spatial dimensions of the world into their present states. Because the Feathered Serpent Pyramid incarnated this divine mountain at Teotihuacan, it was itself conceived of as the very center of the cosmos for those who, in rapturous ecstatic states of consciousness, perceived it as such.

At Teotihuacan, like at virtually all other large Mesoamerican urban centers, elaborate settings were organized for liturgical reenactments of primordial sacred events in which some or all the participants underwent experiential transformation. The Ciudadela compound functioned as a massive ceremonial center, capable of accommodating thousands of people who engaged in large-scale ritual recreations of the Teotihuacan accounts of cosmic origins. According to recent investigations by Julie Gazzola, Sergio Gómez Chávez, and other scholars, the convergence of various elements involved in the ancient ceremonies [the architectural structures that incarnated the sacred landscape and made it present, the timing of events according to the sacred calendar, the personification of deities by appropriately prepared people, the power of the complex performances orchestrated there (with music, dance, and pageantry), and the collective devotion of the thousands of active participants involved] would have triggered the transformation of the perception and consciousness of the masses. For the congregation having the profound spiritual experience of transcendence, the elaborate rituals were far from simple fictitious fabrications. Instead, they were effective methods for bringing forth divine beings and forces from normally unseen sacred dimensions and into the earthly domain, in order to revitalize people, the polity, and ultimately the whole cosmos, with the reactivated powers of creation itself as made manifest through the large-scale ceremonies. As an exemplary and sanctified environment of atemporal ritual action, the Ciudadela architectural complex functioned to conflate ordinary human existence with sacred events and acts from extreme antiquity. As an effective recreation of the timeless creation incident, the pyramid-mountain is perpetually emerging from the plaza-sea.

After the collapse of the sacred city of Teotihuacan, which shone as one of the most important spiritual, political, cultural, and economic centers during Mesoamerica's Classic period, a great power vacuum was left behind in Central Mexico, the territory known today as Oaxaca, and to some extent, even the Maya area. Afterward, during the Epiclassic and Postclassic eras, the remaining confederations of royal houses and city-states in the region implemented measures that addressed the complexities of redistributing power among themselves. The sacred city of Cholula, which is home to one of the largest pyramids in the world, functioned as a main point of political, economic, cultural, and spiritual connection. One

of the ingenious courses of action taken to establish political balance and promote cross-cultural unity, was the adoption of a conventionalized system of graphic signification and communication, which was expressed through a standardized style of art, referred to as the International style, Mixteca-Puebla, or Nahua-Mixteca style. Such art style was characterized by precise linework and vivid colors, as those prodigiously painted in the scarce but exemplary manuscripts (like the Codex Yoalli Ehecatl, or Coder Borgia) that survived the destructive processes of the conquest and colonialism. It was through this homogenized signification system, along with alliances built through marriage, networks of trade, very ancient divinatory feasting traditions, and shared ritual practices, as well as other means, that the allied Indigenous leaders overcame most boundaries not only of space but also of politics and language. The elites, ambassadors, priestly class, and intellectuals of the various great noble houses could speak up to twelve distinct languages, and united in a confederacy that came to be known as the Children of the Plumed Serpent. Expressed through various media, either with synthesized individual signs or fully elaborated figurative ritual and historic accounts, the International style prominently features Flower World iconography, especially vivid chromatism and flower imagery.

Flowering-Mountain-Earth: The Human Component, the Living Earth, and the Experiential Dimensions Bridging All Together

As explained earlier, throughout the Americas, sacred essences have long been conceived of as concentrated transcendent and immanent forces, as well as multifaceted sacred energies in perpetual motion and transformation. They constantly animate, invigorate, and sustain humans and all other living entities, along with mountains, waters, sections of time, and ultimately, the entirety of the unfolding cosmos with vitality. Because everything is permeated by sacred essences, each entity, substance, phenomenon, or feature of the environment, is considered to be equivalent to a person, and thus merits respect. As a central axis of cognition and operation, this general outlook on life provides a moralizing perception of reality. A worldview of this nature expresses the fundamental responsibility that Indigenous people feel to proactively sustain effective systems of balanced and reciprocal relations with the rest of their environment. By no means is this an arbitrary or illogical conception of existence: one of its functions is the deliberate modulation of human behavior and even general experience in regard to the world they are part of. Just as it is necessary to hunt, farm, forage, and generally consume what Westerners would call natural resources, it is also necessary to limit exploitation and only take what is needed because exceeding can bring disastrous consequences, just as those now experienced on an unprecedented global scale. For example, if a hunter must kill an animal, the action must be respectful, dignified, and conscientious. Also, these sorts of predispositions are important because when an animal or plant is encountered in the wilderness, it might be possible that the entity encountered is not ordinary, and it might be the co-essence of another person or even a deity in disguise. Depending on the kinds of interactions humans have with their natural surroundings, the forces and entities residing there, especially the ancestral "Fathers-Mothers" or "Owners," can protect but also punish. Whereas in Western culture people think of the overexploitation of natural resources as the destruction of the environment, as degradation of the biosphere, or as ecocide, Indigenous people perceive such abuse as a major genocide, because such mass destruction involves the death of entities and elements of the environment that are conceived of as persons and are therefore considered to be as worthy of respect, dignity, and life, as any human being.

Just like the sacred animating essences return to their source to be recycled, the bodies of dead organisms (what Westerners would call material or physical remains) decompose and return back to the Earth, thus forming part of both the ground and the base substances necessary for the composition and sustenance of new organisms. Quite literally, those who came before us not only make up the Earth we walk on, but in addition, we are made with their remains, and they sustain us with their ancestral vital essences. As components of the perpetually unfolding cosmic network of relations, all entities, substances, and elements of the environment are in constant interaction with one another, especially in their immediate surroundings, and all are ultimately interwoven together at varying degrees to form a living totality, which is always coming into being and striving for equilibrium. This is not only meant in a spiritual or abstract sense but in a very real and experiential way too, because all parts contribute in one way or another to the functionality of the whole system of life on Earth, or biosphere. Such interconnectivity means that every aspect of the system is interdependent on one another at different levels, and what is done to any part has effects that impact the entire system at varying magnitudes. For the Indigenous inheritors of these ancestral traditions, living with these kinds of operating systems catalyzes active participation in, as well as exalted celebration and thorough integration of, the vital processes and cycles of the world, with special emphasis on the renewal of the force of life on Earth, or Cosmic Renewal. Such characteristics of Indigenous cosmovisions effectively

compel people to navigate the world with profound gratitude and respect for all aspects of reality. This is indeed a more refined understanding of humanity's place, and a more authentic fulfillment of humanity's function, in relation to the other elements and phenomena of existence that sustain life.

Another facet of these overarching Indigenous systems of operation and cognition regarding the omnipresent sacred essences is revealed through creation narratives and the notion of a divinely established primordial covenant. Present-day Maya accounts of cosmogenesis evidence a perception shared throughout Mesoamerica, in which people have a perpetually owed debt, and they have to constantly conduct ritual labors and provide offerings as forms of payment. The reasoning for such endless debt originates from the fact that vital sustenance is continuously provided for humans by the Earth, at times generously but at other times, it might seem like not so much. Traditional narratives explain how a sacred covenant was established between the first people, the Earth, and the divine cosmic forces of creation back in primordial times. After major conflicts, it was agreed that just as the Earth would provide plants, animals, fertility, and resources in general, humans had to gratefully reciprocate by providing abundant offerings. In this sense, one of the main purposes of humans is to sustain the divine Earth's powers and processes that in turn sustain humanity. Dire consequences can unravel if the covenant is not honored, such as insufficient rainfall, the spread of diseases, and scarcity of cures, among others. Contemporary offerings can range from aromatic flowers, fresh foodstuff, the first fruits of harvest, incense such as copal, singing, dancing, and other ritual labors, etcetera. Material offerings can be deposited, interred, or burned, while ephemeral ones are worked or performed, and when offerings are edible, they can be consumed after liturgical presentation. Whichever the case might be, properly offered substances and labors generate vital essences that, through ritual work, are transfigured into sustenance for the living Earth, deities, and the divine ancestors. In prehispanic times, it was not only the ritual offerings and hard work of humans that provided sustenance for the Earth, but their own highly sacred blood and their bodies after death too, along with the vital essences these contain and which eventually have to go back to their original source, the ancestral Earth.

A two-dimensional recreation of a zoomorphic mountain head dominates the middle area of my sculpture (Figure 32). The mountain here takes the form of the personified *witz* or "mountain" logograph from Classic Maya iconography. It is a frontal view of the conventional zoomorphic *witz* portrait head: it includes prominent serpentine/reptilian characteristics, long snout, no lower jaw, *tunn* or "stone" icons, and the *witz* logograph integrated into the forehead. The animate Earth-mountain embodied by the jawless reptilian head recalls primordial events when the world got created from the body of a great cosmic crocodilian or draconic saurian divinity. Called Cipactli in Postclassic Central Mexico, and Itzam Kab Ain in Postclassic Yukatek Mayan, this divine crocodile is present in a variety of creation accounts across Mesoamerica, but the underlying structure of the narratives remains consistent. According to the works of Karl Taube, Alfredo López Austin, and others, after the last world cataclysm, usually a great flood, there existed a crocodile or a composite, dragon-like saurian creature of cosmic dimensions on the primordial waters. Complementary universal forces merged in the crocodile, who threatened to destroy the whole world with its great powers. Divine heroic figures end up battling and eventually slaying this great beast of chaos and disorder, and from its immense body, the world was created and structured into order. Some versions of this account narrate how half of the body was implemented to make the skies, and the other half to make the Earth, while others instead emphasize how the body is dismembered to mark the four world corners and the center. Important focus is also placed on the divine blood resulting from the sacrifice. In

accordance with fundamental processes of self-sustaining cosmic unfoldment, sacrifice and creation, and by extension, death and life, substantiate one another as extremes of an increasingly more consummate continuum. It is through these kinds of universal operating systems that recurring underworldly death and decay generate sacred essences and sustenance for the continuous renewal of Flower Worlds. These transcendent processes are reflected in the earthly plane, where decomposing dead organisms underground provide vital nutrients for the growth of new plant life, which in turn will nourish other living beings and revitalize greater life cycles.

Figure 32. Detail showing the zoomorphic mountain and drawing of lower register of Bonampak Stella 1, showing the Maize Deity, who is replacing the maize plant as cosmic tree, emerging from the forehead opening (next page).

The defeat of the great crocodilian dragon allowed for the creation of the world, the birth of the Mountain of Sustenance, and it also marked the beginning of the 260-day ritual calendar. Significantly, the first day of this sacred calendar is instantiated by a disembodied crocodile's head in Central Mexico and in the Mixtec region, which corresponds with a Maya version in the form of a watery reptile deity. Day names in both Classic Maya and Postclassic Central Mexican iconography are sometimes explicitly portrayed with blood imagery, revealing the fundamental connection between the calendar, sacredness, and sacrificial blood. At times, the bodies of

Figure 32. (continued).

crocodilians and draconic saurians are marked with day names, leading researchers to suggest that the separate qualities of each day originate as the qualities and characteristics of the divine reptiles themselves. As Simon Martin insightfully notes, it even appears as if the very blood of the primordial sacrificial event continues to circulate through the cosmos in the form of the ritual calendar's day names, which carry sacred and vital forces that influence and animate the universe with their presence and continuous succession. Such ideas resonate with an important notion: the great crocodilian is not understood of as being absolutely and irremediably dead after its sacrifice. Rather, because the primordial reptile's body was implemented to create the living world, the sacred creature was transfigured, and in a way even reborn, into more complex conditions of being than those of its previous existence. Along with the notions of sacred essences, this set of associations provides insight regarding the pan-Mesoamerican perception of a world that is literally alive, together with all its components. All these concepts relate back to the idea of the divine covenant: just as the Earth provides nourishment for humanity, humans have to act in gratitude by providing sustenance back to the living Earth and offer a variety of gifts, including copal incense and the bodies of the dead, along with the vital forces and energies they all contain. These essential offerings are ultimately consumed by the Earth in order for it to be reinvigorated, so that in turn it can continue to provide nourishment and sustenance for people and all other living beings, in a cycle where everything ultimately returns where it first originated.

As previously mentioned, there is not a definitive or absolute version of Mesoamerican creation accounts or worldviews. Due to the high flexibility of traditional systems of meaning, several variations of the same core account are known to have long existed along with one another in the same region and continue to do so today. The varying narratives can easily coexist with each other because all of them ultimately share underlying core principles and ideologies,

characteristics that provide fundamental concordance among accounts throughout the region and across the various cultures, even with the marked differences that distinguish them. Even within a single worldview, there can be several non-exclusive and multifaceted models of the world. Each model is implemented to highlight different qualities and attributes of cosmic phenomena, contrasting in accordance with the overall signification and function intended. This characteristic is especially evident with prominent ideas, and of course, the concepts of world order, creation, and the origin of humans are among the most important ones. For instance, archeological remains evidence that by at least the remote Formative era, caves, usually located within mountains, were considered to be holy places of origin of different groups of people in Mesoamerica. During the Postclassic period, the majority of cultures inhabiting Central Mexico related cosmogonic accounts corresponding with other narratives found in the Mixtec and Maya regions, in which various culturally and linguistically distinct peoples emerged from a multi-chamber cave system. This most sacred location is usually called the Place of the Seven Caves, or Chicomoztoc in Nahuatl. Even though the narrative emphasizes the uniqueness of each group, it also highlights their shared beginnings within the living Earth. Ethnographic studies reveal that some Indigenous groups in present Central Mexico still maintain accounts of the Seven Caves in their oral traditions. In regards to world order and creation, the cognitive organization of time and space, as expressed through widespread quadripartite and quincuncial cosmograms, follows models established during cosmogonic events in the deep past. Nonetheless, the ancient incidents are made manifest as reflections, projections, or recurrences through their direct corresponding counterparts in the present world. Thus, the regularly varying positions of the celestial bodies as perceived from the Earth, through the extremes of their general path and the perpendicular sides of the zenith, function to divide the world into four parts set around a central axis. In turn, these phenomena exist in the present world as enduring imprints of the original occurrence when the Sun and the Moon rose for the very first time.

As explained above, the Earth is conceptualized as having been created from the body of a titanic crocodilian dragon divinity. Within another cosmic model, the world is conceived of as a great house with four sides arranged around an anchoring axis in the form of a sacred hearth. Houses in the human world follow this grand structure. There is even a structural association with the deified reptile here: when the great crocodile gets defeated and dismembered to create the world, its limbs are set in the four cosmic directions, just like trees, reeds, and palms are cut and utilized to construct a traditional four-sided house. Another model presents the world in the form of a disk or hemispherical mound with water at all sides, itself a reference to the concept of the Mountain of Sustenance. This sacred mound in turn incarnates into a great cosmic turtle floating on the primordial waters. The divine turtle can unfold and be projected to the four world directions, simultaneously embodying the universal center and the four sides, just like the mountain and tree of creation do. This reptile deity does not get dismembered like the crocodile, but a sacrificial action does take place, and its carapace gets fractured by thunder from rain clouds in order to facilitate the emergence of the Maize Deity, an event analogous to the World Tree sprouting out of the sacred mountain. At times, the turtle's carapace is substituted in art by a quatrefoil cartouche, which is associated with world centrality and order, as well as cave entrances. Caves have long been understood as primordial portals of ancestral emergence and communication with the divine. In another conceptual edifice, the cosmos is conceived of as a great planting field for maize, or milpa, as a direct projection of the very first maize field, which was structured and ordered with four corners and an anchoring center by the divinities themselves in primordial times. This concept is related to the model of the world as a great house, and correspondingly, earthly milpas are also fashioned after the original one. According to yet another model, the entire universe is personified as an all-encompassing entity whose body

is modeled after that of humans. Through this last concept, the human body, and the self by extension of meaning, is boundlessly expanded to span the totality of the cosmos, unfolding it as a universal living unity. As evidenced by the above examples, the delirious boundlessness of Mesoamerican cosmic models allows for the overlap and merging of different categories of being. This is not to say that people would think the Earth would literally change between crocodile, turtle, mountain, or human forms, or was a combination of several of them, which could occur in transcendent or non-ordinary time and space. But rather, each conceptualization functions as a sort of ontological qualifier that allows for different elaborations of meaning to be constructed around the intended concept, in this case, the world itself. It can be noted that there are roughly two overarching themes expressed through all the previous models, one of divisiveness, as exemplified by the partition of the divine crocodile, and another one of unity, as exemplified by the notion of the universal body. Together, both themes reflect polarizing and complementary qualities of existence.

Figure 33. Quartz crystals (sides) and jade (center) stones within flowers on the mountain's face.

The flowers on the mountain's brows, the flowering World Tree, and the flowery Sun make it clear the zoomorphic mountain in my sculpture specifically portrays Flower Mountain as a Classic Maya version of the Mesoamerican Mountain of Sustenance. This entity is essentially a deified embodiment of the living Earth as a sacred mountain. The mouth and cranium openings directly evoke mountain caves, viewed as some of the most powerful portals that allow entrance into the living Earth as well as access to other cosmic realms. The shape of the stepped forehead is also evocative of architecture, especially the steps utilized to descend into ball courts or to ascend atop pyramids, as expressed in the iconography. Maize imagery is often added, and the Maize Deity is sometimes depicted coming out of the mountain's top opening, as an explicit reference to the emergence of sustenance and the force of vitality from the mountain in the form of maize (see Figure 32). The imagery is also a reference to the sprouting of the World Tree from the sacred mountain, since the divine tree is often recreated as a maize plant. Signification systems that revolve around the concept of the mountain have occupied central roles in spirituality and ritual practices across Mesoamerica for millennia. They originated in ancient Preclassic worldviews that defined later traditions, even for cultures residing in flatland areas, like the Lowland Maya peoples. Ancient kings, queens, and spiritual practitioners often associated themselves in different ways with mountains, in order to amplify their status as divine beings and to strengthen their claims to power. Specialists of the Mesoamerican spiritual and ritual traditions acquire some of their instruments of power, like stones and crystals, at holy locations, such as ancient pyramids or mountains. The two quartz crystals and the jade stone placed inside flowers on the mountain's face in my sculpture are set there as references to this practice (Figure 33). These horizontally aligned stones also evoke an episode of Classic Maya cosmogony mentioned earlier, in which three stones or stelae are erected in the Cosmic Hearth at

the reset of the great Long Count calendar cycle and the beginning of the current world. Along with other sacred places in the environment, mountains have long been prime locations for pilgrimages, as well as ideal places to make offerings to the ancestors, communicate with transcendent beings, and conduct conjurations, among many other forms of ritual activity. This is because they are considered to be the dwellings of ancestors and divinities, and also focal points where sacred essences flow between cosmic dimensions. The great mountains function as cosmograms, not only because they embody abbreviated notions of the whole Earth, but also because they allow people to conceptualize the entire universe: the depths of its caves serve as underworldly places, its surface reflects the earthly plane, and the mountain's top connects to the heavenly realms. It is important to emphasize that, even though the different cosmic domains might appear to be independent or separate from one another, they are not to be understood as being absolutely distinct nor mutually exclusive. Instead, in accordance with Mesoamerican traditions, the diverse dimensions of the universe are interconnected among themselves, seamlessly permeating and manifesting through one another.

Throughout Mesoamerica, it is understood that the whole process of life and death, as incarnated in the paradigmatic agricultural cycle of maize growth and the daily solar cycle, revolves around the ancient archetype of the mountain. As mentioned before, all mountains have long been conceived of as giant containers of water from which rivers, mist, and rain clouds emerge. It is noteworthy that in several areas of Mesoamerica, fog, mist, and rain clouds are often seen near mountains, and most rivers in the region do in fact originate from mountainous areas. Alfredo López Austin's works reveal that mountains are also thought of as the prodigious spaces inside of which sacred essences and forces of vitality are recycled for their reincorporation into the rest of the world: the sacred essences, the "heart-seeds," initially emerge from the mountain top to animate all inhabitants and aspects of the earthly realm; when these die, their material bodies disintegrate, but the essences remain and return to the interior of the mountain, where the forces of growth and revitalization reside; by integrating these forces, the sacred essences get prepared to continue the cycle anew. This process of vital force renewal was initiated and established through the sprouting of the World Tree at the Mountain of Sustenance in primordial times, among other divine incidents and processes. In this pan-Mesoamerican creation account, only the primordial waters remained after the last great cataclysm that destroyed the world. As part of the latest world renewal process that unfolded into the present state of existence, or most recent creation, the Mountain of Sustenance emerged from these waters. The sacred mountain contained the precious seeds of the maize plant. After a series of divine events that included the arrival of rains, the World Tree sprouted at the top of this mountain, and eventually, the Sun also dawned for the first time, both as true manifestations of the reinvigorated vital forces that overcame death and triumphantly resurrected into higher orders of being. The tree flourished abundantly, and its branches extended into the sky. The flowering tree-mountain system connected the three general cosmic realms (underworldly, earthly, and celestial planes), and sanctified the universe with revitalized sacred essences. This holy location also became the *axis mundi*, the center of the temporal and spatial dimensions of the world, conceived of as the heart of the Earth. Significantly, the central mountain is projected to the four world directions, in accordance with traditional quincuncial cosmic arrangements. In turn, each of the five sacred elevated points is further projected, not only to form fractal reflections of the original quincunx, but also to create boundless mountainous arrangements throughout the various dimensions of the unfolding universe, naturally including the human domain. The entire flowery tree-mountain allegory can be conceptualized as an intricate elaboration of the main ideas expressed through the special sprouting denomination found on a magnificently painted ceramic vessel dubbed the Cosmic Plate, and I integrate said denomination into my sculpture's

hieroglyphic sentence (Figure 2e). This glyphic term has been difficult to define with precision and has yielded various interpretations, including the readings *yax k'uhul jinaj* and *yax k'uhul ch'ok*, which can be translated as "First Sacred Maize Field" and "New Sacred Sprout" correspondingly. Conversely, this concise expression can be considered to be an abbreviation of the full account of the flowery tree sprouting from the sacred mountain. This correspondence is possible because both the elaboration (the entire sculpture), and the abbreviation (the single hieroglyph), share similar, if not the same central concepts in common.

Not all mountains nor pyramids (themselves embodiments of mountains) were direct replicas of the Mountain of Sustenance, but virtually all of them functioned as references that in varying degrees, evoked this most sacred location, the "First True Mountain," or "Place of Green / Fertile Mountain." Particular elements added to mountains, like wind and flower imagery, specified the mountain intended in visual depictions. In a *pars pro toto* manner characteristic of Mesoamerican iconography, where a part of something stands for the whole thing, Classic Maya mountains stood for complete realms. For example, the presence of Flower Mountain in an image indicated the scene took place at Flower World. Contrasting the human world, this is a wild and untamed place, with jaguars and serpents as some of the powerful guardians of the mountain and its sacred caves. In addition to the aforementioned meanings of Mesoamerican mountains, venerated ancestors and otherworldly beings ascend deified through Flower Mountain at dawn to join the Sun in its flowery realm as it makes its daily celestial journey. This heavenly realm is one of the various manifestations of what scholars collectively call Flower Worlds, although present Yoeme people conceive of a sacred cosmic dimension they call the Sea Ania, which directly translates to "Flower World." A main source of information for the refinement of the present chapter and the entire monograph in general was a radical and innovative book published in 2021, titled "Flower Worlds: Religion, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Mesoamerica and the American Southwest." In this work, several authors of high caliber including Karl Taube, Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos, John M. D. Pohl, Kelley Hays-Gilpin, and Davide Domenici tell us that Flower Worlds can be defined as: extremely sacred and important locations at local and cosmic scale, multifaceted agential dimensions of the personified living universe, and highly cherished generative qualities of the cosmos, the totality of which also operate as central principles of organization and as critical paradigms for the elaboration of systems of values and signification. Flower Worlds are full of delightful things and beings, like inebriating and aromatic flowers, luxuriant fruiting trees, radiant jewels, and beautiful butterflies and birds, along with aesthetically pleasing ephemeral phenomena and qualities, such as vibrant and iridescent colors, moisture and rain cloud-bearing winds, precious cosmic forces and essences, the prodigious smoke of incense (like copal), the sublime sounds of wondrous music and songs, as well as multisensorial and often synesthetic pleasure in general. There are other benign concepts associated with these most sacred locations: highly esteemed cultural values (like respect, gratitude, and the fructification of hard work), the generative flourishing of the divine living cosmos, the world's breath as winds that bring rain clouds, waters of essential vitality, general fertility and abundance, healing qualities and powers, access to the venerable ancestors and their benedictions, themes of resurrection and primordial emergence, along with the reinvigoration of the force of vitality at large. Diverse variants of Flower Worlds have existed throughout the millennia, with material remains bearing Flower World iconography dating back to around 900 BCE. But these early pieces of evidence substantiate the fact that the themes and notions of plurisensorial, pleasant, and paradisiacal flowery realms, had already been established by then, and actually originated sometime in the Early Preclassic or the Late Archaic era. During those times, these systems of signification were mainly expressed in perishable media, like paper, cloth, hides, wood, and many others that after thousands of years did not leave much

trace. Flower Worlds are still present today as integral aspects of the living cultural heritage and lived experience of various groups of Indigenous people, not only in Mesoamerica as exemplified by the Nahua and Wixáritari, but also among the Hopi, O'odham, Zuni, and other Pueblo nations from the American Southwest, or Oasisamerica, as well as other neighboring cultural areas.

There are various ways through which Flower Worlds can be experienced as prodigious qualities of the multifaceted cosmos. Such distinctive modalities of existence can be perceived in special circumstances, in which common dimensions of space, time, and identity, merge with their transcendent counterparts. This is usually achieved through the undifferentiated domains of ritual and domestic labor by people who are sufficiently receptive, predisposed, and prepared to partake in communion with life's most profound mysteries. Navigating reality and conducting life in concordance with traditional values also catalyzes the true manifestation of Flower Worlds in the intimacy of immediate experience, at personal, family, and community scales. During peregrinations to sanctuaries and sacred places in the landscape, during recreations of transcendent acts and events, and during effective ritual performances in general, eloquent and poetic speech, songs, music, and dance, can not only delight but also entrance the audience, consecutively revealing aspects of Flower Worlds at varying degrees, or even directly transport the listeners, active witnesses, and all other participants to these most sacred cosmic realms. Such powerful effects of ritual performance derive from basic characteristics of representations at large: for Indigenous people's lived experience of reality, images, utterances, symbols, or any other signifiers, are fundamentally undifferentiated and indistinguishable from that which they represent. As previously elaborated, the signifier can instantiate, embody, and render present the signified or original referent. In other words, the symbol itself manifests what is being represented. Thus, flowers, altars, iridescence, and luminosity, along with other colorful and aesthetically pleasing things and experiential phenomena, do not just symbolically represent, nor do they only metaphorically stand for, Flower Worlds. When composed of suitable materials, set in an appropriate order, coupled with properly organized ritual acts, and all orchestrated in concordance with traditional signification systems, highly esteemed implements of liturgy can converge in revealing the normally concealed Flower Worlds. Furthermore, all these phenomena, paraphernalia, and actions, when properly deployed, can also give tangible shape and immediate presence to Flower Worlds, or even embody them, for those who are predisposed, capable, and empowered enough to perceive them.

As noted above, recent academic research evidences the fact that ritual and quotidian realms of human endeavors merge as prodigious media through which Flower Worlds can be created and made manifest by Indigenous people. Indeed, acts of spiritual, ritual, and domestic nature, are all equivalently conceived of as important actions and essential labors, which are performed in order to actively express a proper and dignified existence. Every-day actions such as cooking, burning copal as offering, farming, and changing flowers on an altar, are far from mundane acts and are thoroughly imbued with exemplar values, cosmogonic associations, and meanings of cosmological order. In Classic Maya art and architecture, scenes with falling or floating jewels, flowers, water, and other precious and sacred graphic elements, visually instantiate paradisiacal dimensions. When performing musicians are also included in an image, their presence indicates that the beautiful music itself makes Flower Worlds manifest. Ancient drinking vessels from the northwestern region of Mesoamerica are decorated and molded to embody floral blossoms, so that when these ceramics were utilized, likely in ritual or ceremonial contexts, people would be akin to moths, butterflies, and hummingbirds drinking out of flowers. The proper ritual and medicinal implementation of the ancestral steam bath house during traditional childbirth procedures in contemporary Indigenous communities throughout

Mesoamerica, which often include healing and at times flowering plants, catalyzes the health of the baby and the recovery of the mother. Present-day Wixáritari weaving traditions from the Nayarit area, through elaborate and interwoven systems of signification, establish in each weaver the very capabilities of the divine ancestors: bringing about the first dawn, conjuring the rain-bearing clouds, and ultimately generating the sacred flowery realm in the environment itself. Such elaborations of meaning exist in concordance with others across Mesoamerica, where the difficult work that goes into the preparation and performance of ritual practices and domestic duties, is conceived of as a generative expression of self-sacrifice and is essential to make Flower World manifest. In the words of Andrew D. Turner and Michael D. Mathiowetz, from the introduction to their co-edited revolutionary book, "Flower Worlds": "... everyday behaviors and quotidian tasks serve to embody and materialize overarching cosmological principles in individuals' daily lives as lived experiences" (Turner and Mathiowetz 2021). As elucidated in Alan R. Sandstrom's contribution to the same volume, even though the greater mysteries of Indigenous people's theological and spiritual conceptions are often too complex to ever be found within Western-style writings, they are readily expressed through multifaceted and intersecting approaches for engaging with the divine, such as ritual practices and quotidian labors. In the end, as well as in the beginning, general states of affairs are not brought into balance, nor is the human world ordered, through intense philosophical debates, but rather through effective actions of substantial impact.

In her powerful epilogue to "Flower Worlds", titled "'It's Raining Feather-Flower Songs': Commentary on Current Flower Worlds Research," Kelley Hays-Gilpin brilliantly summarizes some of the previous ideas: "[Recent findings by several researchers] make the case that the expression of flowery worlds in contemporary Indigenous practice reveals a monistic understanding of the world contrary to the Western dualisms of sacred/secular, good/evil, spirit/body, and so on. Sacredness pervades everything… In Nahua, Yoeme, and Wixárika understandings of the world, sacredness is revealed or unconcealed according to its own volition in collaboration with human actions and orientations… Both [spiritual and ordinary worlds] are always present, but the spirit world is usually concealed. As we intend flower worlds to be understood, they are made visible, or are unconcealed, in [ritual] contexts… Like many rituals, flower worlds embody reciprocal relationships among humans and all the other agential beings of the cosmos. Worlds in this sense are active, agential. *Worldings* might be a better term. Ritual performances that are not only sacred but entangled with all life activities - from hunting to feasting to weaving - are called "doings" [among Pueblo peoples]. These activities and their images, materials, and technologies, are generative. [For today's Nahua people], one sings the flower world into this world. One sings people into relationships with the world… Wixárika pilgrims become peyote flowers… Felipe Molina, as a Yoeme deer singer, brings the *sea ania*, flower world, into this world… When he enters the village plaza, it becomes a flowery patio of the *sea ania*, where space and time, people and animals, are deeply connected in dynamic balance." (Hays-Gilpin, 2021).

As much as Indigenous people are able to bring Flower Worlds into the immediacy of experiential reality through dedicated hard work of various kinds, these very labors function as transcendent keys through which the special flowery dimensions are able to make themselves manifest in everyday perceptual existence. The dedicated labors of humans are not the only kinds of work that operate as mergers between different cosmic dimensions. Anything from raincloud-bearing winds, flowing waters, decomposing remains of dead organisms, flowering plants sprouting, seed-spreaders, animals, the Earth itself, the cycling seasons, and any component or phenomenon of the environment, are thought of as laborers, because they all contribute in one way or another to the proper functioning of the whole ecosystem. Some of the components of

ancient Flower Worlds could even be gendered and could be associated more with masculine themes, like warriors, war, as well as illuminated and highly chromatic diurnal realms of the Sun, while other fundamental aspects of these paradisiacal realms were more feminine, such as abundance, water, sustenance, fertility, and beauty. However, it is important to remember that gender distinctions are not always clear nor definite, and that the traditional signification systems are complementary and unitary in nature, allowing fluidity not only of gender, but of identity and states of being at large. Traditional Indigenous systems of existing, operating, and navigating through reality, are fundamentally interconnected with, and inseparable from, people's surroundings and the environment, along with all its inhabitants, whether it be of earthly or transcendent nature. As Turner and Mathiowetz insightfully elucidate in their introduction to "Flower Worlds": "Indigenous histories and identities are embedded in the natural landscape within multidimensional and interconnected worlds/realms along with the plants, animals, and ancestral beings that inhabit them. Performance and song as forms of collective sacrificial labor are critical acts at the intersection of these worlds to bring them into presence, which involves collective remembrance that is critical to identity formation" (Turner and Mathiowetz 2021). Flower Worlds, underworldly realms, celestial domains, the earthly plane, and all the other interconnected dimensions, as active and generative agents in the cosmic network of relations, ultimately bring one another into existence too. Not everything about Flower Worlds is positivity and bliss. Even though the colorful and illuminated Flower Worlds are understood to be qualitatively distinct from the achromatic and dark underworldly planes, both kinds of cosmic dimensions are fundamentally complementary polarities of one another, functioning together as parts of the universal system that configures reality in its present states. The qualities and beings from one realm may seep through or filter into another. Such permeability accounts for the fact that Flower Worlds can even be dangerous or deadly, and why there can be precious phenomena like the powers of growth and revitalization in underworldly domains. In addition, Flower Worlds grant a great amount of power, whether it be political, ritual, social, or of another kind, to those who can access them. But the moral ambiguity among people who acquire great power also increases the possibilities for the abuse of such power. Consecutively, constant counteractions have to be implemented to balance power, even if only partially.

Throughout the ages, Mesoamerican peoples have held flowers among the principal natural elements from which a great abundance of conceptual associations and ideological complexes can be elaborated. In Classic Maya art, not only the physical parts of the flower were accounted for, but also their invisible components. To indicate their condition as living beings, the aromatic fragrance of flowers and their breath of vitality were both depicted in the form of pairs of curving lines and volutes respectively. Flowers were also analogous to jewels, and in the iconography, they merge together as flowery jewels and jeweled flowers, at times indistinguishable from one another. From their physical inclusion in altars, offerings, and medicine, to their intimate integration into systems of signification, flowers have been essential for traditional ritual practices across Mesoamerica, as they not only facilitate communications with transcendent forces and realms, but can ultimately embody the latter in the earthly plane. Throughout the region, a four-petal flower can be an expression of the whole cosmos, with each petal directed to the world directions and the middle part instantiating the *axis mundi*, the fifth direction and cosmic center. Qualities of positivity, pleasure, beauty, divinity, and the bountiful abundance of the living universe, as well as cherished values like moral rectitude and the fructification of hard work, are often associated with flowers. Precious flowers incarnate the reinvigorating force of vitality, and freely substituted for elements that embodied the breath of life in ancient art, such as jade beads or outwardly spiraling volutes. In fact, both the Classic Maya and Postclassic Mexica held flowers in such high regard, that to describe something as

flowery was equivalent to highly praising it and emphasizing its divine quality. Since flowers originate from Flower World, they evidence and ultimately embody it, making it present in the human realm. Flowers are inherently generative in nature, even to a cosmic scale. Divinities and ancestors are often depicted emerging out of flowers, and some of the idealized paradisiacal realms of the multidimensional cosmos, such as Flower Worlds, were even conceived of primarily as flowery sacred locations. Exemplified by the likes of the *Cantares Mexicanos*, Nahua literary expressions of the early colonial period include exalted songs of gratitude that praise the supreme creator deity and sustainer of life, who is referred to as Life Giver and is said to paint-recite joyous and beautiful "feather-flower songs" with fragrant flowers. It is worth remembering here that, around the same time period, some of the accounts of the prodigious manifestation of Our Lady of Guadalupe's image on St. Juan Diego's cloak, relate that the Virgin herself rendered her own likeness on the cloak, and she miraculously painted it with the iridescently colorful flowers St. Juan Diego gathered for her atop the sacred Tepeyac Hill, which had prominent Flower World associations from pre-hispanic times.

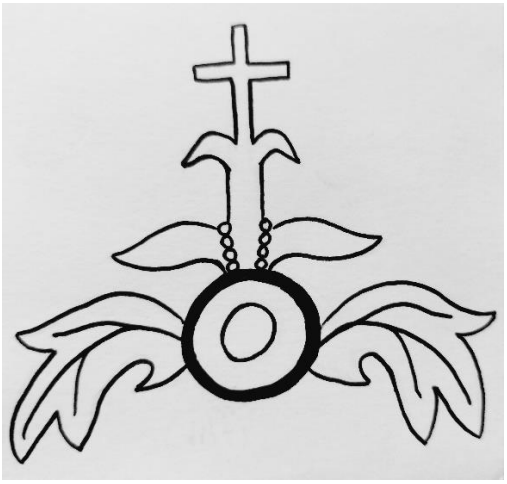


Figure 34. Drawing of *Ti Tie Ti Tixel*, from the top of the central altar within Santiago Atitlán's church, in Guatemala.

Like other contemporary Mesoamerican peoples, the Tz'utujil Maya people of Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala, maintain the concept of the Mountain of Sustenance alive. They recreated it in wooden form as the beautiful central altar inside the town's church. This ritually carved altarpiece can be superficially perceived as a Christian iconographic compound, but more in depth it embodies what the Tz'utujil call *Kotsej Juyu Ruchiliew*, "Flowering Mountain Earth." A foliated cross, adorned with a jade necklace, rests atop the altar-mountain as the World Tree, and its name is *Ti Tie Ti Tixel*, "Father/Mother" (Figure 34). This primordial ancestor is the point of origin where all life comes from, and where all life returns. This most sacred mountain is the spiritual focus of Tz'utujil traditions:

> This altar, constructed when the church was without a resident priest and under full *cofradía* control, is dominated by a mountain carved in wood. To either side of the mountain are carvings of *cofradía* 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. [The Tz'utujil] believe that as long as the primal ancestral element, as 'Flowering Mountain Earth', is 'fed', it will continue to provide sustenance. In [Tz'utujil spiritual practices], this 'feeding' can be literal. For example, some [Tz'utujil] will have an actual hole on their land

through which offerings are given to the ancestor. In the Tz'utujil 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… By way of example, the following prayer, one of the most common standard prayers in Santiago Atitlán, 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 sky.
>
> 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.
>
> (Carlsen, and Prechtel, 1991).

Sanguine Flowers: The Quadripartite Badge, the Cosmic Tree, and the Creation-Sacrifice Complex

Figure 35. Detail showing the Quadripartite Badge in the sculpture, which is composed of the vessel marked with the *k'in* solar flower (center and below) holding a bundled element (left), a stingray spine (center), and a *Spondylus* conch shell (right).

In Maya iconography of the Classic period, there is a special vessel or plate containing highly valued ritual implements, and is nicknamed the Quadripartite Badge by anthropologists (Figure 35). As is the case with various others, this complex signification construct is difficult to define with precision in all its layered depths of meaning, but as research advances, our understanding approaches closer to a fuller picture. The quadripartite icon's plate was marked by the *k'in* solar glyph, and usually carried 3 important elements of ritual performance: a stingray spine as one of the preferred instruments for self-sacrificial bloodletting; colored red as sacred blood (red and yellow in my sculpture), a cut *Spondylus* conch shell is present as a source of the divine breath of vitality; and a foliated bound icon that often includes a celestial crossed-band element, which has been proposed to express the triumphant completion of the transformational ritual, but most likely embodies a sacred bundle. This last element of the iconographic assemblage is very significant, because sacred bundles have been quintessential ritual implements across Mesoamerica from times immemorial, with close parallels throughout the Americas even in the present, and are associated with ancestral origins and the divine powers of cosmic renewal. As stated before, the Quadripartite Badge is a highly significant composite icon with multiple associations, including burnt offerings, sunrises and the world direction where they happen, divine birth and rebirth, self-sacrificial bloodletting, as well as exemplary ritual practices established in extreme antiquity. A celestial aspect of the primordial divine crocodilian, variably known as the Celestial Dragon or the Starry Deer Crocodile, is often portrayed in Maya art of the Classic era with the Badge icon attached to its rear end. Since the Celestial Dragon is evidenced to be a zoomorphic embodiment of the sky, and the Badge evokes the burning of sacrificial offerings, the latter was likely understood to function as a sort of mechanism or engine that powers the unfolding of celestial processes. At a basic level, the Quadripartite Badge is essentially connected to the important notion that sacrifice is necessary for creation, renewal, and for the sustenance of ever-circulating sacred essences, all at both human and cosmic magnitudes. This fundamental icon and its components provide transcendent might to practitioners capable of wielding it. In art, this iconographic assemblage was worn as a headdress by royal people, especially women, and evoked their liminal states of being in ritual settings. It was also worn by

the deity provisionally named GI, indicating that the compound might be the deity's name or part of it, and likely evokes GI's resurrection in the heavens directly. GI was an important but enigmatic deity that had aquatic attributes, and was the embodiment of the primordial morning Sun, triumphantly resurrected from the watery underworld domains, when it dawned for the first time.

Figure 36. Detail showing the Quadripartite Badge resting on the semi-skeletal senser stand/seed and drawing of Quadripartite Badge image from the Tablet of the Cross.

Ceramic vessels and plates for burnt offerings were among the most commonly utilized articles in rituals throughout Mesoamerica. As explained earlier, fire itself is a prime medium for transformation: through the act of burning, offerings would undergo transmutation, catalyzing the emerging smoke to rise and serve as sustenance for ancestors and other divine beings. The aromatic smoke can also serve to open channels for communication with these cosmic agents. Aspects of the World or Cosmic Tree emerge from the Quadripartite Badge's plate at times, as in the case of the Tablet of the Cross and the sarcophagus lid from the Temple of the Inscriptions. Both of these prodigious portrayals from Lakamha (Palenque) inspired my sculpture's central tree. Even in instances where the Badge is not directly present, divine trees or other non-ordinary plants are at times depicted growing from ceramic plates in Classic Maya art. Sacred trees sprouting, growing, or emerging from vessels are of high significance, because they evoke the notion that ritual burnt offerings, as well as self-sacrificial bloodletting acts, catalyze the manifestation of such arboreal deities and their blessings. In some depictions, the Quadripartite Badge rests atop an anthropomorphic head with a bony lower jaw, as shown in my sculpture (Figure 36). This semi-skeletal head is a personified censer stand that recalls underworldly cosmic domains, death, and the ancestors. In a related dimension of meaning, this same head also embodies a personified seed. Throughout Mesoamerica, bones are closely related not only to the great mysteries of death, darkness, and other underworldly characteristics and qualities, but also to the venerable ancestors and their continuous presence as active agents within the ever-unfolding universal network of relations. Skulls and bones are often featured prominently as fundamental elements of cosmic creation and renewal in cosmogonic narratives across the region. In a famous Postclassic creation account from central Mexico, Quetzalcoatl retrieves ancestral bones from the underworldly domains of death, mixes its own divine blood (obtained through self-sacrificial bloodletting) with the pulverized bones inside the jade vessel of the Mother Goddess Cihuacoatl, and from this potent admixture, the deities create human beings. Thus, the bones of the ancestors and the blood of creator divinities compose the base substance

from which humans are created. Beyond exhibiting similar coloration and hardness, both seeds and bones are understood to be inherently imbued with vitality, and are thus placed underground in order to catalyze the regeneration of the forces of life and the renewal of the Earth's fertility. As it turns out, the decomposed remains of dead organisms placed underground, including bones, do indeed provide nutrients for the sustenance of plants and other organisms. Bones are traditionally placed at trees and within caves, both of which are often conceptualized as sacred points where life originates and emerges. In Classic Maya art, skulls are sometimes depicted with foliage and even flowers sprouting from them, in a similar way to how skulls are portrayed for Day of the Dead celebrations in the present. Painted ceramics sometimes feature scenes where the Maize Deity emerges from a flowery or foliated skull/seed, at a sacred location glyphically named Five Flower Place.

For the ancient Maya, the act of digging a dead person's tomb into the Earth was equated with breaking into the Earth-turtle's carapace. When a person was interred into the tomb with elaborate ritual procedures, the Maya were planting the dead body like a seed that would eventually sprout into a new plane of existence, in the same way that the World Tree, personified by the Maize Deity, emerged out of the Earth-turtle in primordial times. The Maize Deity was itself one of the most significant divine beings for the Classic Maya. In addition to personifying deified corn and sustenance in general, this entity was a sort of bringer of abundance and prosperity. In its most ideal sense, this divinity is evidenced to have been something akin to an embodiment of renewed vital essences, as well as a personification of the World Tree as *axis mundi* and cosmic center. Although the Classic era versions of the Maize Deity's primordial journey are not fully understood yet, a few important episodes have been securely identified, such as its death, journey through underworldly watery domains, and triumphant rebirth. The deity's death was equated with the act of severing a mature corn cob from the fully grown stalk. The Maize Deity's descent and journey into watery underworldly realms was associated with planting corn seeds into the fertile Earth. In the climatic part of this cosmogonic account, the turtle carapace embodies the sacred Earth's surface, while the Maize Deity personifies the World Tree as a newly sprouting corn plant. In addition, the carapace substitutes here for the Mountain of Sustenance. The crack on the Earth-turtle's carapace was itself of high importance because it was the main passage through which sacred forces could transit across cosmic domains. The opening was made by the storm deity Chahk, who deployed its thunderous axe to break the carapace, as well as rain to catalyze the Maize Deity's emergence. The Classic Maya custom of dressing royal bodies was based upon the exemplary creation account where, in order to prepare the Maize Deity for its triumphant resurrection from underworldly watery realms, the deity is dressed in its finest jade outfit. An integral part of this costume was a particular skirt composed of netted jade beads. Besides manifesting a more permanent aspect of vital essences, jade evoked sprouting new plants and the fertility of the Earth, as previously noted. The net pattern itself evokes an exemplary aspect of the Earth, which is characterized by having abundant water, plenty of vital forces, and by being highly fertile. Thus, the jade skirts worn by elites when embodying the Maize Deity functioned to conceptually set their bodies' lower half underground, while the upper half was like-in-kind to the maize plant rising above ground. As wind blows, corn plants move and sway, in a manner that can resemble a person dancing. Likewise, the Maize Deity is often portrayed dancing in ritual celebration of its rebirth. Correspondingly, royal people are often depicted in dance poses when personifying this divinity in art, and dead bodies placed in tombs sometimes mirror such depictions. The act of dancing carries several intertwined meanings, including joyous renewed vitality, ritual performance, communication with the ancestors, and rainmaking, among other dignified fields of action. Even though all of these

ancient Maya rituals and concepts are prominently evidenced in elite burials, they were also practiced by the rest of the population, although at more modest scales.

Through the ritual conflation of the Maize Deity's identity with that of a dead person, the latter would undergo transfiguration, achieve rebirth within the interior of the Earth, and rise in apotheosis, in the living image of the World Tree. From a varying but related perspective about death, the sacred vital essences of the deceased would go back into the Earth, their original source, so that in turn these essences can be recycled and ultimately renew the Earth's life-giving qualities. The custom of intimately linking the life cycle of humans to that of plants is of great antiquity, and is present not only in Mesoamerica, but throughout the Indigenous Americas too, as well as in other parts of the world. The sap that emerges from wounded trees, called *itz* in various Maya languages, is conceptualized as arboreal blood, and indeed substitutes for animal and human blood in offerings. The burning of incense made from congealed tree sap, and especially copal, has been an integral part of ritual offerings throughout Mesoamerica, from times immemorial and into the present. Maya people in the present still compare leaders, whether of political or spiritual order, to trees, supporting and sustaining the community, just like the Cosmic Tree supports and sustains the universe. Traditionally, children are often compared to sprouts, young adults are like flourishing fruit-bearing plants, aging is likened to withering plants and flowers, and as explained above, the interred bones of the dead are like-in-kind to planted seeds. Maize and solar themes merge together through the rebirth signification system. People's deaths were also associated with the Sun's descent into the West in ancient times, and like the Sun's re-emergence at dawn in the East, the essences of the deceased would also ascend resurrected into higher planes of existence. Within Maya conceptions of life, death, and rebirth, the regularly varying positions of the Sun, the Moon, and the other celestial bodies, as well as the growth cycles of plants and especially that of maize, occupy central stage. As part of their daily cycles, the morning Sun and Moon rise resurrected from the Earth deity, who consumes the former two to eventually birth them anew. The rebirth episodes of maize and the Sun, with the Maize Deity and G1 as their respective deified personifications, initiated in extreme antiquity the patterns for the maize harvest cycle, the Sun's daily cycle, and set precedents for the proper practices of mortuary and agricultural ritualism. Important notions included within these cosmologic conceptualizations are the ideas of morality and immorality. The resurrections of the maize and solar deities were not only perceived as victories over the forces of death, but also as virtuous journeys culminating in triumph over wicked phenomena and dishonorable beings. Immorality has numerous qualitatively negative or evil manifestations as underworldly agents, such as personifications or embodiments of diseases and death. Some of the most essential moral imperatives for the populace, in general, are to behave and project themselves in accordance with the established parameters of operation, not only within the community, but also in relation to the environment. Ultimately, moral imperatives encompass non-ordinary forces and beings, along with everything else that composes the multidimensional living cosmos and its divine network of relations.

Figure 37. Drawing of part of the image carved on Pakal's sarcophagus lid.

According to ancient Mesoamerican traditions, liturgical alignment with fundamental or primordial cosmic cycles, processes, and forces, in which significant components or aspects of universal unfoldment could be duplicated and mirrored ritually, allowed transcendent forces to be manifested in the human world by specialized practitioners. This principle of ritual operation is evidenced in the fantastic sarcophagus lid found inside Lakamha's (Palenque's) Temple of the Inscriptions, Pakal's very own sanctuary of resurrection, which was enigmatically named "Nine Works House" in antiquity (Figure 37). The main image on the sarcophagus lid is flanked by sky bands, communicating the notion that the scene takes place in the celestial realm. The body of the quintessential Lakamha king, K'inich Janaab Pakal, is placed in the Classic Maya pose for an infant being born, with a flaming torch placed on the forehead, as a direct reference to Unen K'awiil, one of the Palenque Triad Deities. Themes of fertility, political and ritual power, as well as the reinvigoration of the force of vitality, pertain to this divinity, who is an infant aspect of the multifaceted K'awiil. Pakal is dressed in a netted jewel skirt, and overall reflects the outfit and the image of the Maize Deity. Along with the Resplendent Jewel Tree, Lakamha's eastern aspect of the Cosmic Tree, Pakal emerges from the Quadripartite Badge, the latter of which rests on the animate seed-censer stand. In turn, the Badge and censer stand are set within the massive open jaws of a divine skeletal centipede associated with the royalty of Lakamha. Previous interpretations of the lid's image proposed that Pakal was presented at the moment of death, placed like a sacrificial offering on the ritual vessel, and falling into the open maw of a zoomorphic skeletal serpent. However, according to more recent research and more refined understandings, Pakal is actually presented at the very moment of resurrection, deified, transformed into a composite being that conflates Unen K'awiil and the Maize Deity, and ascending into the sky like the morning Sun, as the living image of the revitalized force of life. Bejeweled flowers and *k'uhul* circles float around the image, invoking the presence of the extremely sacred Flower Worlds. The king's rebirth is much more than a lesser copy of the account of the Maize Deity's own resurrection. It is more like a new recurrence of the original event itself. As explained in other areas of the present monograph, portraits were conceptualized as being composed in part from the very essence of the people depicted, and in a way, as extensions of their identity. K'inich Janaab Pakal is present in stone form as himself, but at the same time, incarnates the Maize Deity and Unen K'awiil, all merged into a single divine being, rising from underworldly domains with the World Tree as it enters the path of the dawning Sun in the East. In accordance with Mesoamerican systems of meaning, the reinvigorated vital forces from ancient times are made present through the elaborate image. Although the portrait shows the great king frozen in stone, Pakal is presented at the pinnacle of existence, undergoing eternal apotheosis. The recreation of the divine resurrection served to sanctify and endow the deceased king with the powers of the primordial event, as reactivated and made manifest through the complex imagery. The elaboration of signification is extended further when other elements of the architectural complex where Pakal was buried are taken into consideration. The sarcophagus is four-sided, rests on four supports, and the body has an East-West orientation with the head placed on the eastern side, properly recreating universal order in the space. Portraits of Pakal's royal ancestors are sculpted on the sides of the sarcophagus in the form of personified fruiting trees sprouting from the ground, and they appear in dancing poses. Not only are the ancestors the support that granted Pakal power through the dynastic system, but also the personified stones that literally support his royal body. In addition, by placing Pakal inside the pyramidal structure, a human-made mountain, he is interred just like a seed inside a sacred mountain. The burial chamber embodies a cave within the fertile Earth, and Pakal's bones-seeds provide vital forces that catalyze the emergence of the eastern World Tree. The ancestral trees sprout and dance in

celebration of Pakal's divine resurrection. The unfolding sacred essences that emanate from such a properly arranged cosmogram and exemplary eternal performance, sanctify the immediate space, the city and its population, as well as the rest of the cosmos.

From times immemorial, trees have been deeply integrated into creation accounts and cosmologies throughout Mesoamerica. Very generally and briefly speaking, from one of the most widespread narratives, the Mountain of Sustenance is the place where the grains of precious maize are kept. Maize, or corn, would not only become the base for human sustenance, but would also be an integral component of the substance from which the ancient deities would create human beings. When storms arrive, their thunder opens the Earth, the grains germinate with the waters, and the maize plant emerges as the Flowering World Tree, the sacred mountain's firstborn. Another way to express this primordial event is through the account of the rebirth of the Maya Maize Deity. After dying and then reintegrating the forces of growth and revitalization within underworldly realms, the Maize Deity resurrects and rises out of the Earth turtle, dancing in celebration. The triumphant rebirth of divine maize catalyzed the emergence of other esteemed vegetable edibles, like the highly valued and cherished cacao. In these multifaceted and overlapping signification constructs, the World Tree or Cosmic Tree is also conceived of as the *axis mundi*, conflating in meaning with the sacred mountain in some aspects. Like the primordial mountain, this holiest of trees was the main universal support, centering time and space, while interconnecting and substantiating the three general levels of the cosmos: with its roots reaching the depths of the watery underworld domains, the trunk sustaining the earthly plane, and the flowering branches elevating into the heavens. Thus, the World Tree was also a cosmogram, the universe itself embodied by a divine arboreal being of cosmic proportions. Sacred essences are conceived of as originally sprouting from, and eventually returning to, the flowering tree-mountain system, which functions as one of the most significant divine agents of emergence, destination, and renewal across the cosmic network of relations. In addition, this consummate mountain-tree continuum is one of the quintessential forms of the divine energy-in-motion that sustains the universe. In prehispanic art from throughout Mesoamerica, the lower area of sacred trees are at times expressed in the form of crocodilians or saurians, as allusions to the account of creation in which the world gets fashioned from the body of the primordial crocodilian dragon. As universal support, the sacred tree can take various forms, such as a pole, a pillar, or even a standing divinity holding the sky, among others. Just as in the case of the Mountain of Sustenance and other highly important concepts, the Cosmic Tree can be portrayed in several ways and with a large variety of graphic elements, depending on the meaning intended by the artists. Prominent among the recurring examples of these multifaceted sacred trees, are the directional trees, which appear across Mesoamerica from the Preclassic era to the present. The central tree is essentially projected to the four world directions, in accordance with traditional quincuncial cosmic arrangements. In turn, each of the five sacred plants is further projected, not only to form fractal reflections of the principal quincunx, but also to create boundless vegetation arrangements throughout the various dimensions of the unfolding universe.

My portrayal of the Classic Maya eastern World Tree is placed at the very center of the sculpture. *Te'* markings, meaning "tree, wood," clarify the main figure is indeed a tree (Figure 38). The holy plant rises from the sacred Quadripartite Badge, which is set within the flooded ball court. The celestial Principal Bird Deity perches on the breath volutes emanating from the tree's central flower, evoking the non-ordinary quality of the overall image. A sound scroll

Figure 38. The central tree (above) and detail showing *te'* ("tree, wood") markings on horizontal branches along with drawing of *te'* icon (next page).

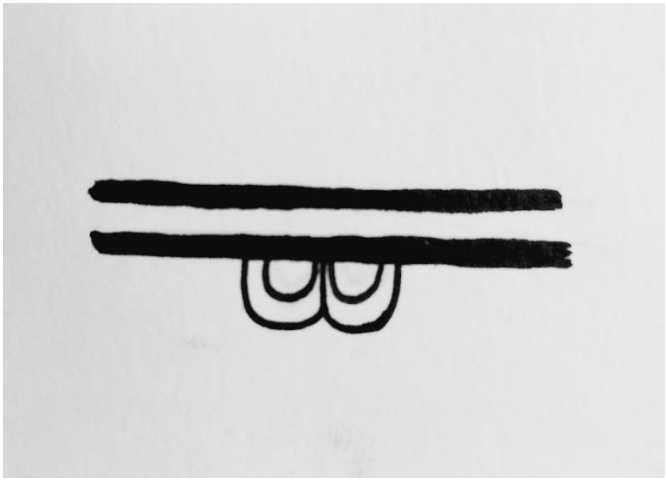


Figure 38. (continued).

marked with flowers projects out of the bird's beak. Because flowers are synonymous with beauty, preciousness, and sacred essences, as well as other pleasant and benign qualities, the scroll indicates the avian deity is singing a divine and beautiful flowery song, in this case, in celebration of the tree's emergence. Due to the architectural complex being set on the zoomorphic mountain's cranium, the sprouting tree synchronously emerges from both the bottom of the ball court and the top of the mountain. This positioning is intended to evoke the notion that this holy arboreal entity is simultaneously present in the watery underworld realms, the earthly domain, and at the summit of Flower Mountain, thus transcending cosmic realms and expressing their fundamental interconnectivity. Throughout this written work, I have mentioned the sprouting of this World Tree as a flowering plant at the Mountain of Sustenance. Obviously, trees in the environment do not develop flowers right as they sprout from the Earth. Rather, different temporal instances are conflated together within my sculpture, not only regarding the development of the sacred tree, but also the rising of the mountain from the primordial waters, the emergence of the breath of vitality, and the dawning of the Sun and the Moon. Such a visual approach follows traditional Indigenous graphic strategies of communication, which in these sorts of cases function to combine what are essentially separate moments in time, thus being able to relate various parts of a narrative or account in a single image. Furthermore, these artistic procedures relate to the notion that universal creation does not only pertain to events from extreme antiquity. Instead, creation, or renewal, is also a fundamental component of ongoing processes of cosmic unfoldment, which are always occurring, even in the present. My sculpture's eastern World Tree is essentially a composite image, with its main characteristics originally appearing on sculptures from Lakamha (Palenque), Mexico. Portrayals of precious stone jewels, along with a central face embodying what can be interpreted as an animate jade celt or mirror, are attached to the trunk, in a similar way to the lithic motifs appearing on the great Resplendent

Jewel Tree that graces the prodigious sculpted lid of K'inich Janaab Pakal's sarcophagus (see Figure 15d and Figure 37). To the Maya, the immense amounts of effort and time invested by people in order to polish jade and other stone objects to a reflective sheen, would concentrate in them great quantities of vital forces and sacred essences. In Maya iconography of the Classic period, polished jade celts and stone mirrors serve as visual conventions often added elsewhere as qualifiers, implemented to indicate that a transcendent thing, a deity, or a deified ancestor, is composed of a precious and long-lasting lithic substance that gleams with iridescence. According to David Stuart's work, the tree's central face can be conceptualized as an animate mirror he calls the "shiner," which embodies the divine personification of resplendence, brilliance, and altered images as reflected from gems, jewels, and mirrors crafted from jade and other valuable stones. Therefore, the presence of this entity as an integrated face qualifies the tree as an animate jade celt or mirror, and also emphasizes the fact that the resplendent tree is itself a sacred agent of cosmic convergence. To create the concave forehead of my tree's face, I added a polished jade stone, which instantiates the meanings just mentioned above.

Figure 39a

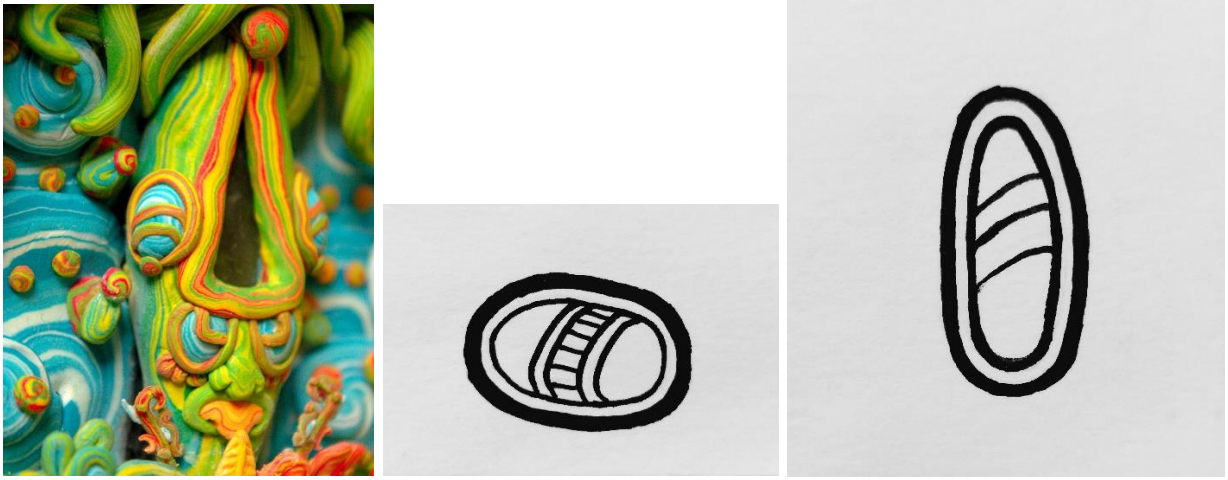


Figure 39b

Figure 39c

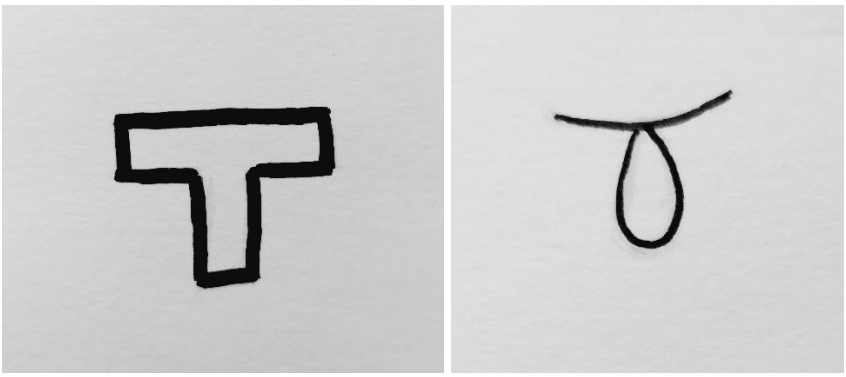


Figure 39d

Figure 39. Elements of the central tree: a) detail showing polished stone/mirror icon on the sides of the tree and drawings of polished stone/mirror icons; b) horizontal maize branches with Maize Deity heads replacing corn cobs (note breath bead and "T" shaped *ik'* motifs above their noses); c) two different versions of the *ik'* icon; d) detail showing closed water lily flower with breath scrolls.

In addition to its lithic nature, the eastern World Tree in my sculpture is composed of Classic Maya maize and water lily imagery (Figure 39). The horizontal branches embody maize foliage with the Maize Deity's head replacing maize cobs, just as they appear on the main sanctuary tablet from the Temple of the Foliated Cross in Lakamha. Maize has been the main Maya staple crop, as well as the base of sustenance in all of Mesoamerica for millennia. It is no surprise that maize is one of the primary plants implemented in portrayals of world trees. Besides functioning as a graphic elements that embody water and aquatic environments in Classic Maya iconography, water lily plants have long been traditionally utilized as components of spiritual sacraments in ritual contexts and also possess healing properties. The two highly venerated plants are parts of the same arboreal deity, evoking the notion that the precious Cosmic Tree is an abundant source of physical and spiritual sustenance, both of which are not mutually exclusive. On the other hand, the abstracted, cross shapes of some of the artistic portrayals of this holiest tree, as it appears in my sculpture, have been identified to be references to the precious ceiba trees and their horizontally growing branches. Throughout the millennia of Maya history, the great directional world trees, and at times primordial ceiba trees specifically, have been

called Yax Te', meaning "First Tree," along with other related terms, as evidenced on the Late Classic vase nicknamed K1226 and on the Yearbearer pages of the Postclassic Dresden Codex. For present-day Yucatec Maya, ceiba trees in the environment are considered to be akin to projections of an original or first tree, and they refer to it with the epithet *ya'axche'*, which directly derives from the ancient *yax te'* expression. Because these trees are primary concentration points of biodiverse communities, sacred ceibas embody the richness of the whole ecosystem in the Maya world. There are other plants that, due to their associated meanings and nutritious significance, have also been elevated to serve as embodiments of the Cosmic Tree, like the squash plant and the cacao tree. Often, these incarnations of the *axis mundi* are portrayed as composite plants, in which, for example, maize and cacao attributes are included, accentuating the transcendent character of these most prodigious divinities.

Ancient cosmogonic narratives, such as the death and rebirth of the Maize Deity, the slaying of the primordial crocodilian dragon, or the creation of the Sun and Moon at Teotihuacan, reveal a fundamental Mesoamerican conception: that sacrifice, and especially self-sacrifice, are necessary for creation, renewal, and the sustenance of ever-circulating sacred essences, all from human to universal magnitudes. Generally speaking, powerful ritual labors were fulfilled in extreme antiquity, when sacrifice and self-sacrificial bloodletting were performed, and the sacred blood of the divinities themselves was essential for the world to be renewed after its previous destruction. Through their dedicated work, the primordial deities triumphantly revitalized and transfigured themselves and the whole cosmos into higher orders of being. These ancestral events established the parameters for proper modalities of cognition and operation in regard to politics, ritualism, spirituality, calendrics, art, architecture, and other endeavors. As stated before, some accounts even relate how the very blood of the creator divinities was one of the main components implemented to create human beings. Because of these momentous primordial circumstances, the blood of any person, but especially that of important individuals, is ultimately derived from the blood of the deities themselves, and thus carries their divine vital forces. Accordingly, self-sacrifice, not only in the form of bloodletting but also in the various forms of hard work performed during often undifferentiated ritual and domestic endeavors, is a creative act of cosmic proportions. As with any other ritual offering, sacrificial acts and substances served to infuse the cosmos with sacred essences, and to channel the latter for divine sustenance. The ancient Mexica used the term *teoatl*, "holy water," when referring to human sacrificial blood in general. This holy water was offered as a drink to nourish ancestors and sacred entities, whose sustenance depended on the consumption of blood's vital forces. Also, there's no traditional designation that is equivalent to "sacrifice" or "self-sacrifice." Instead, the Mexica applied the term *nextlaualli* to refer to any kind of sacrificial offering, and *tlamaceualiztli* in regard to bloodletting practices. The latter term can be translated as "to deserve" or "to merit" something. The concept behind the former word is understood best as an essential payment from people for their primordial debt to the Earth's life-giving powers, to divinities, to ancestors, and to other beings from beyond. Indeed, these concepts relate back to the aforementioned Mesoamerican notion of a divine covenant established in extreme antiquity that all agents within the cosmic network of relations had to abide by. Elaborate ceremonial pageantries were orchestrated in order to recreate the accounts of world creation, of which divine blood was a fundamental component. Mirroring the way that the divinities used their own blood to create and order the world, commoners, spiritual specialists, and the elite, willingly gave their own blood back to maintain the vitality of the cosmic processes and cycles that allow life to exist. Due to its divine origin, but also its intrinsic importance for life, blood was one of the most significant substances in the cosmos, closely related in meaning to concepts of sacred essences

and divine sustenance. In fact, before the Maya glyphs for blood and sacredness were fully identified and deciphered, anthropologists thought the ubiquitous *k'uhul* series of dots and circles were specifically portrayals of blood. This is a reasonable conclusion, considering that *k'uhul* icons often appear in contexts related to blood. Sometimes, both glyphs overlap and even outright replace each other, revealing the essential sacred nature of blood as a vital liquid. Creation and sacrifice are fundamentally related and interconnected in Mesoamerica, so much so that, as David Stuart compellingly states: "In a self-fulfilling cycle, sacrifice begets creation, and creation begets sacrifice." (Stuart, 2011).

Because of the complexity, seriousness, and sensitive nature of the topic of human sacrifice, I only briefly address the practice here. Virtually anyone alive today can agree that murder is wrong. Still, it has to be acknowledged that ancient worldviews were extremely different from our present ones, as evidenced throughout the present monograph and the extensive scholarly research available. Written sources from early colonial Central Mexico relate how war captives who were destined for sacrifice would not even try to escape, and would willingly give their lives for what they surely thought was the right thing to do for the greater good. It is worth emphasizing that ancient Mesoamerican people's conceptions of the world included the important notions that sacrificial offerings were necessary for the continuation of universal unfoldment, and that people continue to function as active agents within the cosmic network of relations after death. Depending on the occasion, some people would be considered to be embodiments of specific divinities, not only when the ritual was taking place, but beforehand too, and would be treated with high reverence. Obviously, not everyone would be so acquiescent, some victims would have certainly been forcefully killed, and some would be given psychoactive substances in order to alleviate the suffering and terror of dying. One theory states that the institutionalization and public display of human sacrifice were elite strategies implemented to maintain power and social control by inflicting fear among the population, since those ritually killed were either criminals or war captives for the most part. Some researchers have argued that some of the reasons why sacrifice was an institutionalized practice in the Americas included the interrelated matters of population control, scarcity of resources, and the impact of human activity on the environment. However, more critical, refined, and recent research, such as the insightful work of Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez and Maarten Jansen, reveals that human sacrifice was not conducted at the scales that post-conquest Spanish accounts claim. Although the ritual killing of people did occur in the pre-colonial Americas, it is evidenced the victims were for the most part either war prisoners or deserving people who had committed severe crimes. However, the most common and most important form of sacrifice was self-sacrifice, which usually took the form of bloodletting, but as previously mentioned, also included the dedicated hard labor that goes into quotidian occupations, often of domestic and ritual nature. Horrible colonial-era Spanish fabricated stories of thousands of humans being sacrificed in the ancient Mexica capital, Tenochtitlan, were simply not true, and were highly exaggerated as means to justify their own atrocities against Indigenous people. In addition, it has been pointed out that these colonial claims of high numbers of sacrificial victims are not realistic, as such practices would not have allowed the Mexica to sustain their society, which would have collapsed due to population decline or the general discontent of the masses who would have overthrown the governing elites. Unfortunately, a lot of the available literature on the subject was made by researchers who place too much value and trust in these propagandist written accounts. Pérez Jiménez and Jansen encourage future research to critically deconstruct these highly biased and incomplete colonial written sources of historical information, in order to decolonize our conceptions of ancestral ritual traditions. In this way, we can not only approximate a better understanding of their ancient

significance in their original contexts, but hopefully, we can also develop a better appreciation for present Indigenous living traditions.

Even though the idea of mass human sacrifice has come to be associated by the general public with Mexica ritualism, the fact is that virtually all ancient cultures around the world, including Egypt, Greece, and pre-Buddhist Tibet, practiced various forms of human sacrifice. We cannot start feeling as if we were morally superior in our modern situation in Western culture because of the apparent absence of human sacrifice as an institutionalized practice. It is crucial to acknowledge and reflect upon the fact that the current capitalist system, as a continuation of colonial-era imperialist predation, functions in part through intertwined processes constantly maintained in motion, which include the dehumanization, marginalization, discrimination, disenfranchisement, violation, exploitation, and at times outright murder, of innumerable people around the world who are usually poor and non-white. I previously mentioned that, as a way to make goods and commodities accessible to consumers at low costs, companies often outsource labor to poorer countries or more disenfranchised sectors within their base territory. Well-known examples of these practices are cloth workers in Eastern Asia and immigrant farm workers in California. There, the people who are employed do not have too many other work options available, so they often have to endure detrimental and inhumane working conditions. The well-being and the very lives of these poor people are slowly sacrificed, not because of any necessity or religious ideology, but for consumer convenience and maximization of profits. In a very real way, the megalomaniac selfish world elites, but especially white and Western ones, are reaping economic earnings by allowing the systematic sacrifice of people, particularly among poor and non-white populations, because the former groups are fundamentally desensitized and indifferent to the suffering of the latter. Of course, such relentless and abominable predatory behaviors of the elite are well known to unfortunately extend beyond the social realm, and include the disturbing mass murder of animals, plants, and other living beings, as well as the disastrous depletion of natural resources, ravaging of entire ecosystems, and utter destruction of the biosphere. The privileged members of our present global society, and especially those who hold high positions of political and economic power, are most responsible for perpetuating such catastrophic circumstances. If only we could collectively understand the implications of the fact that we are the inheritors of the triumphant integration of countless generations, not only of humans but of our most remote ancestors, into the natural habitat and its perpetually unfolding network of relations, we would perhaps be able to live in better equilibrium with the rest of the environment and leave behind a better future for those who are yet to come. As eloquently said by numerous wise people, if one would feel the consequences of one's actions, one would immediately stop any harmful behaviors. As warned by multiple scientific findings, it appears that the time of reckoning for this global economy as a culture of death is near.

The theological and liturgical experiences of most Mesoamerican people in our times are molded by religious and spiritual syncretism. The Christian dogma brought from Europe and the spiritual traditions that traveled with the many African peoples brought to the Americas as slaves by the colonizers, have been fused with the pre-columbian Indigenous Old Ways throughout the years. In more recent times, globalization and the internet have also brought exposure to even more forms of religious and spiritual modalities that influence people at varying degrees.

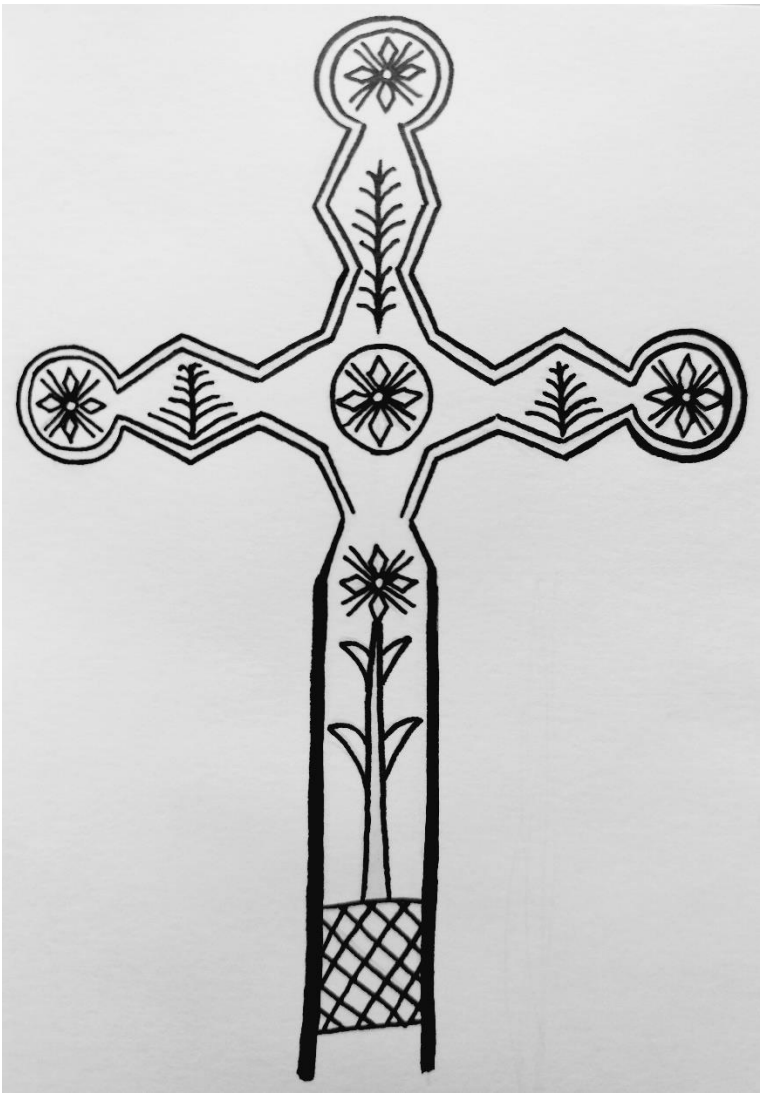


Figure 40. Drawing of a Tzotzil flowery cross from Chamula, Chiapas.

Wooden crosses are found everywhere in the Maya area, from family houses to community sanctuaries, at sacred altars on mountain tops, and within caves, where divinities and ancestors can be contacted. On the immediate surface, the crosses evoke the original wooden cross where Jesus died, according to Christianity. But more in-depth, the core essences of these crosses are still purely Maya, because they embody sacred ceiba trees. Additionally, the cruciform structure of the world, which serves to give form to some depictions of the World Tree, has been an integral part of Mesoamerican spirituality for at least three thousand years. The Tzotzil Maya of Zinacantan and Chamula, in the Mexican state of Chiapas, paint their crosses in blue-green (*yax*) colors, in direct reference to the *ya'axche'*, the ceiba tree as a living embodiment of the Cosmic Tree. They also decorate crosses with flowers, evoking the life-generating powers of the deified tree (Figure 40). Offerings, prayers, music, and dance are dedicated to these embodiments of the great first tree, and copal is often burned before them. Robert Carlsen and Martin Prechtel's important work with the Tz'utujil Maya people of Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala, has yielded insightful ethnographic understanding of the local spiritual practices, which are in many ways parallel to Tzotzil Maya traditions:

… before there was a world (what we would call the ‘universe’), a solitary deified tree was at the center 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 center 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 [Tz’utujil] 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.

(Carlsen, and Prechtel, 1991).

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