

Ancient Mayan Culture

Dr Allen J Christenson

The foundations of the Maya world-view date back more than 2000 years and core elements of their beliefs and rituals continue to be practiced in many traditional Maya communities. It is a part of who the Maya are, and significant numbers of them have held to their unique perspective on the world despite the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century and the many years of pressure that followed to abandon their traditional faith.

Ruth Bunzel, who worked as an anthropologist in the Maya town of Chichicastenango, Guatemala, in the early 1930s, once asked why the people of the town continued to pray and worship in the old ways. An elder told her, 'This rite and custom belongs to the first people, our mothers and fathers... This belongs to them; we are the embodiment of their rites and ceremonies... It is our name and destiny to repeat and perpetuate these ceremonies before the world.' A priest of the traditional Maya religion in the town of Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala, expressed a similar thought decades later: 'Our ancient mothers and fathers are still with us. We all know them, they visit us in our dreams, they are still very powerful. They are the soul of the town... These first people live because I live. I carry their blood. I remember, and so they are not forgotten.'

For a lively discussion of Maya religion and the creation, pick up a copy of *Maya Cosmos* by David Freidel, Linda Schele and Joy Parker.

THE CREATION STORY

The ancient Maya patterned their lives according to precedents set by their first ancestors. Nearly all aspects of Maya faith begin with their view of the creation, when the gods and divine forebears established the world at the beginning of time. From their hieroglyphic texts and art carved on stone monuments and buildings, or painted on pottery, we can now piece together much of the Maya view of the creation, even down to the precise date of the beginning of creation.

In AD 775, a Maya lord with the high-sounding name of K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoat (Fire Burning Sky Lightning God) set up an immense stone monument in the center of his city, Quiriguá. The unimaginative archaeologists who discovered the stone called it simply Stela C. This monument bears the longest single hieroglyphic description of the creation, noting that it took place on the day 13.0.0.0.0, 4 Ahaw, 8 Kumk'u, a date corresponding to August 13, 3114 BC on our calendar.

WORLD-TREE & XIBALBÁ

For the Maya, the sky, the surface of the earth and the mysterious 'unseen world' beneath the earth called Xibalbá (shee-bahl-bah) were all one great, unified structure. At the center, transcending each of the three layers of the cosmos was a World-Tree, the first life to emerge out of the primordial chaos of creation. The Maya often linked this sacred World-Tree with the towering ceiba, which grows throughout the Maya world. A unique feature of the ceiba is the fact that its branches grow straight out from the trunk, forming a cruciform shape. Such cross-like trees appear frequently in the art of the Maya, particularly in the famous Group of the Cross panels and sarcophagus lid of Pakal at Palenque (p408). In the 16th century, Christian missionary friars arrived and required the Maya to venerate the cross; this Christian symbol soon became linked with the World-Tree in the eyes of the Maya, an association that continues today.

This date appears over and over in other inscriptions throughout the Maya world.

On that day the creator gods set three stones, or mountains, in the dark waters that once covered the primordial world. These three stones formed a cosmic hearth at the center of the universe. The gods then struck divine new fire by means of lightning, which charged the world with life.

This account of the creation is echoed in the first chapters of the *Popol Vuh*, a book compiled by members of the Maya nobility soon after the Spanish Conquest, many centuries after the erection of Quiriguá Stela C. Although this book was written in their native Maya language, its authors used European letters rather than the more terse hieroglyphic script. Thus, we have a fuller account of how they conceived the first creation:

This is the account of when all is still silent and placid. All is silent and calm. Hushed and empty is the womb of the sky. These then are the first words, the first speech. There is not yet one person, one animal, bird, fish, crab, tree, rock, hollow, canyon, meadow, or forest. All alone the sky exists. The face of the earth has not yet appeared. Alone lies the expanse of the sea, along with the womb of all the sky. There is not yet anything gathered together. All is at rest. Nothing stirs. All is languid, at rest in the sky. Only the expanse of the water, only the tranquil sea lies alone. All lies placid and silent in the darkness, in the night.

All alone are the Framer and the Shaper, Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent, They Who Have Borne Children and They Who Have Begotten Sons. Luminous they are in the water, wrapped in feathers... They are great sages, great possessors of knowledge. Thus surely there is the sky. There is also Heart of Sky [a lightning god], which is said to be the name of the god...

Then they called forth the mountains from the water. Straightaway the great mountains came to be. It was merely their spirit essence, their miraculous power, that brought about the conception of the mountains.

The Maya saw this pattern of creation all around them. In the night sky, the three brightest stars in the constellation of Orion's Belt were thought of as the cosmic hearth at the center of the universe. On a clear night in the crisp mountain air of the Maya highlands, one can even see what looks like a wisp of smoke within these stars, although it is really only a far-distant string of stars within the M-4 Nebula.

MAYA CITIES AS THE CENTER OF CREATION

The ancient Maya often chose to build their communities in such a way that they reflect sacred geography. One of the earliest Maya centers was Kaminaljuyú, a massive site now buried beneath the sprawling

The most recent and accurate English translations of the *Popol Vuh* are *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya*, translated by Allen Christenson, and *Popol Vuh*, translated by Dennis Tedlock.

For an incredibly beautiful and searchable collection of photographs of painted vases, monuments and other works of ancient Maya art, visit the Kerr Archives at www.famsi.org.

ANONYMOUS

The authors of the *Popol Vuh* did not sign their names, likely because doing so would have endangered their lives. The *Popol Vuh* contains devout descriptions of the ancient Maya gods and deified ancestors that would have offended the Spanish authorities who ruled Guatemala at the time. Those found in possession of the book were often tortured or killed.

capital of Guatemala City. Kaminaljuyú was settled by at least 1000 BC along the shores of a lake that no longer exists, surrounded by three volcanoes. The ancient capital of the highland, Tz'utujil-Maya, located across a small bay from the modern city of Santiago Atitlán, was also built along the shores of a lake, at the point where three great volcanoes came together. The people of Santiago claim that they live at the *r'muxux jab'*, *r'muxux uliw'* ('navel of the rain, navel of the earth'), the place where the first three mountains of creation emerged from Lake Atitlán, which they believe to be a remnant of the primordial sea that once covered everything.

Because the ancient Maya of the eastern lowlands didn't have real mountains as symbols of the creation, they built them instead in the form of plaza-temple complexes, impressive examples of which may be seen at Tikal (p179), Palenque (p408) and Copán (p148). In hieroglyphic inscriptions, the large open-air plazas at the center of Maya cities were often called *nab'* (sea) or *lakam ja'* (great water). Rising above these plastered stone spaces were massive pyramid-temples, often oriented in groups of three, representing the first mountains to emerge out of the 'waters' of the plaza. The tiny elevated sanctuaries of these temples served as portals into the abodes of gods that lived within. Offerings were burned on these plazas, as if the flames were struck in the midst of immense three-stone hearths. Only an elite few were allowed to enter these small inner sanctuaries, while the majority of the populace observed from the plaza below. The architecture of ancient Maya centers thus replicated sacred geography to form an elaborate stage on which rituals could be carried out that charged their world with regenerative power.

A good introduction to the art of the Maya world is Mary Ellen Miller's *Maya Art and Architecture*.

THE CREATION OF HUMANKIND

According to the *Popol Vuh*, the purpose of creation was to give form and shape to beings who would 'remember' the gods through ritual. The Maya take their roles in life very seriously, believing that people exist as mediators between this world and that of the gods. If they don't carry out the proper prayers and ceremonies at just the right time and place, the universe will come to an abrupt end.

The Maya don't see their gods as either perfect or immortal. The gods made three attempts at creating people powerful enough to maintain the world before finally getting it right on the fourth. On the first attempt the gods made deer, birds and other animals, but when the gods called upon the animals to pronounce the names of their creators, they only squawked and grunted and roared. Not being able to speak properly to honor the gods, they were deemed unworthy and condemned to be eaten.

For a complete overview of Maya cities and culture from the point of view of an eminent archaeologist, try *The Ancient Maya* by Robert J. Sharer.

FLATLANDS *Dr Allen J Christenson*

When I first visited the ruins of Tikal in the 1970s, the twin-prop airplanes that ferried tourists there were not equipped with global-positioning instruments as they are now. During one flight, the pilot got a little lost over the Petén jungle with its sea of unbroken green forest. He asked us passengers over the intercom to help him look out for the tops of the ancient temples at Tikal. These just barely cleared the 45m jungle canopy and could be seen from kilometers away. He later told me that pilots would love to have at least one real hill to help orient them.