

## Changes in Maya Religious Worldview: Liminality and the Archaeological Record

By focusing on Maya ritual symbolism found in the iconography and archaeology of the pre-contact New World, it is possible to isolate elements that significantly changed following the advent of the Spaniards. Among the aspects of Maya religion to be modified following contact were several key components of Maya worldviews—specifically, the symbolism and beliefs relating to life and death. Maya concepts of death were at odds with those stressed by the Catholic Church in the New World, and these indigenous belief systems were affected almost immediately upon contact—so much so that standard ethnohistoric references appear to reflect changes within a generation following the conquest of the Maya by the Spanish. However, other aspects of Maya religion remained or were transformed with less modification.

The changes that occurred in Maya religion are most readily visible when iconographic and archaeological data are compared with historic and ethnographic information. Although both Maya and Spanish cultures believed in some form of upper and lower realms, the implementation of these concepts was quite different in each society. A Maya underworld existed beneath the ground surface and within or beneath bodies of water (especially the sea); Maya underworld symbolism related to watery creatures is common in Preclassic (900 B.C.–A.D. 250), Classic (A.D. 250–A.D.900), and Postclassic (A.D. 900–A.D. 1542) period iconography, as well as in archaeologically recovered caches and burials. However, such watery underworld symbolism is not common in historic or contemporary Maya death ritual, which is instead dominated by considerations and descriptions

of Christian-inspired heaven and hell, polar opposites that were at odds with traditional considerations of the Maya afterlife.

The rapidity of the change involved in Maya religious concepts of death contrasts greatly with Maya symbols and belief systems that could be more easily incorporated into Western models. Indeed, certain aspects of contemporary and historic Maya ritual and worldviews appear to have closer ties with an ancient Maya past and can be related to the archaeological and iconographic data. This includes symbolism relating to four directions and the conjoined concept of center (e.g., Coe 1965; Freidel et al. 1993; Pugh 2001b; Rice 2004). The nuanced nature of this syncretism is apparent in considerations of continuity as well as disjunction (Watanabe 1990). Similar functions may also be achieved by different actions and symbols, as is the case with materially distinct Classic and Postclassic period caching practices (D. Chase 1988).

Although religion is generally thought to be a conservative aspect of culture, changes and replacements in Maya concepts of death make sense in the context of the forced religious conversion of the Maya by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Catholic priests (see also D. Chase and A. Chase 2001). Yet, it makes uncritical consideration of many historic texts, be they written in Spanish or Maya, problematic for two reasons: first, the Maya themselves were sometimes coerced into conforming (at least outwardly) to a new religious paradigm on pain of torture (Clendinnen 1982, 1987; Greenleaf 1994; Tedlock 1993); and, second, priests were actively attempting to identify evidence for prehispanic Christianity (Tozzer 1941:207) and, thus, misrepresented or misunderstood Maya religious symbols, instead translating them into their own frame of reference. Of further concern is the authenticity of Landa's *Relacion de las cosas de Yucatan* (Restall and Chucikak 2002). Similarly, it is evident that Maya culture and religion also changed from the Contact period to the present day (Chance 1996; Chance and Taylor 1985); at no time were the Maya completely uniform in all aspects of culture. These findings underscore the difficulty in the simple application of analogies derived from contemporary or historic ritual practices to the interpretation of past behavior.

### Liminality

Van Gennep employed the concept of liminality in 1907 in order to emphasize the tripartite nature of ritual transitions involved in various rites of passage during an individual's life cycle. Following Arnold Van Gennep (1960), an individual symbolically progressed from one role into a transitional or liminal period until the next role or status was attained. This tripartite division of ritual, specifically as related to mortuary activities, has also been referred to as "rites of separation," "rites of transition," and "rites of re-incorporation" (Metcalf and Huntington 1991; Meyerhoff 1982:116). According to Van Gennep (1960:146), the rites of transition

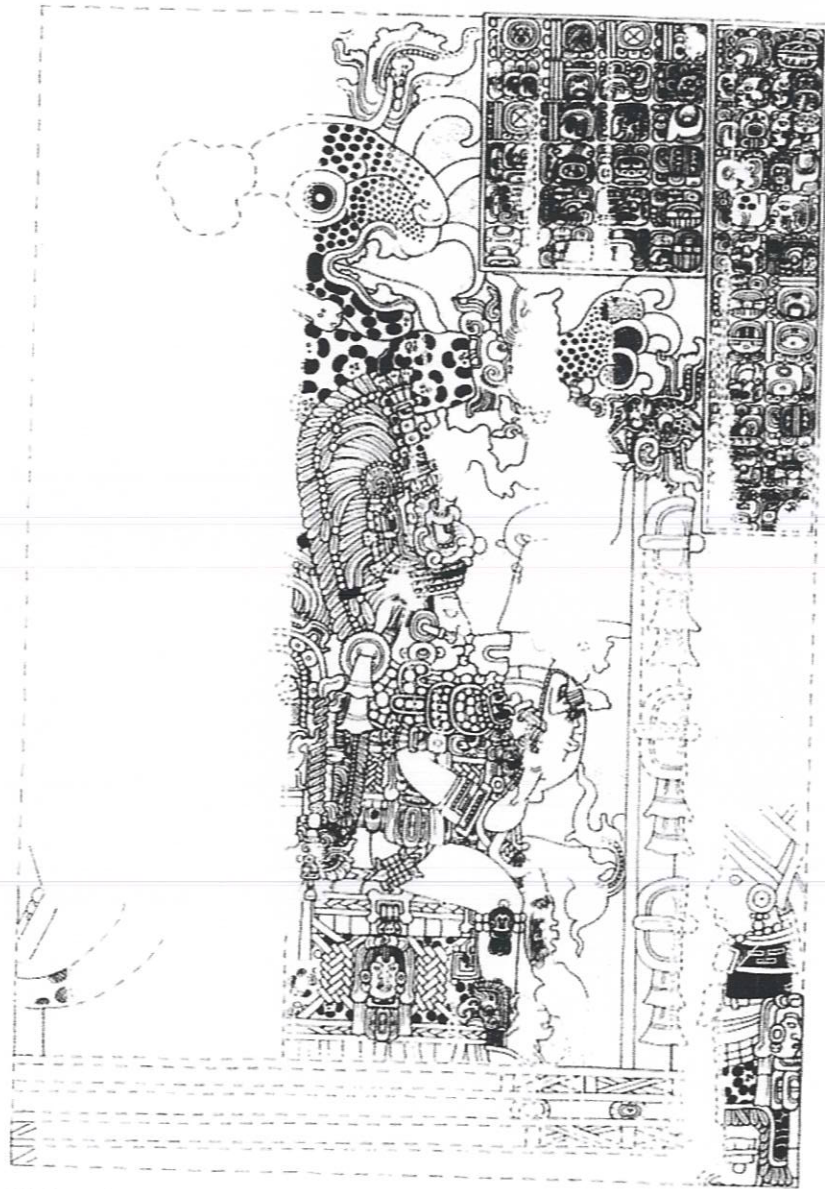
are far more focal and important in funeral customs that either the rites of separation or re-incorporation.

Victor Turner (1969, 1974) expanded van Gennep's concept of liminality from a transitory stage to something more—particularly existing in either people or phenomenon charged with mystery, sacrality, and power. Barbara Meyerhoff (1982:117) points out that this enduring "liminal" category can include "tricksters, clowns, poets, shamans, court jesters, monks, 'dharma bums,' holy mendicants," and even "social movements" or "social principles"; symbols associated with liminality emphasize "innocence, rebirth, vulnerability, fertility, change, emotion, paradox, disorder, anomaly, opposition, and the like." The liminal person stands for "equality, undifferentiated humanness, androgyny, and humility" and exists in stark contrast to "social structure with its emphasis on differentiation, hierarchy, and separation" (Meyerhoff 1982:117).

It is argued here that pre-contact Maya ritual incorporated liminality—not solely as a stage in rites of passage but also as a transcendent state of being—and that this liminality was a critical feature in the ritual integration of community and cosmos. As will be described below, formal Maya iconographic portrayals of the Classic and Postclassic period depict transcendent subjects and events; this focus on liminality helps explicate Maya worldviews. We have expanded on Turner's (1969, 1974) concepts of liminality rather than focusing on "border" individuals and concepts (e.g., Weber 1995) because most of the Maya images present figures central to their society and, presumably, not the multi-cultural, imperialist, and post-colonial situations that are so applicable to modern "border" analysis.

### Pre-Contact and Post-Contact Maya Worldview

There were basic differences between most Contact period Maya and Catholic worldviews related to life and death. Ancient Maya belief systems focused on transitions, liminality, and co-essences, as well as on portals or thresholds for movement among existences. Thus, a jaguar *way* could have a coeval existence and provide support to mortal Maya rulers, as can be seen in a wooden lintel from Late Classic Tikal, Guatemala (Figure 11.1). Caves located on the surface of the earth allowed passage to an underworld (Bassie-Sweet 1996). Chol myth had the sun—itsself transcendent—descending into and rising out of the underworld through a cave that was protected by the jaguar at night and the deer during the day; a ceramic vessel from Early Classic Santa Rita Corozal, Belize, portrays this exact dyad in a mortuary context (D. Chase and A. Chase 2005:124). Catholicism, in contrast, maintained more clear-cut polarity and oppositions. This is most apparent in the disjunctions between heaven and hell—reachable only after death—and their associations with good and evil. Thus, conversion to Catholicism took place in conjunction with modification of traditional Maya concepts relating to life, death, and

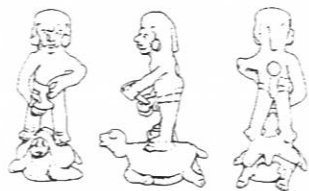


11.1. Carved wooden lintel from Temple 1 at Tikal portraying a jaguar protector or way above and behind a Late Classic ruler (after Jones and Satterthwaite 1982; used with permission from author).

afterlife. However, some aspects of Catholicism—particularly those that more easily were incorporated into Maya worldviews—were readily adopted and modified by the Maya to fit their own concepts. Specific examples include the Holy Trinity, with its co-essences, and the liminal All Souls' Day, now transformed into the popular Day of the Dead (Garciaogodoy 1998). Other aspects of the Maya worldviews that were on the surface more similar to the European worldviews were retained with less modification. Thus, the Maya focus on four directions and a center was easily reconciled with European directionality and with the standard Spanish town plan focused on a central plaza (Lowe 1995), regardless of whether or not the Maya directional symbolism equated with cardinal directions (Coe and Van Stone 2001:123–124; Mathews and Garber 2004; Watanabe 1990).

Our conception of ancient Maya religion and beliefs derives from many different sources: history, archaeology, ethnography, hieroglyphs, iconography, and comparisons to other Mesoamerican cultures—especially the Aztec. Although J. Eric S. Thompson (1970:336–337) commented that “archaeological evidence for the cosmological beliefs of the Maya is not plentiful,” within the last two decades these varying threads of data have been woven into conceptions of a Maya otherworld that is both watery and beneath the world of living humans (D. Chase and A. Chase 1989; Freidel et al. 1993; Miller and Taube 1993). Aspects of the pre-contact Maya underworld may be confused due to the use of imagery found on many forged and repainted vases (e.g., Robicsek and Hales 1981) and/or to the use of historic highland Maya texts to describe pre-contact lowland Maya beliefs and iconography. Although some unprovenanced materials present imagery of a Maya underworld that is found in post-contact texts like the *Popul Vuj*, these same images are unusual in materials recovered from the actual archaeological record. For example, Linda Schele and Mary Miller (1986:267) note that the underworld or “Xibalba of the Classic period . . . was a watery world that could be entered by sinking beneath water or by passing through a maw in the surface of the earth,” but they also followed the ethnohistoric description of Xibalba found in the *Popul Vuj* in seeing the underworld’s “primary characteristic” as “the stench of decaying corpses and rotting blood,” a description potentially attributable to post-conquest influences.

As reconstructed, the ancient Maya view of the world contained three planes of existence: the earth’s surface on which humans interacted; an underworld ruled by nine lords and possibly represented by five levels; and an upperworld with thirteen deities and seven levels. It is assumed that the levels corresponded with the daily stages in the passage of the sun (Thompson 1970:280–282). Four *bacabs* held up the sky (Thompson 1970:276–277), potentially escaping the last world destruction on the back of sea turtles (Figure 11.2; D. Chase and A. Chase 1998). The world on the earth’s surface was one where at least some individuals had companion spirits; in ethnographic literature (Carlsen and Prechtel 1991) these souls could also regenerate. In spite of a sometimes rich and varied portraiture



11.2. Late Postclassic ceramic figurine cache set in the fill of Santa Rita Corozal Structure 213 (see D. Chase and A. Chase 1988:48–51 for further information). Cache consists of three sets each of four animals plus four bacabs performing automutilation astride sea turtles. Another two sets each of four animals plus a human figure seated on a stool blowing a conch shell was located within the urn surrounded by the bacabs. The interior stool covered a quincunx arrangement of four shells with a central piece of jadeite. This figurine cache represents a Maya world creation myth and also demonstrates how the bacabs, who hold up the Maya sky, escaped the flood that destroyed the last world.

of the ancient Maya, it is difficult to pin down more specific Maya beliefs about life and death because detailed information about Contact period Maya religion and worldviews and its subsequent modifications, such as that documented for the Aztec by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1950–1982) and other writers, does not exist. Some academic interpretations of Maya belief systems are based on Aztec data (see Thompson 1970), whereas other interpretations are based on ethnohistoric documents that may already have been influenced by religious conversion (Clendinnen 1982, 1987; Greenleaf 1994; Tedlock 1993) or whose authorship is in question (Restall and Chuckiak 2002). Thus, although the nine lords of the night (or underworld) may have confirmation in glyphic texts naming the *B'olon ti' K'ub* (Montgomery 2002:89–93), in architectural complexes like the “twin-temple” complexes of Tikal (Harrison 1999; Jones 1969), and in physical sculptures that were once set in buildings at Palenque and Yaxchilán (Tate 1992:234), the thirteen levels of the above-world are assumed rather than proved by Maya data. Indeed, some researchers record the existence of only seven upper levels for the Yukatek

Maya (Tozzer 1941:132). That the Maya world existed in three planes, however, can be inferred from iconography, such as the registers in the Postclassic murals of Tulum (Miller 1982) and Santa Rita Corozal (Gann 1900), where the lowest plane always contains watery images.

Classic period stelae often depict three registers. A ruler generally occupies the middle register. He frequently stands on an earth (or *cauac*) monster, representing a portal to the underworld. A cosmic serpent often defines an upper level. Such a tripartite division is also in evidence on Postclassic murals where sea creatures are represented in the lower register and in the upper register celestial serpents can be represented either by a symbolic eye or presented in full body form (see Miller 1982:plates 28 and 40). In the Santa Rita Corozal murals (Gann 1900), darts and knives penetrate the surface, represented by the body of a serpent, perhaps indicative of the warrior's heaven described in Aztec documents (e.g., Thompson 1970)—for such knives are found in the upper register of other Postclassic murals at Tulum (Miller 1982:plate 39). In the middle register of the Santa Rita and Tulum murals, human agents mingled with deities on the surface of the earth. Miller (1982:91) notes that these scenes “are neither the world of the living nor the world of the dead, but is rather a liminal condition in between.” Entrance into the underworld is pictured by intertwined snakes and by representations of caves (Miller 1982:plate 37). Postclassic mural iconography thus defines the three major layers of the Maya universe and implies that entry into the different levels is possible through portals (such as *cauac* monsters) and through sacrifice (as indicated by spears and flint knives).

It is apparent from iconographic representations in murals, stucco friezes, other architectural embellishment, and archaeologically excavated materials that there were ways to penetrate the underworld using portals during both the Classic and Postclassic periods. These portals could be large or small; some were more symbolic than actual. *Cauac* or earth monsters symbolized the entry into the underworld during the Classic period. Rulers stood on these figures. Complete buildings were decorated as these entities. The gaping mouths of *cauac* monsters permitted individuals to symbolically enter this level, but it is also evident that *cauac* monsters literally swallowed the dead, thus bringing them into the underworld. This is physically evident in human skeletal remains encountered within a basal stair mask in Structure B20 at Caracol (D. Chase and A. Chase 1998) and in iconographic representations at Tikal (Miller 1986:41). Doorways framed by open-mouthed creatures indicate that temples could serve a similar purpose. Burials and tombs were carved into the underworld to place the dead, similarly penetrating the underworld; Stephen Houston (1998) has suggested that painted rectangles on tomb walls represented symbolic doors. Formal entranceways to tombs at sites like Caracol and Palenque provided the means to enter and re-enter tombs and the underworld (D. Chase and A. Chase 2003), a phenomenon also noted for Copán (Sharer and Traxler 2003).

Caches served a similar purpose in connecting levels. They could include the simple remains of sacrifice and offerings, sometimes including obsidian or chert blades, but also the physical depiction of deity images often occurred. Maya caches can be extremely complex and exhibit multiple components, providing great insight into Maya cosmology and to changes within their worldviews (D. Chase and A. Chase 1998). Key symbolic aspects of these caches are directionality, layering, and regeneration.

Caches from Classic period contexts at Caracol and Santa Rita Corozal, Belize, have been the subject of substantial previous analysis (D. Chase 1988; D. Chase and A. Chase 1998). Caches have been interpreted as community-centering mechanisms for both the Preclassic and Classic period Maya, largely because they frequently incorporate four examples of a particular object located toward four different sides or directions. Contents include natural objects such as shells or jadeite as well as organic remains like seeds and pine needles (if preserved). Human creations placed in caches include pyrite mirrors and mosaic figures in the Classic period; in the Postclassic period, gold and modeled ceramic figures and figurines were added to the repertoire. Frequently, a central object representing zenith and/or nadir was added to a cache. In the Preclassic and Classic periods, this could be a single green jadeite earflare (D. Chase 1988; A. Chase and D. Chase 1985; D. Chase and A. Chase 1998) or a jadeite mosaic figure (Moholy-Nagy 2006). In the Postclassic period, this could be a central figurine or a diving figure, clearly transitional from an upper level into a lower level (D. Chase 1985b), as is indicated on one of the Tulum murals (Miller 1982:plate 28).

Significantly, items included in Preclassic and Classic period caches at both Caracol and Santa Rita Corozal include underwater symbolism represented by stingray spines, sharks' teeth, coral, and seashells. The Postclassic period caches at Santa Rita Corozal are iconographically clearer as to meaning than their Classic era counterparts. Many of these Postclassic caches likewise contain explicit underworld symbolism represented by modeled ceramic figures of turtles, sharks, crocodiles, and cauc or earth monsters. However, items incorporated may also include a mixture of all three basic world levels, further supporting the role of caches as portals.

Lowland Maya cache contents can be extremely complex. Many caches are in fact layered (D. Chase 1988; Mathews and Garber 2004). A lower level generally consists of pyrite mirrors, green malachite pebbles, and even liquid mercury. The middle level generally consists of a fairly standard set of artifacts, such as "Charlie Chaplins," sea shells, and jadeite or obsidian (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 2005). These artifacts are often spatially arranged to emphasize four directions and a center; this arrangement sometimes is even found in termination rites on the floor of an abandoned building (Taschek and Ball 1999). An upper level may have consisted of perishable items. In one case at Caracol, this upper level was represented by a beehive (D. Chase 1988); in another, above-world and underworld deities are

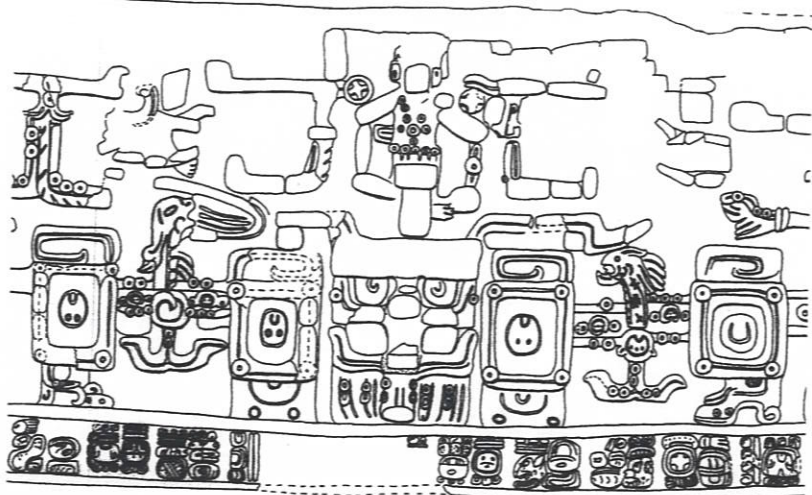
counterposed on the interior lid and interior base of a barrel cache (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987b:47).

Similar layering and directionality is sometimes in evidence in tombs. Painted red lines define doors and also break tomb space into multiple levels (e.g., Houston 1998). At Rio Azul, a painted deity figure and earth monster portrait extend from a tomb's ceiling (Adams 1986:438). In one Rio Azul tomb, hieroglyphs, interpreted as representing the four directions, are correctly painted on the four walls of the chamber (Graham 1986:456), further linking the sun with east, darkness with west, Venus with "south," and the moon with "north." Also present in this chamber are four glyphs painted in the corners representing interstitial directions and perhaps suggesting that the Maya utilized geomancy (e.g., Carlson 1981).

Some scholars do not see the Maya as having used true directionality, preferring to see the four directional glyphs as representing quadrants of the sun's position relative to the earth (e.g., Mathews and Garber 2004; Wantanabe 1990) or solstices (Coe and Van Stone 2001:123–124), but the repetition and standardization of four elements in caches and their overt association with directionality makes a strong case for the significance of geographic directions in Maya worldviews.

Although Postclassic period cache contents and placement may include four-part symbolism, much like their Classic period counterparts, Postclassic caches were likely related to calendric ritual, as has been established by comparing contents and contexts with ethnohistoric descriptions and Contact period codices (D. Chase 1985a, 1985b). An emphasis on the four corners and the center of a community is found in Postclassic rituals (Coe 1965). Many Postclassic caches exhibit a similar directionality tied to quadrants and a center. Four figures can be arranged around a central figure; in one case at Santa Rita Corozal, the central figure was seated on a bench, under which was a small jadeite piece with four small shells forming a quadrant about it (D. Chase and A. Chase 1988:51). This quincunx pattern shows great antiquity and significance in Maya cosmology (e.g., Mathews and Garber 2004). There is also a Postclassic focus on caches associated with the five *wayeb'* days at Santa Rita Corozal. These ritual deposits show some indications of distinct spatial locations at the site and may further be correlated with rituals that are described in Landa (Tozzer 1941) and are painted in Maya codices, linking archaeology to ethnohistory (D. Chase 1985a).

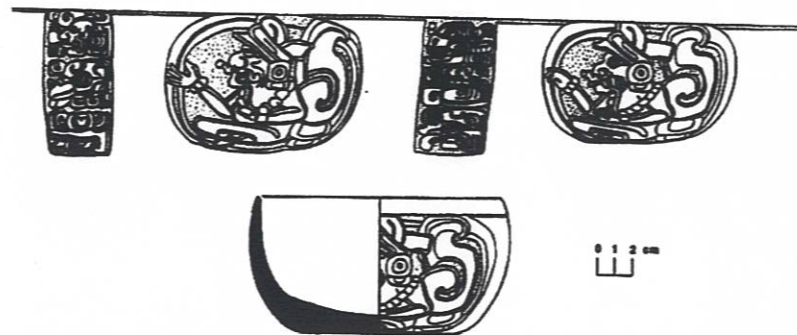
Besides archaeologically recovered caches, Classic period iconography, such as that found on stucco building friezes at Caracol (Figure 11.3), contains "underworld" and potentially transitional symbolism in fish nibbling on water lilies (something that can only physically occur at the transition between water and air) and in ancestral figures resting atop earth monsters, as opposed to being within the underworld itself. Classic period Maya burials, especially those of the elite, frequently incorporate symbols that are often interpreted as underworld or underwater metaphors explicitly through the inclusion of seashells, crocodile or turtle



11.3. Late Classic stucco building frieze from Caracol Structure B16-2nd. Frieze is approximately two meters in height. Liminal Caracol personages are portrayed seated on earth monsters amongst fish nibbling on water lilies. The hieroglyphic text records information relative to at least two Caracol rulers and dates to after A.D. 680.

bones, and stingray spines, as well as metaphorically through painted portals and “planes” in chambers (Houston 1998). Rebirth symbolism may also be present in depictions on offerings; this specifically occurs in the inclusion of the potentially liminal old God N emerging from a seashell, symbolizing rebirth (see D. Chase and A. Chase 2005:119 for more detail; height = 8 cm).

In contrast to archaeological and iconographic data, historic and contemporary rituals infrequently mention underwater creatures as aspects of the underworld (see Gossen 2002). In Chan Kom and other Maya communities, ceremonies are conducted related to the four corners of town and the four corners of fields (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962; Vogt 1993 [1976]). However, the actual offerings and timing for these offerings are different from their preceding counterparts. Early historic descriptions, such as those by Landa, rarely mention underworld sea creatures—already suggesting the blurring between Christian and Maya symbols and conceptions of heaven and hell, at least in the minds of Spanish priests (Tozzer 1941:132n616, 207n1154). But, these descriptions do mention other symbols or



11.4. A carved stone vessel included within an Early Classic tomb from Santa Rita Corozal with two representations of the old God N emerging from a seashell, symbolizing rebirth (see D. Chase and A. Chase 2005:119 for more detail; height = 8 cm).

metaphors related to rain and agricultural fertility that may appear to have been less directly affected by conversion. It is evident that the Maya were active participants in their own acculturation—they accepted, rejected, and modified Catholic symbols and provided their own interpretation of Christianity (Carmack et al. 1996:162–172; Chance 1996; Madsen 1967:384). However, conversion to Catholicism was not possible with traditional beliefs regarding life and death intact.

### The Liminal Maya

As noted above, a number of scholars (such as Metcalf and Huntington [1991], Turner [1969], and Van Gennep [1960]) have focused on the liminal aspects of beliefs and rituals surrounding human lifespan transitions—and especially the liminal aspects of death and funerary ritual. Liminality, although inclusive of thresholds, entrances, and portals, specifically focuses on the transition of humans with regard to important life events. Death ritual provides perhaps the clearest example of liminality. In many cultures, an individual's existence continues beyond physiological death. They may no longer breathe and their hearts may not pump blood through their bodies, but they are not yet gone. Their souls or essences survive. Sometimes these liminal beings continue both to inhabit the world of the living for a substantial period of time and to have an impact on the day-to-day lives of their family members. Conversely, living beings could also occupy liminal realms, as may happen in near-death situations. It has been argued that liminality was an important aspect of at least some ancient Maya funerary rituals allowing transition from the world of the living to the underworld (Freidel et al. 1993). Multiple individual interments with disarticulated human remains at Caracol have been used to suggest

the existence of double funerals that reflected a period of liminal existence before final interment (D. Chase and A. Chase 2004b).

The use of underworld and above-world symbolic metaphor by the ancient Maya is consistent with worldviews that join the worlds of the living and the dead in a constant cycle of rebirth. Whether pre-contact Maya religion was “world-rejecting” or whether it was “world-maintaining” (Bellah 1964) is an important, but difficult and potentially unanswerable, question. The Catholicism of the Spanish explorers maintained that the next world was a different and better place (thus termed as a “world-rejecting” religion), but it is not clear that the same can be said for that of the pre-contact Maya. The Maya, instead, conceived of a world that was a conjoined multiple-level cosmos.

Thompson (1970:300–304) combined ethnographic and ethnohistoric sources from highland and lowland Maya peoples to reconstruct an ancient Maya view of death, suggesting that the lowest level of the underworld was called Metnal or Xibalba and that access to the underworld was gained by a long journey that included crossing a body of water with the aid of dogs. It appears from these descriptions that the dead also passed through a cycle of rebirth much like that of the daily path of the sun, first moving into the underworld and then ending up in the heavens. Parts of this reconstruction are obviously influenced by post-conquest Christianity, but some of this scenario is likely to be pre-contact in origin.

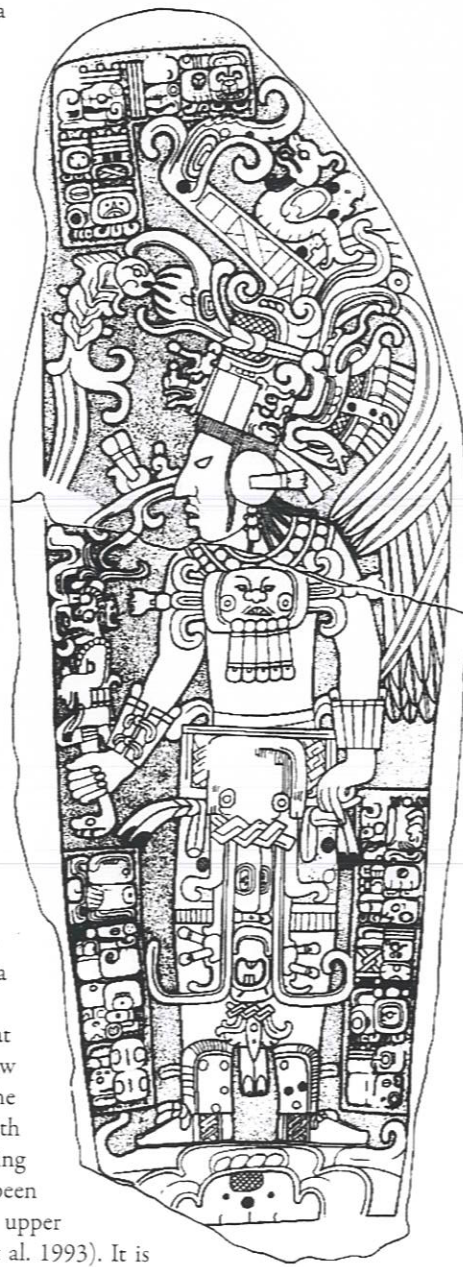
There are potentially world-rejecting aspects of other Western Hemisphere religious systems in the “willing” sacrifices of Mesoamerican peoples, especially as described for the Aztec (Evans 2004:503–506). Whether this attribution is appropriate for the Maya is unknown. However, even in Central México, archaeological evidence indicates that earlier sacrificial victims at Teotihuacán were bound, indicating that they did not go to death “willingly” (Cabrera et al. 1991). Maya sacrifice was likely tied to both worldly and otherworldly ends (e.g., Demarest 1984; Schele 1984) and can be particularly tied to warfare and politics (A. Chase et al. 1991; Webster 2000). Perhaps supporting the idea of a single-cosmos, as opposed to world-rejecting, philosophy is the potential of certain liminal creatures—such as celestial serpents, cauc monsters, dwarfs, and even the sun itself—to exist in more than one plane and the ability of non-liminal beings to use portals, actions, or implements to accomplish a similar transgression. If Maya worldview is this-worldly or world-maintaining and focused on a single, yet multi-level, cosmos, the focus on liminal metaphor and the distinction with world-rejecting Christian views of life and death is further amplified.

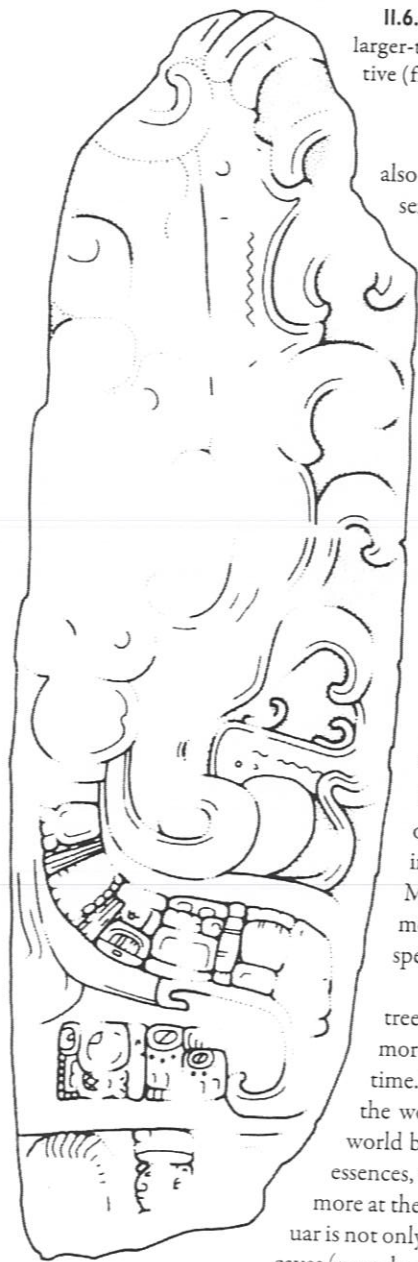
Maya iconography contains numerous examples of the comingling of upper, middle, and lower world creatures and images. Individuals carved on stone monuments openly employed symbols that indicated their existence between two worlds (such as fish nibbling on water lilies or snakes that operate both in and out of the earth [see Figure 11.5]). Other examples of liminality include birds, like herons, that

11.5. Late Classic carved stone Stela 7 from Machaquila, Guatemala (Graham 1967:fig. 57; courtesy MARI, Tulane University). The ruler's headdress exhibits both a sky serpent and a fish nibbling on a water lily. The ruler also stands on a watery cave (Bassie-Sweet 1996:71).

are comfortable in both air and water and dwarfs who are capable of going from the world of the living to the world of the dead (A. Chase and D. Chase 1994). The images and hieroglyphs are also ripe with fertility symbols related to both corn and to scattering (e.g., Schele and Miller 1986; Thompson 1970). Thus, Classic Maya worldviews appear to have centered on rulers, who apparently could exist in multiple levels, margins, and worlds. The androgyny of some of the carved portrayals of these rulers has led to extended discussion over whether or not the individuals portrayed were male or female (e.g., Joyce 2000). Much of the existing portraiture of these rulers depicts them in a transitional state.

It has long been known that the Maya used metaphor to draw connections among things. The ceiba was seen as a world tree—with its roots in the ground but yet having branches in the sky. Thus, it has been viewed as a portal between the upper and lower worlds (e.g., Freidel et al. 1993). It is

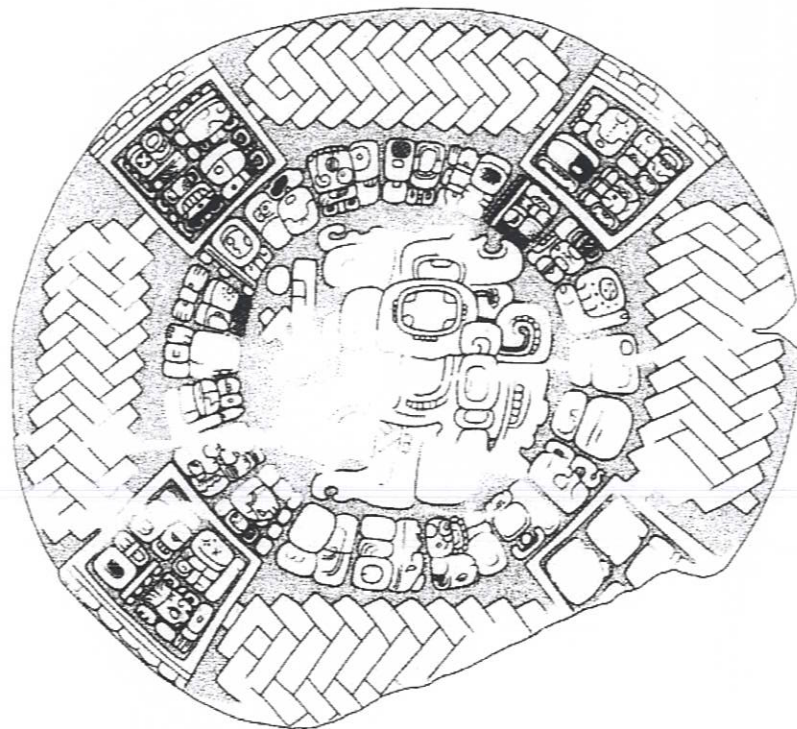




11.6. Stela 18 from Caracol, Belize, depicting a larger-than-life serpent rearing above a bound captive (from A. Chase and D. Chase 1987a:8).

also evident that the Maya symbolically represented transitional thresholds—caves were portals to the underworld and temple doorways represented entrances into symbolic earth monster (or *witz*) entities rising through the ground surface. That the individuals carved on stone stelae and altars were transitional is sometimes explicitly shown. One stela at Caracol directly substitutes an up-ended vision serpent rearing above a bound captive for what should have been a human (Figure 11.6). An altar from Guatemala (Figure 11.7), which would have been paired with a stela depicting an individual, portrays the conjunction of rulership (in the form of mat symbols) with the underworld (referenced in the central image of the “7 black-yellow place”; Freidel et al. 1993) and with centrality (in the form of the quadripartite organization of the image). Recognizing this intentional Maya focus on liminal, or transitional, metaphors provides an even greater perspective to their ancient worldviews.

Many Maya symbols, such as world trees, maize, jaguars, and caves, exist in more than one place or “plane” at the same time. They not only connect the underworld, the world of living humans, and the above-world but they are themselves transitional co-essences, existing not in one place but in two or more at the same time (Figure 11.8). Thus, the jaguar is not only guardian of the night and entrances to caves (portals to the underworld) but also is an animal



11.7. Altar 1 from Zacpetén, Guatemala, illustrating a quincunx pattern of hieroglyphs interspersed with elite mat symbols; the central element portrays a mythological place in the Maya underworld (after Rice 2004:161; used with permission from author). The altar, which probably once was paired with a stela, would have served to reaffirm the liminal aspects of Maya rulership.

that is usually seen at twilight and in the early morning hours—physically times of transition between day and night. The way—often jaguars themselves (Grube and Nahm 1994)—may be creatures from the world of the ancestors (Calvin 1997) or contemporary animal souls existing apart from their human companions but with fates intimately conjoined (Gossen 1975). The known Classic period depictions of way on lintels located in the thresholds or doorways of major temples at Tikal (Coe and Shook 1961; Figure 11.1) and on pottery included as funerary offerings (Adams 1963) reinforce their metaphorical coexistence in the Maya world. Other common symbols include crocodiles and turtles. Both may be found in the water and on land, but in addition, both are often seen at the surface of the water—above and below at the same time. At Tikal, the exact center of the Classic period site is





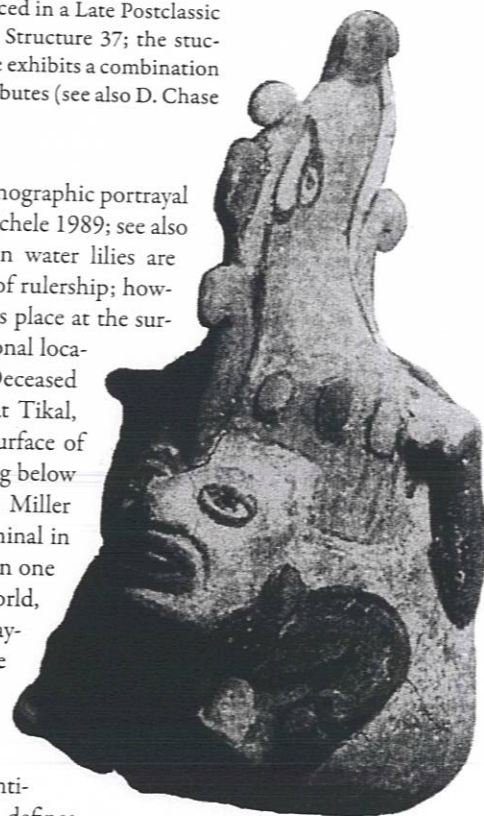
11.8. Ceramic vessel from Uaxactún, Guatemala, showing a dead individual descending into the underworld (from Smith 1934). A serpent forms the transitory earth surface, and two liminal jaguars and a liminal human are also portrayed. It is suspected that the imagery relates to lost mythology.

ritually delineated through the physical caching of crocodiles on the four sides of a sacred space (D. Chase and A. Chase 1998:326).

Other symbols that may initially be assumed to indicate single contexts only also may metaphorically refer to transitions. Sharks, for example, are represented in their entirety as ceramic cache figures in the Postclassic period and symbolically by teeth only in Preclassic and Classic period caches. Although sharks require water to survive, they also are liminal or transitional figures. Their single back fins break the surface of the water, extending into the air. Snakes exist on the ground yet also crawl into the earth or onto trees in the sky; their existence in three planes is explicitly

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11.9. A ceramic diving figure placed in a Late Postclassic cache from Santa Rita Corozal Structure 37; the stuccoed and post-fire painted figure exhibits a combination of maize and earth monster attributes (see also D. Chase and A. Chase 1988:39).



acknowledged through the iconographic portrayal of the Maya "vision serpent" (Schele 1989; see also Figure 11.6). Fish nibbling on water lilies are often assumed to be a symbol of rulership; however, the action itself only takes place at the surface of the water—the transitional location between water and air. Deceased rulers are depicted in canoes at Tikal, at one point floating on the surface of the water but ultimately sinking below it (Coggins 1975; Schele and Miller 1986). Some caches may be liminal in exhibiting symbols of more than one realm (underworld, above-world, and human level) or in portraying figures that combine the imagery of humans and deities (Figure 11.9). Analyzing Maya deities is difficult because they did not have single discrete identities; Eva Hunt (1977:55–56) defines Maya religion as pantheistic, "neither polytheistic nor monotheistic," with multiple and fluidly changing aspects of deities that could be combined and merged.

If one views ancient Maya worldviews with regard to death and afterlife from the perspective of liminality, other aspects of ancient Maya culture become clearer. Interment of ancestors within still-functional residential plazuela groups (and contrary to Landa's [Tozzer 1941] assertions relating to household abandonment at the time of death, statements possibly formulated in conformance with Christian thought relative to cemeteries) reinforces the coexistence of the deceased and the living. Tombs with entranceways or psychoducts are necessary thresholds for the deceased, providing both access to the world of the living and passage to the underworld. Interments containing multiple individuals and disarticulated human remains in interments belie the unity of the family group in life and death—as well as the possibility of second funerals to signal the disjunction between biological and spiritual

death (D. Chase and A. Chase 2003). Reentry into chambers by either descendants or liminal creatures like dwarfs to gain relics or disinter ancestors reflects the ability of the living to interact with the dead (A. Chase and D. Chase 1994) or with other transcendent and/or liminal beings.

### Conclusion

Certain aspects of Classic and Postclassic Maya beliefs and practices continued into early historic and contemporary ritual; however, others changed dramatically after Spanish contact. Continuity is perhaps most apparent in those aspects of Maya belief that were compatible with or adaptable to European thought and Catholicism. Threads of continuity are apparent in the use of four directions conjoined with centering and a focus on contemporary agricultural and community rituals (Madsen 1967). As has been aptly noted, syncretism also occurred; because of this, continuities and discontinuities are often difficult to discern (Watanabe 1990). All Souls' Day took on a new significance in the New World context where ancestors are liminal creatures who can impact the lives of their descendants and who must be supplicated to avoid calamity (Garciaodoy 1998). Community-focused ritual is a key element of both pre- and post-contact Maya society; however, contexts varied. Caching and burial practices conjoined the community in shared identity and family-centered ritual in Classic period Caracol (D. Chase and A. Chase 2004a). Late Postclassic Santa Rita Corozal community integration was achieved through a ritual cycle that involved cache and censer deposition (D. Chase 1985a). Contemporary Maya communities achieve similar integration through *cofradías* (Cancian 1965; Chance and Taylor 1985; Watanabe 1995).

Key elements of ancient Maya worldviews were changed dramatically with Spanish contact and conversion to Catholicism. Specifically, conceptions of death and the afterlife became markedly altered. Many metaphors—such as those focusing on a watery underworld—appear to have dropped out of the symbolic repertoire shortly after contact. Once key portals to the Maya underworld, earth monsters became equated with Ladino Earth Lord plantation owners (Watanabe 1990). However, conjoined concepts of co-essences and companion souls were retained, as was the conception of the cyclical nature of life and death.

Archaeological data provide clear clues to the continuity and discontinuity of Maya culture—beyond simple changes in artifact or architectural styles. These data draw into sharp focus the changes in Maya ritual symbolism that accompanied sixteenth- and seventeenth-century culture contact, as well as the varied acceptance of Christian beliefs and symbolism. This analysis indicates the importance of considering pre-contact metaphor as inherently focused on transitions, liminality, thresholds, and co-essences. For the most part, the ancient Maya maintained a “this-worldly” religious tradition. Maya cosmology was based on a conception of regen-

erative cycles that ranged from daily passage of the sun to human life and death to the long-term passage of time. Liminal metaphor was used as a means to integrate the living and the dead, the community, and the cosmos within an interconnected and constantly cycling reality. Contextual analysis underscores the difficulty both in analyzing ancient Maya ritual and in assuming that analogies derived from contemporary or even historically recorded ritual practices can be used directly to interpret past behavior without cautious review and testing with pre-contact archaeological data.

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