

Hybrid Cosmologies in Mesoamerica: A Reevaluation of the *Yax Cheel Cab*, a Maya World Tree

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Abstract. During his visit to Nojpeten in 1696, Fray Andrés de Avendaño reported observing the Itzá Maya worshipping a stone column called *yax cheel cab* (the first tree of the world). Though claiming to recognize the *yax cheel cab* from depictions in pre-Hispanic Maya codices, Avendaño notes that the Itzá “want it to be understood that they give homage to it because this is the tree of whose fruit our first father Adam ate.” As no known pre-Hispanic source uses the term *yax cheel cab*, how are we to interpret Avendaño’s report? Based on iconographic as well as primary textual sources from the Postclassic through Colonial periods written in Maya and Spanish, we document the transformation of pre-Hispanic Maya tree symbolism in response to contemporaneous European Christian myth and cosmology. We argue that, though having roots in pre-Hispanic iconography and practices millennia deep, the *yax cheel cab* known from the documentary record is a colonial amalgam, a world tree at the center of a hybrid cosmology emerging over the course of over a century and a half from processes of direct as well as indirect dialogue between Mayas and Europeans.

Introduction

Near the close of the seventeenth century, Fray Andrés de Avendaño and two companions were appointed to deliver a letter from Governor Martín de Ursúa to Canek (Kan Ek’), *ahau* (king) of the last independent Maya city-state on the Yucatán Peninsula, at Nojpeten (see Jones 1998). The letter, demanding that the Itzá convert to Catholicism and submit to the Spanish Crown (198–201), foreshadowed the military occupation that was to follow in March 1697. Upon his arrival at Nojpeten, Avendaño observed:

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The king and all of his family and followers worship together at this stone column. They call this same column, which is the title by which they give homage to it, *yax cheel cab*, which means in their language “the first tree of the world,” as I have understood in their ancient songs (there are few who understand them). They want it to be understood that they give homage to it because this is the tree of whose fruit our first father Adam ate, who in their language is called *Ixanom*. And there is a mask that is in the foundation of the said column, in the small part that is preserved fortunately. They give homage to him with the title of the son of *Dios* most wise. In their language they call him *Ah Cocabmut*. In the instant that we disembarked and I saw the said column and mask, I came to recognize it because I had already read of it in their ancient papers and seen it in the *anahtees* that they use, which are books of tree bark, polished, and coated with lime. In these they have prognosticated their future events through painted figures and characters. (Avendaño y Loyola 1997 [1696]: 35 [translation by Timothy Knowlton])

Avendaño’s reference to his encounter with the Yucatecan Maya world tree, the *yax cheel cab*, is fascinating for a number of reasons.¹ On one hand, he explicitly links the *yax cheel cab* to the ancient Maya tradition, its lore being expressed and transmitted through the text and image of prophetic codices and through “ancient songs” presumably so suffused with metaphors or archaic elements that they are difficult to comprehend.² On the other hand, the actual content of the lore attributed to the *yax cheel cab* appears to only partially derive from ancient Maya cosmology. The references to Adam eating the fruit of the tree suggest instead that the beliefs of these last independent Maya elites surrounding the *yax cheel cab* may have been as grounded in the Christian mythology of the Garden of Eden as they were in the autochthonous cosmology of their forebears. Although cosmological trees are widespread motifs in Mesoamerican iconography (Arnold 2001; León-Portilla 1988; Taube 1988: 142–43, 170–71; Thompson 1970: 195–96, 219, 333), with some features enduring in pre-Hispanic Maya iconography for over a millennium (Saturno 2006: 74–75), what do we really know of this particular manifestation, the Yucatecan *yax cheel cab*?

As there are no known pre-Hispanic references that explicitly employ the name *yax cheel cab*, could this “first tree of the world” have always been *that* first tree, the one in Eden? Is the *yax cheel cab* a colonial import? Or is Avendaño simply misreporting or misinterpreting the beliefs and practices of the Petén Itzá within his own European Christian worldview, as commonly occurred among chroniclers describing unfamiliar cultures?³ Alter-

natively, had the beliefs and practices of the Petén Itzá, faced with periodic *entradas* by soldiers and missionaries ever since Cortés passed through the area in 1525, already undergone significant hybridization well before the military conquest of the last Maya kingdom? Or perhaps Canek was strategically attempting to make indigenous Maya beliefs interpretable to the Christian envoys. A reevaluation of the *yax cheel cab* based on the primary documentary and iconographic sources from the Postclassic through Colonial periods will enable us to address the question of continuity, transformation, and appropriation in regard to this potent Maya cosmological symbol.

In this article we argue that, though having roots in pre-Hispanic iconography and practices millennia deep, the *yax cheel cab* known from the documentary record is a colonial amalgam, a world tree at the center of a hybrid cosmology emerging over the course of over a century and a half from processes of direct and indirect dialogue between Mayas and Europeans. We begin our discussion by evaluating the object that Avendaño saw, his *yax cheel cab*, and compare his account to earlier Spanish accounts and to pre-Hispanic Maya iconography, the source that Avendaño claims to have relied upon to recognize the “first tree” at Nojpeten. We then go on to analyze references to the *yax cheel cab* found in colonial documents composed by Mayas, especially in the Books of Chilam Balam.⁴ Parallelisms in the Chilam Balam books provide alternate names or appellatives for the *yax cheel cab* that give us further insight into the pre-Hispanic iconographic roots of the concept. Finally, we draw upon Colonial period doctrinal literature written in Yucatecan Maya to document the hybridization of Maya cosmological trees with European-Christian ones.

Pre-Hispanic Sources and Avendaño’s *Yax Cheel Cab*

The concept of “world trees” is of considerable antiquity in the Maya region and can be related to the belief that the cosmos is a quincunx consisting of four directional quadrants with a central space corresponding to the fifth direction (Miller and Taube 1993: 186). Trees associated with the four quadrants are depicted in various media, ranging in time from the first century BC, as seen in the Late Preclassic San Bartolo murals (Saturno 2006), to the fourteenth century through early sixteenth century AD Late Postclassic Maya codices (Taube 1988; Thompson 1972). They are frequently associated with hieroglyphic captions that link them to particular quadrants and their associated colors, and also at times with specific deities. Birds may also be shown perched in the trees. There is continuity between this pre-Hispanic quincunx cosmology and accounts from indige-

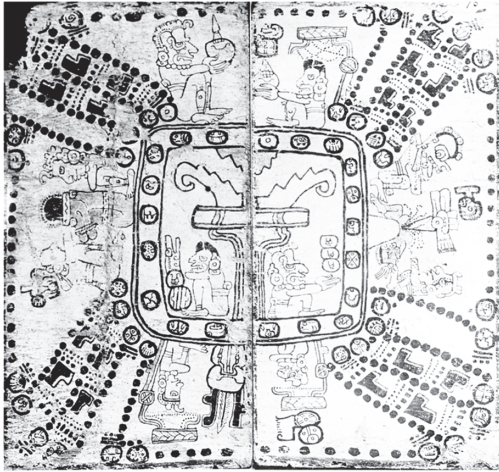
nous colonial sources (described below) of the setting up of trees, and the birds that perched in them, during cosmogonic events (Bassie-Sweet 2008: 68; Knowlton 2009, 2010b; Taube 1993: 70).

In pre-Hispanic Maya sources, the four directional trees surround a fifth tree growing at the center of the world that is frequently interpreted in the scholarly literature as a *yaxche*, which has been translated both as “first tree” and as “green tree” (Miller and Taube 1993: 57). In several Mayan languages, the *yaxche* (or *yaxte*) is identified with the *ceiba*, a tree characterized by thick conical thorns along its trunk (Thompson 1970: 195). Though not representing *ceiba* trees, some of the best-known pre-Hispanic depictions of the central world tree concept occur on the inscribed panels from the Temples of the Cross and Foliated Cross at Palenque (Thompson 1970: 208–9; 337). Based on analogy with contemporary Maya beliefs, scholars have interpreted the central world tree as an “axis mundi,” representing a means of communication between the earthly, underworld, and celestial realms (Bassie-Sweet 2008: 72; Miller and Taube 1993: 186).

Representations of trees associated with the world directions and central space continue into the Postclassic period (ca. 900–1520 CE), where they are frequently labeled as “world trees” or “cosmic trees” by scholars (León-Portilla 1988: 65–66; Taube 1988: 239–40; Thompson 1970: 196). Of these, the best known examples are those occupying the central space on pages 75–76 of the Madrid Codex and page 3a of the Dresden Codex.⁵ In both instances, the tree iconography is linked to imagery stressing fertility and renewal in the context of a quadripartite representation of ritual events that can be linked to specific days in the Maya calendar (see Vail and Hernández 2006). This five-part division of the cosmos is a common representational principle used by scribes throughout Mesoamerica during the Postclassic period.

The tree on Madrid 75–76 appears in a very stylized form (fig. 1a), suggesting that it may have been an architectural feature meant to symbolize a tree (see Paxton 2004: 96).⁶ The two deities seated beneath it, Chak Chel on the left and Itzamna on the right, are the female and male members of the Yucatec Maya creator couple, who were responsible for forming humans from maize.⁷ Neither this tree nor that on Dresden 3a (fig. 1b) is named, but there is good reason to believe that the latter tree is a *yaxche* based on a cognate scene in the Madrid Codex (on page 91a) where the tree has the “spikes” used graphically to represent the *ceiba* tree. The scene on Dresden 3a, which shows a tree growing from the chest of a sacrificial victim, emphasizes the generative role played by “world trees” in pre-Hispanic Maya thought.

We might well expect that the tree iconography in the surviving



a



b

Figure 1. (a) Tree at the center of the Maya cosmos, from pages 75–76 of the Madrid Codex. Image courtesy of George Stuart, from an original photograph taken in 1910 for William Gates. (b) Tree in the form of an “altar,” with two serpent heads at its base, from page 3a of the Dresden Codex. A ceiba tree grows from the gaping chest of the sacrificial victim on the altar. After Förstemann (1880)

pre-Hispanic codices would be similar to that which Avendaño reports having seen in the Mayas' "ancient" papers and painted books. However, we should keep in mind that by the time Avendaño arrived at Nojpeten, the indigenous communities of Yucatán had already been engaged in over a century and a half of direct and indirect contact, exchange, and confrontation with Spanish missionaries and soldiers. The Petén Itzá he met were one of several groups speaking very closely related Yucatecan Maya languages, although experiencing different degrees of Spanish control over their political and religious affairs throughout this period. The various patronymic groups of northern Yucatán, sometimes referred to collectively in colonial documents as *ah maya uinicob* (Maya peoples) (Restall 2004; Knowlton 2010a), experienced greater direct Spanish control at an earlier period than the Itzá did, and some of these northern Maya even participated in the subjugation of other Maya groups (Restall 1998). The beginning of the military campaigns by the Montejos in 1527, the founding of the Spanish colonial city of Mérida in 1542, and Franciscan Diego de Landa's torturous anti-idolatry campaign of 1562 were all episodes in a long *process* of establishing Spanish dominance in the region, as opposed to any single decisive conquest event. And although Friar Landa's campaign clearly ushered in a new phase of Maya awareness of the violent means by which Christian orthodoxy might be enforced (Clendinnen 1987), in practice Maya populations maintained a significant degree of control over their everyday religious lives even in the northern region. This found expression in numerous avenues: the clandestine survival of the pre-Hispanic priesthood and hieroglyphic books (Chuchiak 2001, 2004), the fusion of Catholic saints and indigenous community deities (Farris 1984: 286–319), and the fact that Maya continued to occupy positions within local civil and religious hierarchies (Farris 1984: 320–351; Restall 1997: 148–165).

Although they also encountered Spanish soldiers and Franciscan missionaries from the early sixteenth century on, the four Yucatecan-speaking groups living in the Petén and central and southern Belize (the Itzá, Kejach, Kowoj, and Mopán) were less immediately affected. These southern communities often served as refuges for northern Maya fleeing Spanish dominance, as the Itzá both supported native rebellions and engaged in active military campaigns against the Spaniards and those nearby indigenous communities supporting them (Jones 1998: 39–59). Therefore, as we examine Avendaño's account of the yax cheel cab and northern Yucatecan language sources referring to it, it is important to keep in mind the relative degrees of political and religious autonomy possible for the northern Maya and the still independent Itzá.

With this context in mind, let us return to Avendaño's account and

consider the detailed description of the yax cheel cab he observed (see also Jones 1998: 69–71):

On the shore of the landing place is situated the house of the said petty King . . . in the middle of which, open to the street, stands the fragment of a column of round stone, the circumference of each part of which is about three quarters of a yard across and one quarter high. It is made of stones placed on top of each other with mortar of lime and *cab cab*, which is usually used for that purpose; the middle is filled in with bitumen so it is like a table, with a round pedestal upon which and set in the foundation of the said stone column there stands out toward the west a stone mask, very ill-formed, which, together with the stone column, the petty King and the rest of his family and followers worship. (Avendaño y Loyola 1987 [1696]: 31–32)

Although compared to a tree, the object described by Avendaño sounds more like an architectural feature, perhaps originally the column of a building, that was being used in the late seventeenth century as an altar. The description of the mask attached to the base calls to mind the large effigy censers with modeled portraits that have been discovered at Palenque and other Classic period Maya sites (Cuevas García 2004) as well as the anthropomorphic heads depicted at the base of the trees represented on the Panels of the Cross and Foliated Cross at Palenque (Thompson 1970: 208–9). Additionally, Prudence Rice comments on a resemblance between Avendaño’s description and the “idols” mentioned by Landa in use during the rituals performed in connection with the New Year to avoid calamities (Rice 1985; Avendaño y Loyola 1987 [1696]: 33n104). The figure portrayed on the yax cheel cab column, Ah Cocahmut, may correspond to the deity referenced in earlier Spanish sources in relation to the rituals at the start of Muluc years (Jones 1998: 444n26). Landa, writing circa 1566, relates that “the devil caused them to make an idol named Yax Cocah Mut to place him in the temple . . . and to make in the court in front of the temple a figure of stone [an altar]” (Tozzer 1941: 145). Later he notes that “those who were very devout had to draw their blood and to anoint the stone of the idol Chac Acantun with it. This service and sacrifice they considered as being very agreeable to their god Yax Cocah Mut” (145).

There are some very significant parallels between Landa’s discussion and Avendaño’s description of the stone column. Both feature what we and others (see Tozzer 1941: 145n697; Jones 1998: 444n26) believe to be the same deity, and both are associated with what can be described as a sculptured altar. *Yax*, which may refer either to “first” or to the color “blue-green,” is associated cosmologically with the center. The word is used both

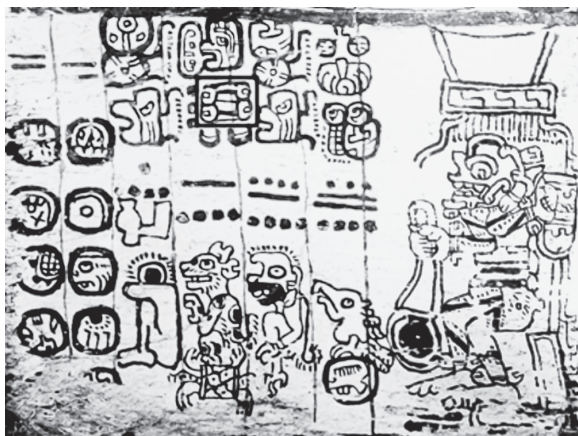


Figure 2. Syllabic spelling ko-k(o) for *coc* (turtle), from page 88c of the Madrid Codex. Image courtesy of George Stuart, from an original photograph taken in 1910 for William Gates

as part of the name of the deity *Yax Cocahmut* (an elaborated form of Ah Cocahmut) and to designate the stone column as *yax cheel cab*.

The meaning of the deity name Ah Cocahmut is potentially ambiguous and so requires interpretation. *Ah* is the male agentive particle in Yucatec Maya. *Mut* means either “bird” or “omen” (Barrera Vásquez et al. 1980: 542) and is used in pre-Hispanic sources as both (Kelley 1976: 181). As noted above, the deity name occurs with the color prefix *yax* in Landa’s account. The *yax* designation also appears in several references in the Books of Chilam Balam, although an alternate color designation, *ek* (black, associated with the direction west), appears with some irregular spellings of the deity name in the Books of Chilam Balam of Chumayel (92.6) and of Tizimín (32.18).⁸ Because Ah Cocahmut can occur with different color prefixes, Thompson (1939: 161) interpreted it as meaning “the [color] Coc bird.” We suggest, however, that what is often interpreted as a single name is, or was at one point, derived from a paired title: *ah coc ah mut* (see also Bassie-Sweet 2008: 140). *Coc* is one of the Classical Yucatecan words for “turtle” (Barrera Vásquez et al. 1980: 329). It not only appears in colonial sources but is attested to syllabically in the pre-Hispanic script used in the Postclassic codices (Vail and Hernández 2005–2008). For example, the term is used in conjunction with a picture of a turtle on Madrid 88c (fig. 2). Therefore, Ah Cocahmut is perhaps better understood as Ah Coc Ah Mut: “Turtle-Bird” or “Turtle-Omen.”

So who is the deity Ah Coc Ah Mut whom, Avendaño (1997 [1696], 35) reports, the Itzá of his time referred to as “the son of *Dios* most wise”? Numerous Mayanists since the late nineteenth century have associated Ah Coc Ah Mut with Itzamna, the male member of the creator couple in Yucatec Maya mythology (Bassie-Sweet 2008: 130–40; Brinton 1882; Roys 1967; Thompson 1970: 211; Tozzer 1941: 145n695). An entry on folio 129 of the Colonial era *Bocabulario de Maya Than* (also known as the *Vienna Dictionary*) lists the paired names Hun Itzan Na, Yax Cocahmut for a single “ydolo q[ue] decían ser de éste” (Acuña 1993: 419).⁹

Itzamna’s equivalent among the highland K’iche’ Maya of Guatemala is named Xpiyacoc in the Popol Vuh. He is described as the creator grandfather, a role also assumed by Itzamna for the Yucatec Maya. *Coc* means “turtle” in K’iche’ as well as in Yucatec, and one possible derivation of Xpiyacoc’s name is a design woven into textiles (*piyacoc*) in the highland town of Rabinal that is associated with turtles (Akkeren 2000: 207, 261–64; Christenson 2003: 62–63n26). The association of these related deities with turtles is important to their identification as creators. In a well-known eighth-century text (Stela C) from the Classic period site of Quirigua, Itzamna is described as setting the last of three stones that formed a celestial “hearth” that was responsible for centering the cosmos. Based on analogy with K’iche’ ethnographic sources (Tedlock 1992: 181–82), scholars have identified this last hearthstone with the star Alnitak, one of the belt stars of Orion (Looper 1995; Schele 1992). The pre-Hispanic Maya visualized Orion’s belt as a turtle, as suggested by images from a mural painted at the Classic period site of Bonampak and from the zodiacal almanac depicted in the Paris Codex (Bricker and Bricker 1992; Lounsbury 1982). The designation of the effigy associated with Muluc years as *yax coc* suggests a correspondence between Itzamna and the “first” turtle, or the turtle occupying the central place in the quincunx cosmology.¹⁰

One of the deities most commonly associated with turtles in Maya art is Schellhas’s God N, who was later identified by scholars as Pauhtun, an aspect of the Bacabs, or the deities who hold up the world (Taube 1989). In their turtle aspects, the Pauhtuns are earth deities who manifest as the four directional mountains (Taube 1992: 92–99). An example of a Pauhtun associated with a collocation reading *coc* (turtle) in the hieroglyphic caption to a scene on Dresden page 37b suggests a connection to the creator aspect of Itzamna. Indeed, epigraphers have recently argued that God N is an aspect of Itzamna, referring specifically to his role as an earth god (in Bassie-Sweet 2008: 130–40). There are a number of instances in the Post-classic codices in which Itzamna is linked iconographically with turtles. For example, on Madrid 19b Itzamna is depicted with a turtle, whose shell

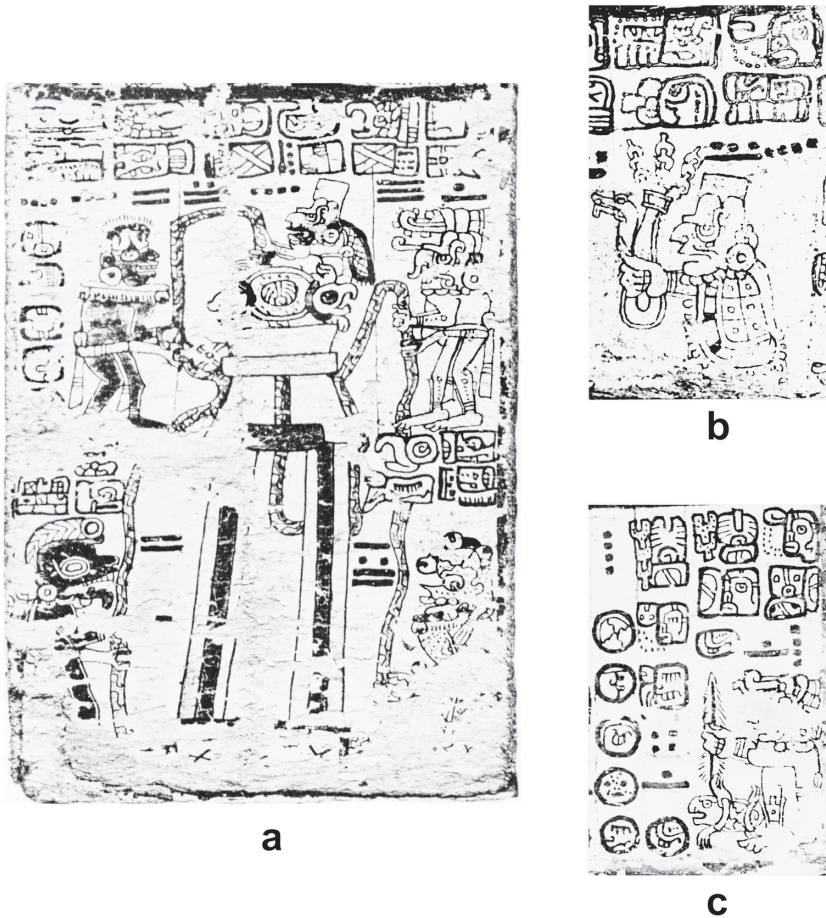


Figure 3. (a) A bloodletting ritual, from page 19b of the Madrid Codex, depicting Itzamna next to a turtle marked by the glyph reading *yax* (first). After Rosny (1883). (b) Itzamna dressed in a turtle shell, from page 60c of the Madrid Codex. Image courtesy of George Stuart, from an original photograph taken in 1910 for William Gates. (c) Itzamna holding a bloodletting implement and seated next to a turtle, from page 81c of the Madrid Codex. Image courtesy of George Stuart, from an original photograph taken in 1910 for William Gates

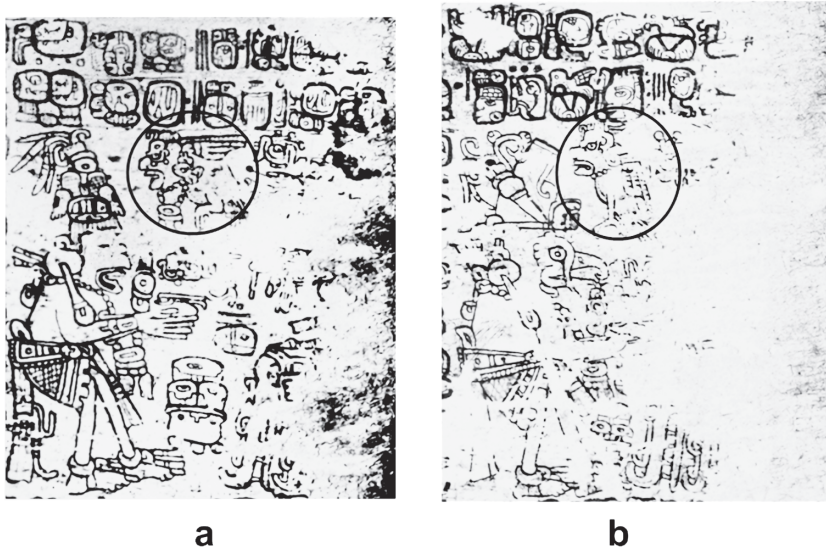


Figure 4. (a) Itzamna in avian form as a bird of omen (*mut*) for the *katun* period 11 Ahau, from page 4b of the Paris Codex. After Rosny (1888). (b) Itzamna in avian form as a bird of omen (*mut*) for the *katun* period 3 Ahau, from page 8b of the Paris Codex. After Rosny (1888)

is marked with a yax glyph, in the central frame of the scene (fig. 3a). On Madrid 60c, Itzamna appears dressed in a turtle shell in the context of an almanac with seasonal and astronomical associations (fig. 3b). In another almanac, found on Madrid 81c, Itzamna is seated holding a bloodletting implement next to a turtle (fig. 3c). Various lines of evidence, therefore, suggest that the *ah coc* portion of the name of the deity described by Avendaño relates to Itzamna in one of his manifestations.

With respect to the title *Ah Mut*, there is considerable evidence from Classic period Maya sources that Itzamna had an avian aspect. Mayanists refer to iconographic representations of Itzamna's avian form as the Principal Bird Deity (Bardawil 1976). Itzamna appears in his avian form in several instances in the Maya codices, most specifically as the bird or omen associated with a particular *katun*, or approximately twenty-year period of time (see, e.g., Paris 4 and Paris 8 in figs. 4a and 4b). In Classic contexts, the avian aspect of Itzamna is frequently pictured perched on the branches of a tree (Bassie-Sweet 2008: 132).¹¹

The pre-Hispanic evidence therefore corresponds well with the pro-



Figure 5. New Year's rites featuring *yax itzamna te*, from pages 25c–28c of the Dresden Codex. After Förstemann (1880)

posal that Ah Mut refers to Itzamna as the Principal Bird Deity, whereas Ah Coc refers to Itzamna's association with turtles. If we are correct in identifying the Ah Coc Ah Mut image Avendaño saw with Itzamna, then the pre-Hispanic "trees" most likely at the root of Avendaño's *yax cheel cab* are the *yax itzamna te* depicted in the Postclassic Maya codices (fig. 5). Like the tree Avendaño described, the *yax itzamna te* are linked to Itzamna and to the notion of first tree (*yax te*). Depictions of the *yax itzamna te* appear on pages 25–28 of the pre-Hispanic Dresden Codex in reference to ceremonies associated with the start of the new year.¹² According to the hieroglyphic captions accompanying the images, these *itzamna te* are set up (*dzap*) on the days Ben, Edznab, Akbal, and Lamat of the Maya divinatory calendar (*tzolkin*). Each day and tree is associated with a specific deity (the sun god Kin Ahau, the god of sustenance Kauil, the death god Cimil, and the creator Itzamna) and a series of related prognostications (see Taube 1988: 219–245 for a detailed discussion).

The phrase *itzamna te* is also found in the pre-Hispanic Madrid Codex

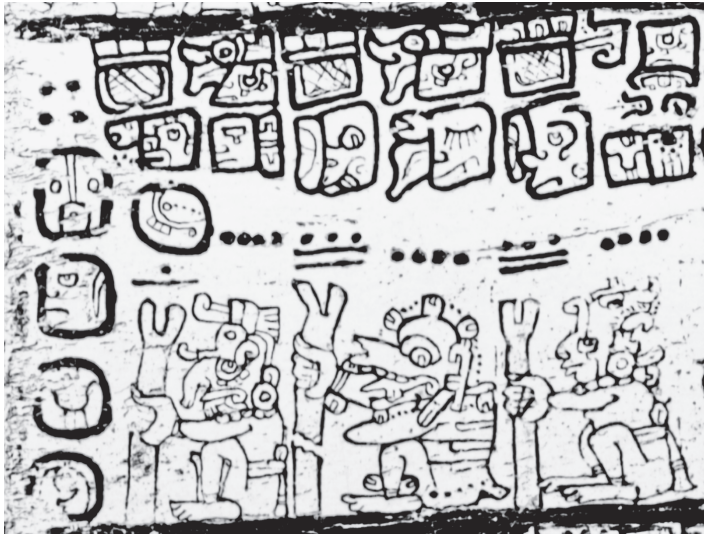


Figure 6. *Itzamna te* as blue poles, possibly house posts, from page 60b of the Madrid Codex. After Rosny (1883)

in association with three deities (the rain god Chaac, the death god Cimil, and the maize god Nal) holding blue-painted forked posts on page 60b (fig. 6). Like the text on Dresden 25c–28c, the clauses begin with the verb *dzap*, referring to the setting up of *Itzamna* trees. It has been suggested that the reason poles are depicted in place of trees is that they are meant to be the foundation posts for a house or other type of structure (Bey 2002). Among several contemporary Maya groups, the house is a model of the universe, with the four structural posts corresponding to the directional trees (Schele and Mathews 1998: 26–27; Vogt 1993: 11). The *itzamna te* in the Madrid 60b almanac are thus architectural features, as is also true of the *yax cheel cab* column described by Avendaño.

An even closer iconographic correspondence can be found in the almanac on Madrid 19b (fig. 3a), where a feature similar to that described by Avendaño marks the central space (although the columns are depicted as rectangular, not round). Vail (n.d.) interprets this as an altar used during New Year's ceremonies. A turtle appears at the summit of the structure; next to it is *Itzamna*. A *yax* glyph on the turtle's back, corresponding to "first," serves to identify this figure as *yax coc*. Four deities are depicted surrounding the central scene, all engaged in a bloodletting ritual reminiscent of Landa's description of the *Muluc* yearbearer ceremonies involving *Yax*

Coc Ah Mut.¹³ Perhaps because of their connection with the fertile forces represented by the earth, turtles are commonly associated with bloodletting rituals in the pre-Hispanic Maya area (see fig. 3c; see Bassie-Sweet 2008: 168–69 for a more detailed discussion).

The presence of the image of the deity Ah Coc Ah Mut at the base of the yax cheel cab suggests some continuity with cosmogonic beliefs current since pre-Hispanic times. Nevertheless, the correspondences between Avendaño's description of the object he calls the yax cheel cab and the itzamna te of the Postclassic Maya codices, however illuminating, are insufficient to explain the entire yax cheel cab complex as it is documented for the Colonial period. In fact, the first known explicit references to the Yucatecan yax cheel cab appear farther north and predate Avendaño's account by over a century. It is to these sources we now turn.

Yax Cheel Cab in Colonial Spanish and Yucatecan Language Sources

From the documentary record, it is evident that trees were of considerable importance to Yucatecan Maya during the Colonial period. Of practical importance as much as cosmological, trees served as sources of fruit and as boundary markers, and so were bequeathed as property in colonial Maya testaments (Restall 1997: 203–5). The first securely dated textual reference to the yax cheel cab is Gaspar Antonio Chi Xiu's mention of pre-Hispanic cross symbols as the *arbol verde del mundo* (green tree of the world) in the *Relacion histórico-geográfica* for the town (*cab*) of Maní (de la Garza 1983: 1:69; translation in Restall 1998: 149–50). Chi's account asserts that stones worked to represent this green tree of the world were in fact representations of the cross of Christ and that their construction was a new phenomenon introduced by the Chilam Balam in Maní as a prophecy of the coming of Christianity.¹⁴

Chi's pronouncement of the relative novelty of the yax cheel cab contrasts sharply with Avendaño's statement in which he describes recognizing it from painted codices and "ancient songs." This is not to say that Avendaño is entirely mistaken in asserting some antiquity to the concept, however. In addition to his account, evidence for the antiquity of the tradition may be found in the alternate names or appellatives for the yax cheel cab that appear in the Books of Chilam Balam. By examining a number of instances of parallelism from these sources, we can identify two synonyms for the yax cheel cab that may shed light on the concept. For instance, on page 13, line 9, of the Book of Chilam Balam of Tizimín we encounter the parallelism

Tu yax cheil
 Tu tzuc teil cab

[At the First Tree of,
 At the Divided Tree of the World]

An interesting feature of this parallelism is the substitution of the Yucatecan word for tree, *che*, with its Ch'olan cognate, *te*. This substitution may reflect a tradition grounded in pre-Hispanic hieroglyphic texts, many of which were written in a Ch'olan prestige language rather than in a Yucatecan Maya language (Lacadena 1997; Vail 2006; Wald 2004). This pattern of substituting the Ch'olan word for “tree” for the Yucatecan term appears again in another Chilam Balam text, the Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel (44, lines 16–17):

Chacacan [*sic?*] u yax chel cab
 Chacan u num teil cab tumenelob uuc yol sip

[The First Tree of the World is discovered
 The Spiny Tree of the World is discovered by them, the Uuc Yol Sip]

Uuc Sip is a pre-Hispanic deity identified by name on page 13c of the Dresden Codex (Vail 2000: 39).¹⁵ To the present day in Yucatán, the *sip* are spirits associated with the hunt (Gabriel 2006), and a tree with a deer trap attached to it sprouts from the head of Sip on page 45c of the Madrid Codex (fig. 7). However, it is on page 69c of the Dresden Codex that we encounter the pre-Hispanic antecedent to the *yax cheel cab* being evoked by the appellatives “Divided Tree” and “Spiny Tree” (fig. 8). This tree, divided into blue (watery) and red (bloody) halves, is characterized by spines along the sides and a saurian head at the base. Unfortunately, the pre-Hispanic name of the tree depicted on Dresden 69 is lost (this part of the hieroglyphic text is eroded), but the saurian head at its base may give us a clue to its identity.

The ordering of the world narrative in the first three manuscript pages of the Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel (Gordon 1993 [1913]; see also Roys 1967: 15–16, 63–66) involves the placement of cosmological trees as part of the process of establishing various Yucatecan patronym groups (*chibal*). Each of these cosmological trees is referred to in the text as “[color] *imix yaxche*,” and each is inhabited by a bee deity (*Ah Mucencab*) of the same color association. As Seler (1902: 499, quoted in Roys 1967: 64n5) originally noted, the day corresponding to *Imix* in the Aztec calendar is *Cipactli*, or “Crocodile.” Taken together, we argue that *imix yaxche* is a textual reference to these trees with crocodilian head roots depicted in the iconography of the Postclassic Yucatecan Maya.

Elsewhere, in the versions of the Katun 11 Ahau myth contained in

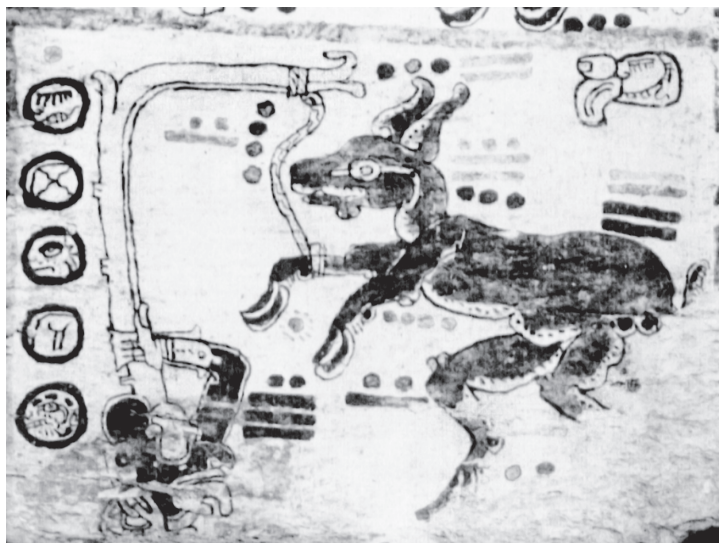


Figure 7. *Sip* deity with tree sprouting from its head, from page 45c of the Madrid Codex. Image courtesy of George Stuart, from an original photograph taken in 1910 for William Gates

the Books of Chilam Balam of Chumayel, Tizimín, and the Codice Pérez, a series of color-directional *Imix Che* are established in the cardinal directions as part of the ritual of recreating the world following a catastrophic flood that destroyed the previous creation. Taube (1993: 72) suggests that the day name Imix, in addition to its association with Cipactli, refers to the first day in a new 7,200-day katun cycle by which the pre-Hispanic Maya organized their autochthonous histories. This means that the setting up of the Imix Che in this myth refers to the establishment of ritual trees as part of the ancient Maya stela cult. This suggestion receives support from the fact that the last of the trees established, the central *yax imix che*, is called in the text *u kahlay haycabil*, “the memorial (or history) of the destruction of the world,” *kahlay* referencing the genre of colonial Yucatecan history emerging from pre-Hispanic stela inscriptions (Knowlton 2009, 2010b). The Imix Che, therefore, were cosmological trees materialized as architectural features in the ritual landscape of pre-Hispanic Maya communities.

So what are we to make of the multiple appellatives for the *yax cheel cab* that appear in the documentary record along with their pre-Hispanic iconographic referents? It is clear that there is not simply one, but in fact there are several pre-Hispanic traditions that merged into the cosmological tree known in the Colonial period as the *yax cheel cab*. That being the



Figure 8. Tree, from page 69a of the Dresden Codex, divided into blue (watery) and red (bloody) halves and characterized by spines along the sides, corresponding to alternate names of the *yax cheel cab* appearing in the Books of Chilam Balam. After Förstemann (1880)

case, how do we explain the emergence of the name itself and the belief of clergy-educated Maya like Gasper Antonio Chi that the roots of the *yax cheel cab* were to be found in the Judeo-Christian tradition? The solution to this problem can be found through an examination of doctrinal literature written in Yucatecan Maya that circulated during the Colonial period.

The *Yax Cheel Cab* in Yucatecan-Language Doctrinal Literature

Another source that makes considerable use of the symbol of the *yax cheel cab* is Christian doctrinal literature that appears in the Morley Manuscript, a colonial Yucatecan Maya-language manuscript currently in the collec-

tions of the library of the Laboratory of Anthropology in the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in Santa Fe, New Mexico (Whalen 2003). A sort of “missing link” between the Books of Chilam Balam and Christian doctrinal works produced by the Franciscans, the Morley Manuscript contains versions of sermons later edited for Fray Juan Coronel’s 1620 Yucatecan Maya-language publication, *Discursos Predicables*, as well as Maya-language cosmological texts based on European sources that were never published but were later copied into the clandestine Books of Chilam Balam of Kaua and of Chan Kan (Knowlton 2008). As such, the Morley Manuscript is a very significant source for understanding the relationship between Maya and Franciscan literary production in colonial Yucatán during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It also illustrates the “old style” of Yucatecan Maya language that Avendaño mentions studying in preparation for his mission and sermons to the Itzá (Jones 1998: 198).

In the Morley Manuscript, the Yucatecan world tree is represented as a source of abundance. Drawing on biblical imagery of the Tree of Life in the New Jerusalem (Apocalypse of John 22:1–2), the *yax cheel cab* is said to bear fruit every *v* (moon/month) for all twelve months of the year (Morley Manuscript 195.2–4). Furthermore, the *yax cheel cab* in the manuscript conflates the Tree of Life with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Earthly Paradise (*parayso terenal*), or Eden (194–95, “About the Earthly Paradise,” 199–213, “About Eve’s Fall,” in Whalen 2003). Similar to the biblical account, in the Morley Manuscript Eve is tempted by a *cisin zerpiente* (devil serpent) to eat from the *yax cheil cab*, also described here as *u cheel gracia cuxtal y toholal* (the tree of grace, life, and health) (Morley Manuscript 209.3–4). This Yucatecan doctrinal text asserts that the result of Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was that “then the grace was withdrawn from them . . . they were cast from Earthly Paradise, here into suffering (*numyayl*) and the world which is our existence today” (31.13–17). The choice of *numyayl* here in the text is interesting, as there are several Yucatec Mayan words distinguishing different kinds of pain. *Numya* is derived from *num*, the term for cactus spines the pre-Hispanic Maya used as pins (Ciudad Real 2001: 444).¹⁶ This reference parallels the alternate name or appellative for the *yax cheel cab* found in the Books of Chilam Balam discussed previously—*u num teil cab* (the spiny tree of the world).

Although Chi asserts that the Christian cross was called the *arbol verde del mundo* according to the prophecy of the Chilam Balam at Maní (de la Garza 1983: 1:69; translation in Restall 1998: 149–50), the Morley Manuscript does not identify the *yax cheel cab* with the Christian cross. Instead, the *yax cheel cab* is identified with the Tree of Life and the Tree

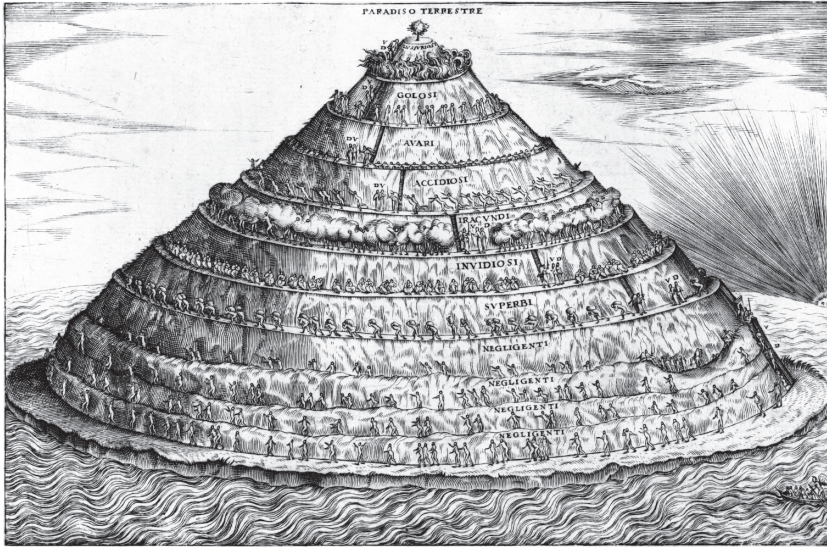


Figure 9. Depiction of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the center of the Earthly Paradise atop Mount Purgatory. Engraving from Pietro da Fino's 1568 edition of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Venice. Reproduced from the original held by the Department of Special Collections of the University Libraries of Notre Dame

of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in Eden (fig. 9), which is how Aveniño reports that the Péten Itzá interpreted it at the close of the seventeenth century. The Itzá interpretation then cannot be explained as ignorance or misinterpretation of Christian evangelism. In fact, the Itzá had long been acquainted with the Christian cross. López de Cogolludo relates that during their 1618 mission, the friars Obita and Fuensalida encountered a cross at Nojpeten placed there by Cortés during a visit nearly one hundred years prior to their own (Jones 1989: 145–46). So how are we to understand these divergent Christian traditions informing Maya interpretations of the yax cheel cab? The fact is that the Cross and the Trees of Life and of the Knowledge of Good and Evil are closely related in European Christian mythology and cosmology.

The *Yax Cheel Cab* in Light of Iberian Tree Symbolism and European Christian Cosmology

Although our discussion so far has focused on Maya tree symbolism, the ancient and extremely diverse traditions of tree symbolism in the iconog-

raphy and folklore of Old World civilizations have long been subjects of scholarly inquiry (e.g., Lechler 1937, Russell 1981). The Iberian Peninsula during the late medieval and early Renaissance had a particularly rich tradition of tree and garden symbolism expressed in devotional literature, architecture, and iconography (Robinson 2006). The efflorescence of tree imagery in Iberia during this period was due in part to this symbolism being held in common by members of Iberia's Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities. Cognizant of this common religious point of reference, during the mid-thirteenth through early fifteenth centuries those Iberian Christian polemics aimed at converting Jews and Muslims frequently likened Christ's crucified body to—and in some cases visually merged it with—the Tree of Life shared by all three faiths. This identification was further facilitated by numerous medieval legends that held that the wood of the Cross came from trees growing from the grave of Adam where seeds from the Tree of Life (Lechler 1937: 370) or the Tree of Knowledge (Scafi 2006: 69) were placed by his son Seth. Although the tradition of “Tree-Christ” declined with the Isabelline reforms of the fifteenth century, this devotional tradition was particularly popular with Franciscans and persisted at least into the sixteenth century (Robinson 2006). Recalling Avendaño's report that one of the titles applied to the Ah Coc Ah Mut deity mask incorporated into the Itzās' yax cheel cab was “son of *Dios* most wise,” it may be that the Franciscan mass and accompanying Christian cross presented to the Itzá by Cortés in 1525 (Jones 1998: 34–35) drew from this earlier tradition of Christian polemics that merged Christ with the Tree in Eden as a familiar conversion strategy.

Of course, developments in late-fifteenth-century Iberia not only included the expulsion of Jews and Muslims but also Columbus's voyages of “discovery.” During his third voyage (1498), Columbus identified the Orinoco River in South America as one of the four flowing out of the Garden of Eden (Delumeau 1995: 54–55). Given Columbus's own interest in mysticism and his relationship with the Franciscans, perhaps it is not surprising that some millennial Franciscans shared Columbus's view of the New World as the site of the Earthly Paradise (Phelan 1970: 19, 69–72). Although colonial era cartographers rarely located the Earthly Paradise on an eastern landmass separate from Asia (Scafi 2006), Columbus's suggestion circulated widely among sixteenth-century historians, appearing in the works of José de Acosta, Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, and Francisco López de Gómara, among others (Delumeau 1995: 156–57).

Perhaps most important for understanding how the yax cheel cab can be simultaneously the Cross of Christ and the Tree in the Earthly Paradise is the persistence among Renaissance Europeans of an essentially medieval

Christian moral cosmology like that found in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. As Nielson and Reunert (2009) recently documented, not only was Dante's work present in Mexico by 1600, but his multilevel cosmos was known much earlier among Franciscan and Dominican friars involved in evangelizing indigenous communities in the Americas (see also Phelan 1970: 71). In this cosmology, the Cross is located at Jerusalem in the center of one hemisphere, with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil located in Eden in the center on the opposite hemisphere (in what would become the New World) atop the summit of Mount Purgatory, leading up into the heavens (Cornish 1993: 207–9) (fig. 10). Therefore, whether understood as the Cross or the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the Maya *yax cheel cab* was oriented at one end of an axis running through the center of a spherical earth. To the extent that the *yax cheel cab* descends from pre-Hispanic concepts of a central cosmological tree, its identification with the Christian cross and the Tree in Eden represents a significant ideological shift during the Colonial period, from a cosmology organized as a quincunx to a view of the world as a sphere oriented along an axis. Therefore, the creation of the *yax cheel cab* in Yucatecan doctrinal literature was not simply the identification of one civilization's world tree with another, but for the Maya, it represented a new geometry of the cosmos. Tellingly, the cosmographs and calendar wheels contained in the colonial Books of Chilam Balam are always circular in shape rather than using the square cosmographic almanac format found in the pre-Hispanic Madrid Codex (Aveni 2006; Bricker and Miram 2002: 74–77, 91–93).

That Yucatecan-speaking Maya peoples came to merge the pre-Hispanic lore of cosmic trees with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the form of the *yax cheel cab* parallels developments also occurring in Central Mexico. Colonial Nahuatl-language documents speak of Tamoanchan, a mythical paradise represented in the pre-Hispanic iconography of the Central Mexican codices by an often dual-colored, split tree with a crocodilian head (López Austin 1997: 84–120). The tree of Tamoanchan is an obvious parallel to the Maya *tzuc teil cab* (Divided Tree of the World) and the iconography of Dresden Codex 69a (fig. 8). The “Bereavement Song” on folio 15 of the *Cantares Mexicanos* relates that a flower tree stands in Tamoanchan, where humans were created (Bierhorst 1985: 20, 177). The imagery of Tamoanchan is clearly informed by the widespread Uto-Aztecan theme of a flowery paradise (Hill 1992). However, the evangelizing possibilities of this were hardly overlooked by the friars, and Nahuatl myths of Tamoanchan were reinterpreted in terms of the Christians' Terrestrial Paradise of Eden (Burkhart 1989: 76–77, 1992; Gruzinski 2002: 168–70). This convergence even appears to have informed colonial mural programs like that

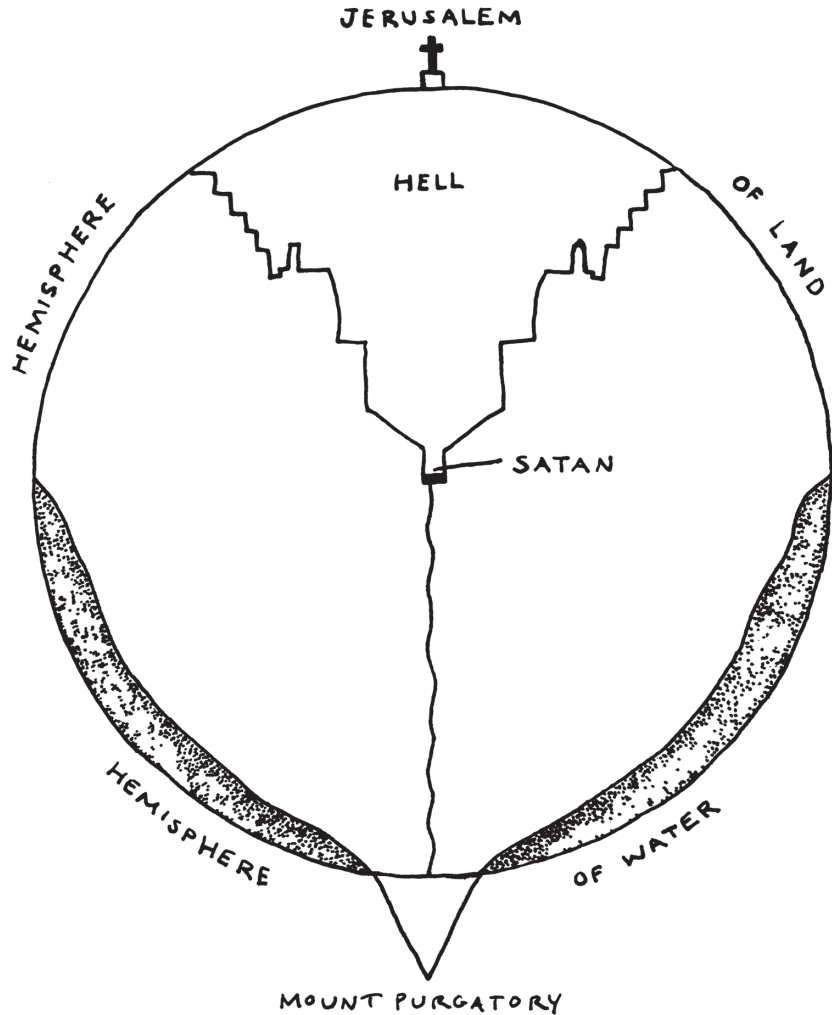


Figure 10. Renaissance European religious cosmology. After Cornish (1993)

of the sixteenth-century Augustinian monastery at Malinalco (Peterson 1993: 135–36). Thus, the case of the Yucatecan Maya yax cheel cab documented in this paper is not unique, but a single example among similar dialogic encounters between indigenous civilizations and friars that occurred throughout colonial Mesoamerica.

Conclusion

In this article we have demonstrated that, rather than a simple merging or syncretism of any one pre-Hispanic Maya tradition with a European one, the *yax cheel cab* is a colonial hybrid grafted from multiple pre-Hispanic Maya traditions as well as European interpretations of Judeo-Christian religious cosmology. *Itzamma* trees, crocodile trees, and the spiny painful *u num teil cab* all contributed to the colonial *yax cheel cab*, as did the trees from Judeo-Christian creation mythology and eschatology that were likewise associated with pain (*num*).

By being equated with both the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Cross/Tree of Life, the *yax cheel cab* served as the world tree, a central place connecting heaven, earth, and underworld. Yet the heaven, earth, and underworld it connected were those of a spherical cosmos. Rather than portraying the division of space-time found in pre-Hispanic cosmographs, the *yax cheel cab* is a colonial hybrid connected not only with creation (as seen in the Books of Chilam Balam) but also with European Christian eschatology through its identification with the crucifixion (Gaspar Antonio Chi) and reference to apocalyptic imagery of the New Jerusalem (Morley Manuscript). Though this might suggest the colonization of indigenous cosmologies, especially in northern Yucatán, it should be remembered that the Itzá placed the Tree of Eden, the place of origin and the center of the world, at Nojpeten. Though occupying a hybrid Maya-Christian cosmos, when Avendaño encountered the Itzá, they still lived “in a different world and in an alternative territory,” to borrow Mignolo’s (2003: 311) phrase, maintaining a view of the world in which their community continued to occupy the central place.

As the evangelizing friars with their millennial expectations appropriated the Yucatec language and Maya “prophetic” traditions for the promulgation of their cosmology, Mayan-speaking populations employed the innovation of Eden in terms of their preexisting beliefs concerning the cosmological significance of trees. Thus, among the Itzá whom Avendaño encountered, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil morphed into stone, receiving Maya kings’ homage to their gods and ancestors, among whom the friars would proclaim Adam to be the first.

Notes

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cially the session discussant Robert Hill for very helpful comments on that earlier draft. We are grateful for the assistance of Sara Weber and the staff of the Rare Books Department of the Hesburgh Library at the University of Notre Dame for images from sixteenth-century editions of Dante's works and to George Stuart for generously sharing his collection of images from the Maya codices with us. We received excellent suggestions from three anonymous reviewers, which we have endeavored to incorporate and for which we are also very grateful. Finally, we wish to thank the editors and staff of *Ethnohistory*, especially Matthew Restall and Matthew Padron, for their assistance.

- 1 Variant manuscript spellings include *yax cheel cab* and *yax cheil cab*.
- 2 For more on Yucatec Maya songs and social memory, see Knowlton 2010a.
- 3 See, for example, Walter Mignolo's discussion of how Durán and Sahagún misrepresented central Mexican conceptions of space and time as part of an integrated system expressed visually in terms of a square in indigenous depictions (Mignolo 2003: 231–42).
- 4 The manuscripts known as the Books of Chilam Balam are handwritten *cartapacios* (copybooks) of heterogeneous content. They contain texts relating pre-Hispanic Maya myth, history, calendrics, and ritual alongside texts of European derivation regarding astrological, medicinal, religious, and other topics (Bricker and Miram 2002). They are called Books of Chilam Balam after the *chilan* (interpreter, prophet) of the town of Maní, who is said to have foretold the coming of Christianity to Yucatán (de la Garza 1983: 1:69) and who is cited by name as the source of some of the texts contained within. Books of Chilam Balam are usually identified by the name of the Maya town in which the manuscript was first encountered (such as Kaua or Tizimín), although one (Nah) is named after the family to whom it belonged, and two manuscripts (Pérez and Morley) are named after scholars.
- 5 Trees associated with the four quadrants are also featured in the Maya screenfold codices. Examples may be found on pages 25c–28c and 29a–30a of the Dresden Codex (discussed below).
- 6 See Paxton (2004) for her discussion of correspondences between the “tree” on Madrid 75–76 and the *yax cheel cab* described by Avendaño.
- 7 The three glyphs above Itzamna's outstretched hand represent maize seeds, in addition to being the day *Ik* in the Maya calendar, meaning “wind, breath” and “life.”
- 8 The *yax* designation appears in the Book of Chilam Balam of Tizimín, ms. page 30, line 34, and Codice Pérez ms. pages 78.13, 129.17, 154.36, and 161.28. The contexts in which the *ek* designation appears are found in Miram and Miram (1988: 1:204).
- 9 A deity named *Yax Naab Itzammaaj* “First Itzamna” is said to have overseen the enthronement of the Classic period god GI during mythological time, described in the eighth century AD text of the Platform of Temple XIX at Palenque (Stuart 2005: 66). The name that is paired with *Yax Cocahmut* in the Vienna Dictionary, *Hun Itzan Na* (First Itzam Na), is perhaps a Colonial period derivation of this earlier deity.
- 10 The entry relevant to the Turtle constellation in the Motul dictionary refers to it as *ac ek*, “turtle star” (Ciudad Real 2001: 29), utilizing another word for *turtle* that Marc Zender (2006) argues appears elsewhere in Classic period sources.

Nonetheless, the Postclassic codical sources from Yucatán under discussion here utilize the term *coc*, whose phonetic reading is attested to syllabically in the Madrid Codex (fig. 2).

- 11 This figure was initially identified with Seven Macaw in the Popol Vuh (Taube 1987), who was overly vain and was defeated by the Hero Twins. More recently, however, scholars have associated the Classic period figure with the bird known as Wak in the Popol Vuh, which has been identified as a laughing falcon or hawk (Bassie-Sweet 2008: 140–41). Bassie-Sweet draws a connection between the laughing falcon and Itzamna; both are associated with good omens and are believed to have power as healers.
- 12 Both *che* and *te* (tree) appear in Yucatecan tree names, though *te* is the Ch'olan form.
- 13 The bloodletting implements depicted in relation to the Muluc New Year's ceremonies in the upper and lower registers of Madrid page 36 also call to mind Landa's discussion (see Tozzer 1941: 145).
- 14 Some contemporary Yucatec Maya communities continue to associate crosses with trees (Sosa 1985: 242). Furthermore, inhabitants of the Yucatec Maya town of Xocén, the place where the Talking Cross of the nineteenth-century Caste War originated, refer to their community as "the center of the world." Xocén is well known on the Peninsula as the site of the sanctuary of the *Santa Cruz Tun*, a stone cross of unknown antiquity that receives considerable ritual devotion (Dzib May 1999).
- 15 The use of a number (*uuc* means "seven") to modify a deity name is a common pre-Hispanic Maya practice.
- 16 The *num* spines referred to in the Colonial era *Calepino Maya de Motul* likely belong to the cactus *Acanthocereus pentagonus* (Bricker, Po'ot Yah, and Dzul de Po'ot 1998: 202).

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