

MAYA KINGS AS SHAMANS AT THE DOOR OF THE UNDERWORLD CEREMONIES WHICH HAVE SURVIVED TILL TODAY

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When Teobert Maler began his Maya studies 130 years ago he was fascinated by the rock drawings and carvings. He took photographs (with equipment then available) and made accurate drawings. He also copied glyphs with great diligence. Although those on monumental stairs and stelae are quite eroded scholars still rely on his illustrations. Only in recent years did the Maya research make rapid strides due to the "breaking of the code"—and thus the Maya culture, which is still alive, has been assigned its proper status in precolumbian history.

It is principally the merit of Linda Schele who gathered till 1973 in the Mesas Redondas de Palenque a group of young archaeologists and epigraphers who collaborate enthusiastically on that theme. Her death at age 55 represents a tragic loss for Maya and Mesoamerican studies.

Schele writes, "The writing was the power of the upper class, it was the armature of wealth, prosperity, and the organized labor of the state. It was the wellspring from which flowed knowledge and lore, orally repeated and memorized by the common folk in their songs and prayers".

The end of literacy occurred centuries before the conquest, with the great collapse of the southern kingdoms in the ninth century A.D. To what happened we have no final answer but many clues. At Copan the densest population created sickness and hard life. In the central Petén the raised fields were neglected during conditions of social strife, such as the growing military competition between late Classic ruling lineages likely led to their rapid erosion and decay. The farmers moved out and became refugees in other areas.

The collapse came also of a crisis of faith: ecological and political disaster, could be placed as the failure of the King to sustain his privileged communication with the gods and the ancestors. But when the kings became conquerors, they could never speak persuasively to the ancestors of the kings they had captured and slain! Each king wielded the written word and history to glorify his own ancestors and his own living people. Let us go back to the beginning.

The Popol Vuh is the authentic myth of the Indios, legends handed down (orally) by tradition first and written down later. They tell us about the first gods, the creation of the cosmos and numerous

attempts to bring other beings into this world. Today we live in the fourth generation.

There were--there are always--holy places in the universe created by the gods: waterholes, volcanous, mountain tops, doors to the other-world by which humans could communicate with their gods. It was not a matter for everybody; Only the Kings who were almost holy themselves could regenerate the creation story in the present time on selected holy days, on recurring calendar dates, together with particularly suitable star constellations and after lengthy preparations.

During these ceremonies the kings received power from the gods to have command over the fate of their people, a power over others which basically consisted of faith. And this faith built mountains--the pyramids!

These pyramids, topped by a sacred temple, were built neither by slaves nor by paid labor. The entire people worked together, piling stone after stone until the monument was completed, then the king would wait for the most favorable star constellation for its inauguration. The gods also made a contribution for they were made to feel bound to by means of blood. They loved blood, they fed on blood; for that reason human sacrifices were made to them. And better yet if those victims were kings defeated in war. (Many stelae show the victims' names engraved on the thigh.) It also happened that the king himself sacrificed his blood--which is the scene of "blood-letting" pictured on a great number of stelae. The king perforated his tongue or penis with a stingray spine or a silex knife, a ritual that would take place in his lofty sanctuary.

Black drops of blood trickle down his legs onto a pile of paper strips in a brazier, then the paper is set on fire. Black smoke rises, growing into a manifestation of the Vision Serpent, with the head of a deity or ancestor emerging from the creature's wide open jaws.

It is this very mythical head that gives orders to the king how to rule his people, to build cities and to leave them again. The power of the empire lies in the faith in this authority. The loss of blood causes the ruler to go off in trance, he steps up to the threshold dripping with blood, and the masses down rejoice, moved just as much.

Only after the translation of singular glyphs such as "bloodletting", "capture of", "birth", "accession to the throne"--mainly in the form of verbs--were the scholars able to figure out scenes whose meaning used to be guessed at only.

Fic.

Fic. 2

Dancing could also induce a trance.

Only in 1990 Nikolai Grube was able to decipher the glyph --ak'ot-- "dance" in the language of inscriptions. The representation of dancing kings and nobles with the heel of one foot raised and the fingers contorted bear witness that the king's body functioned as a vessel for awesome spiritual forces. He affirmed his power to control these forces through dancing on the top of his pyramid or in the plazas of his city. And the folk danced, too.

F:G3

F:G4

Many years later the conquistadores arrived at the deserted sacred temples they were startled at the sight of the "idolos" spattered by and fed with blood. We know what happened then. But that was not the end—faith cannot be eradicated and replaced by something new from one day to another. A large number of indians, yet not all of them, received baptism. Almost all hid their sacred objects and made sacrifices to them in secret. At 1990 Teobert Maler notes in his diary on the Americanists' Congress:

"Zelia Nuttall hatte im Staatsarchiv die Akten eines endlosen Prozesses gefunden, der im Jahre 1539 von der Inquisition geführt worden war: mehrere Indios wurden beschuldigt, 5 Idole aus dem Tempel des Huitzilopochtli versteckt zu haben. Montezuma hatte nämlich im Jahre 1520 kurz vor seiner Ermordung, seinen Getreuen befohlen, die "Götter so zu verstecken, dass sie niemals in die Hände der Eroberer fallen sollten!" Und das wurde dermassen gut ausgeführt, dass diese Statuen bis zu jener Zeit (1910) nicht gefunden wurden. Bischof Zumarraga verhörte damals eine Unmenge von Zeugen. Jeder wusste, worum es sich handelte, jeder sagte bereitwillig aus. Es war immer dasselbe: Er hätte wohl die Götter gesehen, er hätte sie auch in seinem Haus gehabt--selbstverständlich bevor er die heilige Taufe empfang--man hätte sie verehrt und mit Kopal beräuchert. Dann wurden sie von dem und dem abgeholt! Die Inquisitoren verfolgten von Ort zu Ort, von Haus zu Haus den Weg und den Aufenthalt der teuflischen Idole, bis sich deren Spur verlor, und nicht einmal unter Folterqualen der Hüter des Geheimnisses herauszubekommen war. Die skulpturen harren ihrer Entdeckung."

This happened in Mexico City, at the time the situation in Yucatan, however, was even worse!

Let us return to the old legends and their reference to today. Located in the center of the world is a Ceiba tree (*Chorisia Insignis*), a sacred tree which can be found today in the center of every village. It is the World Tree Wakah-Chan. When the Temple of the Foliated Cross, named after the representation on the main wall, was discovered

F:G5

F:G1

F:G2

in Palenque, not much could be made of the intricate depiction. Now all the pertinent glyphs have been deciphered we know that the temple of the Foliated Cross on the eastern sunrise side depicts images of the First-Tree-Precious maize plant, the first true mountain, which contained the maize used to mold human flesh in the last Creation, and the shell that opens into the otherworld in the sacred space of the first Mother and the first Father. Pakal and his son Chan Balam erected three temples in the pattern of the "three stone thrones of Creation which centered the cosmos and allowed the sky to be lifted from the Primeordial Sea". It was in those temples that kings could communicate with their gods.

Linda Schele resumes important concepts about the holy tree. She states: "The pathways connecting ancient words and concepts and their modern counterparts are particularly evident in the striking resemblance between the World Tree and the modern Christian Maya Cross. These Maya "crosses" had the same basic shape and were as elaborately decorated as those gracing the altars of large European churches. The carvings of these ancient trees are outlined with reflective mirrors, and they wear jade necklaces and loinclothes as if they were living beings. Modern Christian Maya Crosses, both in Yucatan and Chiapas, are decorated with mirrors, and dressed in clothing or flowers and pine boughs. They too are considered to be living beings".

"The names of the ancient trees are as important as their appearance. The hieroglyphic name of the bejewelled and bemirrored World Tree was Wakah-Chan. Spelling the syllab's in the glyph they are homophoneous with the word wakah, meaning "raised up". The name of the tree literally meant "raised up sky". The classic texts at Palenque tell us that the central axis of the cosmos was called the "raised up sky" because First Father had raised it at the beginning of the creation in order to separate the sky from the earth. Each World Tree was therefore a representation of the axis of creation."

Classic artisans also depict the World Tree as a luxurious maize plant, havy with ribs of corn, often depicted in personified form as the face of the Maize God. At Palenque and Copan eight century scribes called this maize tree the Na-Té-Kan, First Tree Precious. By combining the Maya Conquest period stories of first Father given in the Popol Vuh with the textual evidence and images of the classic period we can say that these maize trees symbolizes the original act of creation sacrifice and rebirth. First Father was also the Maize God,

Hun-Nal-Ye, "One-Maize-Revealed", and was depicted both in his human form and as this tree. After First Father's defeat and sacrifice of the Lords of the Underworld, of Xibalba, he was reborn as maize and God Almighty as gracia "grace", showing that they understood maize and divinity to be the same substance, a concept deeply rooted in their mythological past. P.C.7

Linda Schele with her deep understanding of Maya mentality, who had to put up with the negative experiences of the reality under the Spanish domination, says that perhaps the most dramatic example of this transformation is embodied in the Maya adaptation of the Cross of Christ, the central symbol of the European domination. The Maya promptly appropriated and reinterpreted the most Christian of all symbols by merging it with the World Tree of the Center..... "Their own meaning of "Cross" persisted in the same way as other spiritual traditions! The tradition of holy men, h-men, Shamans-

As a social institution Shamans help their neighbors in their communities. A state of grace allows them to move freely beyond the ordinary world -- to deal with gods, demons and ancestors and other unseen, but potent beings. They recreate the order of cosmos again. Through participation in these rituals, when the Shamans call Ch'a Chak to bring rain, or when they heal a sick child, or bless a new home, the Maya both exalted and ordinarily reaffirm their cultural deepest truths. The greatest Shaman of all and the Patron of his human counterparts was ITZAMNA. He was the principal God in Yucatec cosmos at the time of the Spaniards arrival. F.C.6

130 years ago, when Teobert Maler was copying a painting on a steep rockwall over Lake Pethà showing, what he called, "a monster with a human head in his fauces", exited Indians approached in a canù and shouted: "No hombre - quietate de ahí - es mi santo - es el Jesus Maria de nosotros - vâmonos - vamonos - mucha agua por el mal corazón de mi santo"! P.C.8

The design was first interpreted as ITZAMNA, the magician, who appears sometimes in the form of an Iguana. Shall we call it now a VISION SERPENT? Anyway, isn't it a vivid example of religious syncretism?

Festivals are held at certain intervals in villages as San Juan Chamula in the highlands of Chiapas, a region that was in the headlines of the international press in January 1994 due to the government's last cruel acts of bloody oppression of the rural population. Today no more stelae can be erected in memory of a victory, an accession to the throne or the foundation of a city. People commemorate the past,

which always begins with the story of the creation: death and rebirth of the gods and the recurring repetition of these events through the suffering of mankind.

It takes a cargoholder one year to organize the festival of Crazy February. A pageant of the five dark days memorizes all the conflicts, in which the people of Chamula have participated. The persons involved don masks and historic costumes. We see Cortez and his mistress Malinche, here named Nana Maria Cocorina, who is dressed in Spanish style with a veil and is constantly waving a censer with incense. This humorous representation of tragic events help them deal with grief. And this suffering people does have humor! FIG.

In view of the buffoonery of the Crazy Carnival commemorating the "five dark days" outside of the Calendar Round it would be wrong, however, to disregard the "sacred" and the traditional, elaborate plan. In all ceremonies the Shamans and in this case the cargoholders are entrusted with centering the Navel of the world, were the central axes from north to south and from east to west, from the rising and the setting sun, intersect. The apex of the festival of Chamula is the final scene in front of the church, were the passions interpreting Jesus Christ, and their group run over burning thatches spread on the ground: the path of God, which represents the road of the sun, a symbol of Christ in the sky. Running through clouds of thick smoke the men carry the banners of the Sun-Christ across the flames and red-hot coals, east to west and back again. All this is performed three times in a row.

As to my personal opinion I would say, I am not irreligious, but I am very sceptic about esoterics in general, and brujos, sorcerers and magicians in particular. I heard and read a lot, but I never met a "Don Ernesto" or some Ghurdjiev" and above all I did not try hallucinogenics. But what I saw in Chiapas is different, also different from the Tijuca-forest in Rio de Janeiro and the macumba-session for foreigners. So when I tried to get some information from the people in San Cristóbal, they did not understand what I wanted. "Quiére a algún para rezar"?

There were so many things to learn and to see for me.

One day early in the morning I came to the beautiful church of San Lorenzo, with its mercado in front of it, where the women sit in the grass and offer their multicoloured handwoven textiles for sale. I stepped through the door in the splendid, baroque - perhaps a little bombastic front. The inside was dark. From a side aisle I heard a monotonous murmur in cadences. A girl was kneeling silently on the ground. An old woman tenderly passed a handful of grass over her

back. Other women stood around. They had bottles of some liquid and lunch bags. I wondered but it did not really touch me.

At San Juan Chamula everything was different. I entered the church. The first thing I noticed was a group of young girls who piled up blades of grass with their little gracious feet to make cushions to kneel on. The grass however was actually heaps of needles of the Ocote Pines. A lot of people were sitting in circles on the pavement. I looked for the altar, but there was none. Where it was supposed to be, I saw a short man kneeling, bowing often to some unseen entity and singing a monotonous song with his deep voice. I did not understand the language, but the words and the melody seemed repetitive. The people sitting around him passed each other their bottles, tortillas and enchiladas. They talked and did not behave at all as if they were in church! To my European mentality all this seemed very curious!

In the evening, I stayed in Na-Bolon, the characteristic old hacienda with the Museum and the Centro de Estudios Mayas of Trudy Duby-Blom, a lot of my questions were answered: At present there is a silent understanding at San Giovanni Chamula between the padres and the Mayan souls, providing space and coexistence for both and for Jesus Christ and the holy Mary, for San Juan and Santa Rosa!

FIG 10

What I had observed in the church of Chamula was a ritual setting which is supposed to please the deities, although they are not addressed directly. But they like the heat produced by the multivocality of songs and the redundancy of prayers. The deities consume essences and humans consume substances. For that reason incense, tobacco, rum and fireworks, flowers and leaves accompany Chamula rituals. They emit the smoke, aroma, and sound which serves as the god's food. The blood for the sacrifices is that of chickens only.

The couplets with their formal dyadic phrases will vary through substitutions of words from setting to setting, depending of the time of the year and the particular occasion. All these types of songs are learned by processes of socialisation and language acquisition.

Specialized knowledge of cargoholders is generally passed on from father to son, by listening in the role of an assistant at cargo functions. Meanwhile Shamans, who are not Lords anymore as in classic times, and not rich, are supposed to have acquired their knowledge by revelation. Because their knowledge is believed to be a personal matter. Often aspiring Shamans are sons of Shamans and have assisted their fathers in their curing missions, and have also learned the correct language for rendering holy and the ritual formulae of petition, or have had revelatory dreams - but when they don't have the charisma and the

FIG 11

imponderable power of being holy, which is recognized by their community they don't share a part in the exiguous number of the real great Shamans.

It is only a question of faith - the faith which moves the mountains.

Illustrations

- Fig. 1 Bloodletting. Lintel 17 of Yaxchilan
Vision Serpents Lintel 15 of Yaxchilan
- Fig.2 Glyphs on Lintels and Steps at Yaxchilan
all drawings by Ian Graham
From the Book: A FOREST OF KINGS, by Linda Schele & David Freidel 1990
- Fig.3 Amelia Stele, Dancer. Graffito at Tikal in "Maler's Palace" in
TIKAL COPAN by Nicholas Hellmuth 1978
- Fig.4 Holmul Dancer, Vase, Maya Lowlands, Late Classic. From PRINCIPAL
YOUNG LORD, by Nicholas Hellmuth (Photoarchive Hellmuth 453027-7)
- Fig.5 Temple of the Foliated Cross. Photograph Teobert Maler (magnesium-
light) from AUF DEN SPUREN DER MAYA, Andreas Herrmann, 1992
- Fig. 6 Wakah-Chan, the World Tree Na-Te'-K'an, the Foliated Cross
In MAYA COSMOS, by David Freidel, Linda Schele & Joy Parker
- Fig. 7 Young Lord rising from the turtle and being attended to by the
headband-partners. Late Classic Petén. in PRINCIPAL YOUNG LORD
by Nicholas Hellmuth
- Fig. 8 Lake Petha. a) Maler's design. b) photograph c) Robert Bruce's
design. In LAKE PETHA AND THE LOST MURALS OF CHIAPAS; J. David
Wonham (Pre-Columbian Art Institute)
- Fig. 9 Design from Mariano Lopez Calixto: Nana Maria Cocorina ...
In Victoria Bricker, RITUAL HUMOR in HIGHLAND CHIAPAS
- Fig.10 A MAN ENCOUNTERS SAN JUAN. in CHAMULAS in the WORLD of the SUN
Harry G. Gossen. 1974
- Fig.11 A CHAMULA CHART OF THE UNIVERSE, by Mariano Lopez Calixto. in
CHAMULAS in the WORLD of the SUN. Harry G. Gossen 1974

Lady I



Bl
of

The Events
Leading to
Bird-Jaguar'
Accession

Lady Balam of Ix Witz Bird-Jaguar



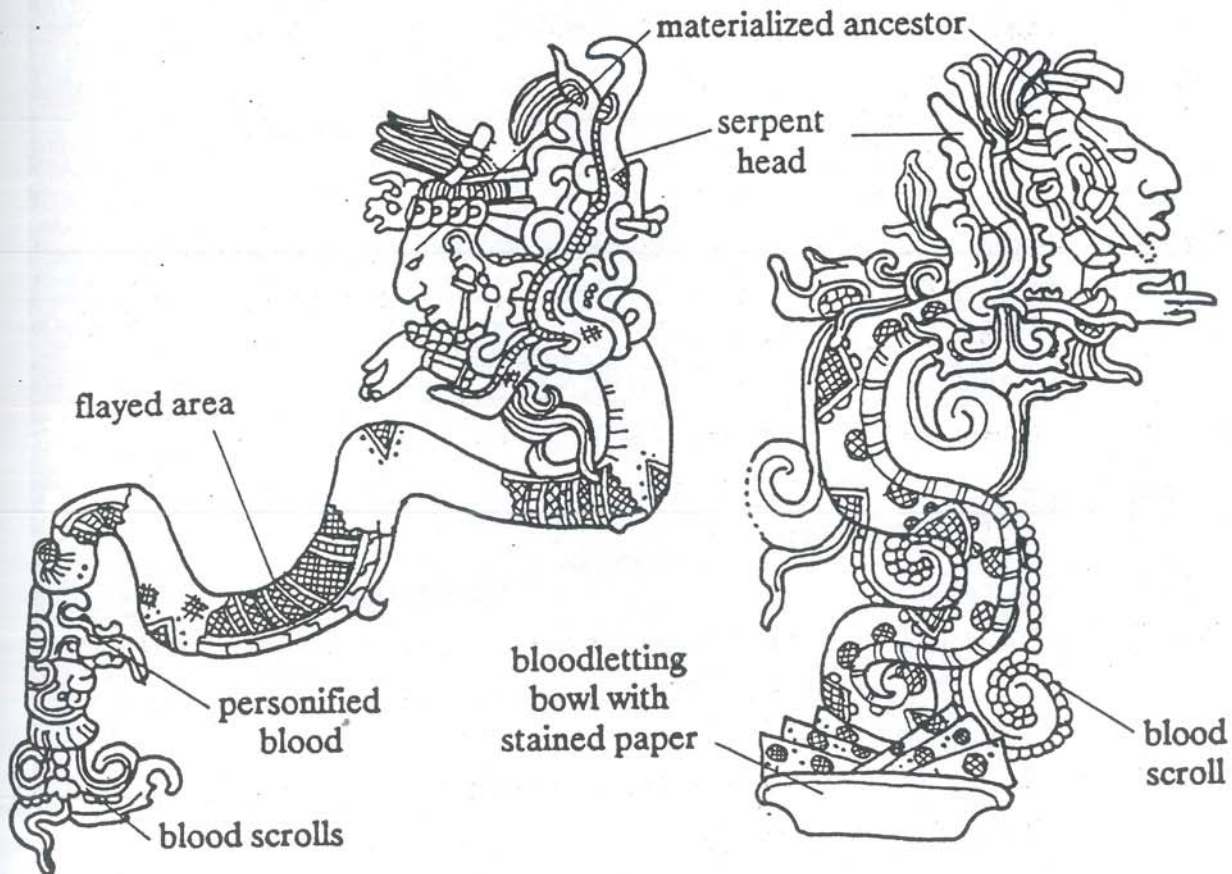
Bloodletting celebrating the birth
of Chel-Te on Feb. 18, 752

c. Lintel 17



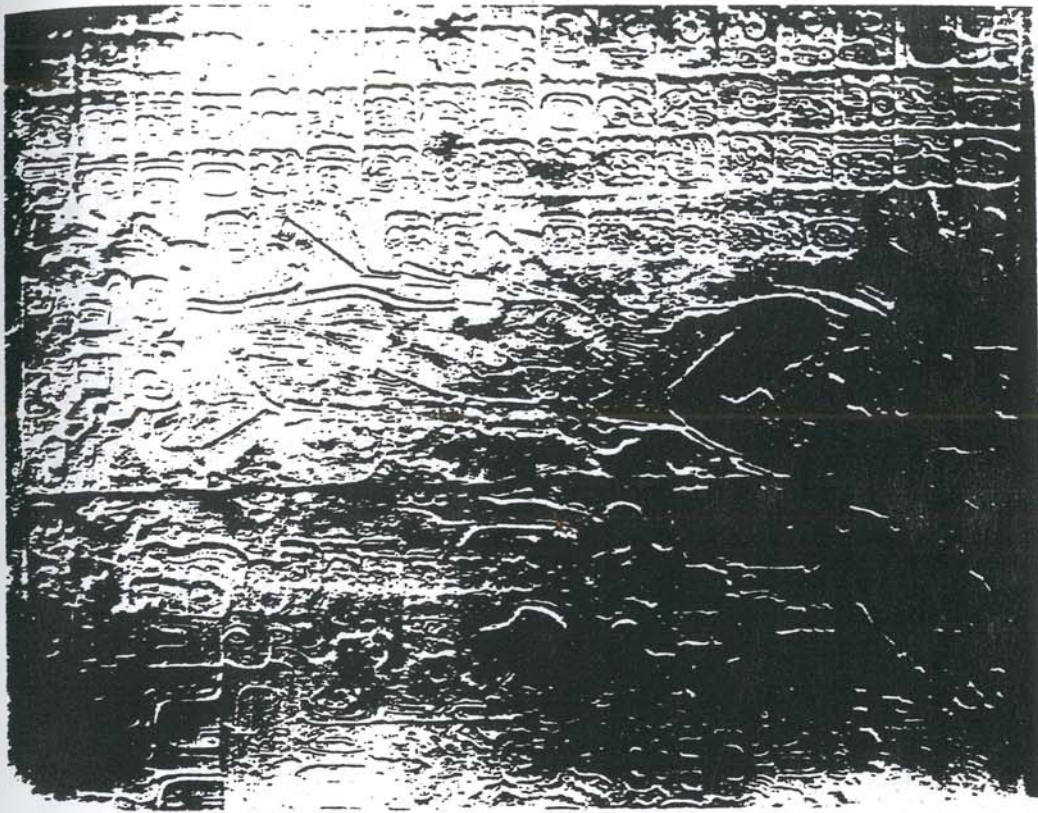
Vision rite by Lady 6-Tun on Mar. 28, 755

d. Lintel 15

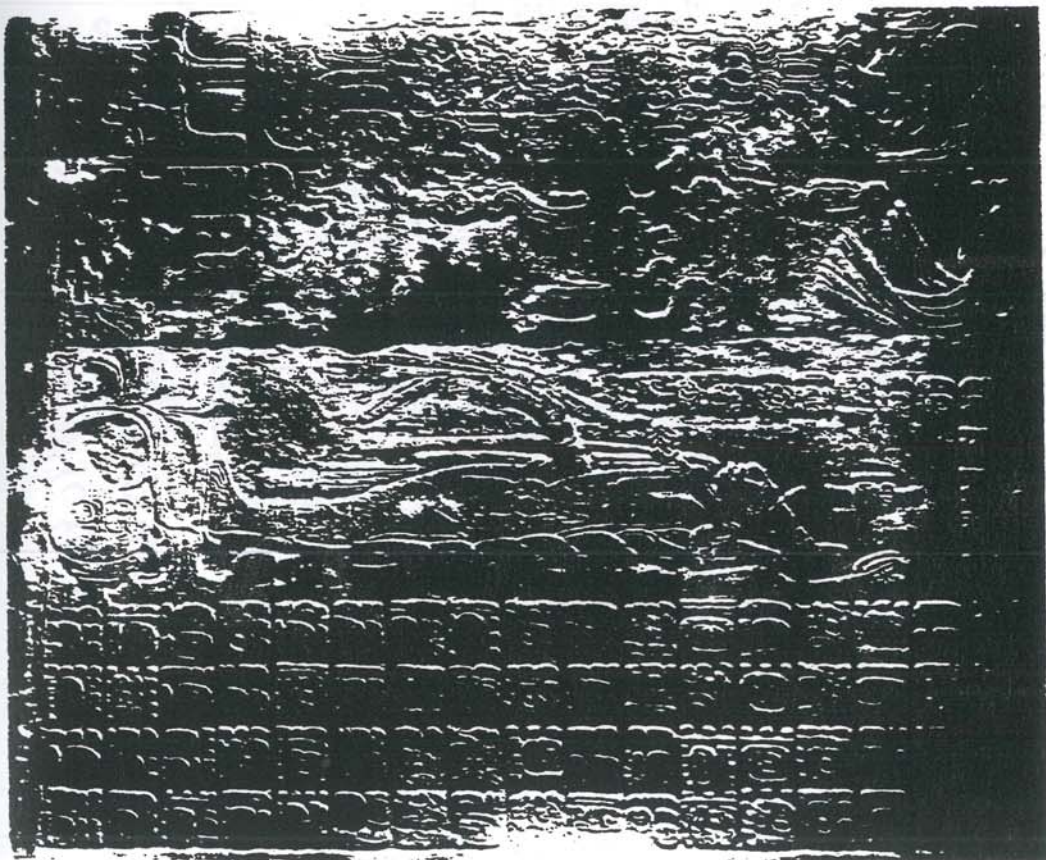


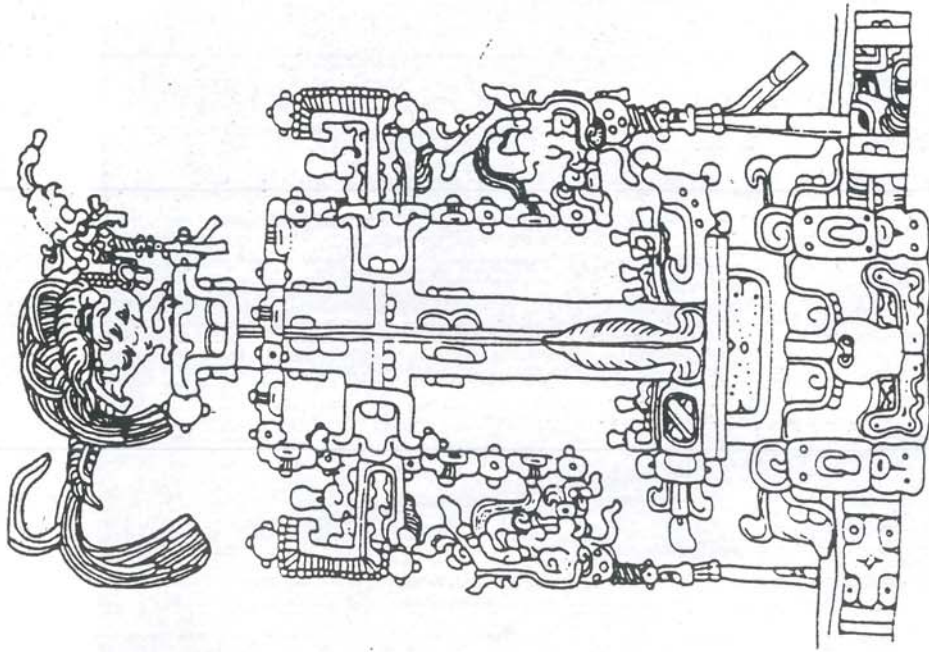
Vision Serpent



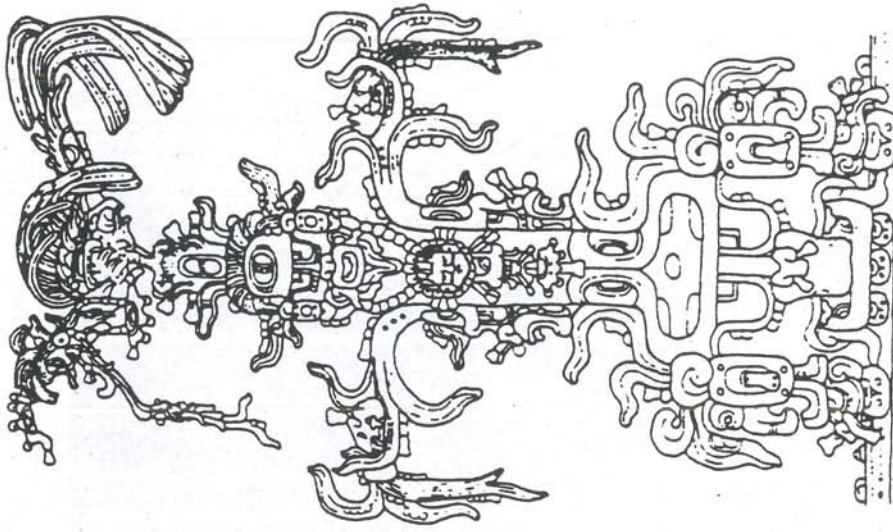


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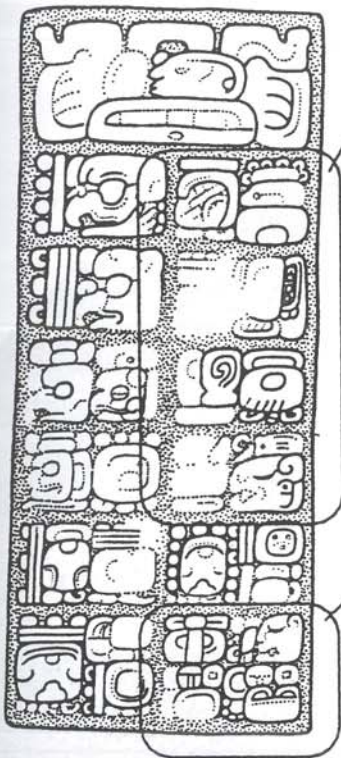




a. *Wakah-Chan*
the World Tree



b. *Na-Te'-K'an*
the Foliated Cross



a. Step from Temple 41

the capture of Chac-Cib-Tok on Feb. 10, 752

the accession of Bird-Jaguar



Bird-Jaguar

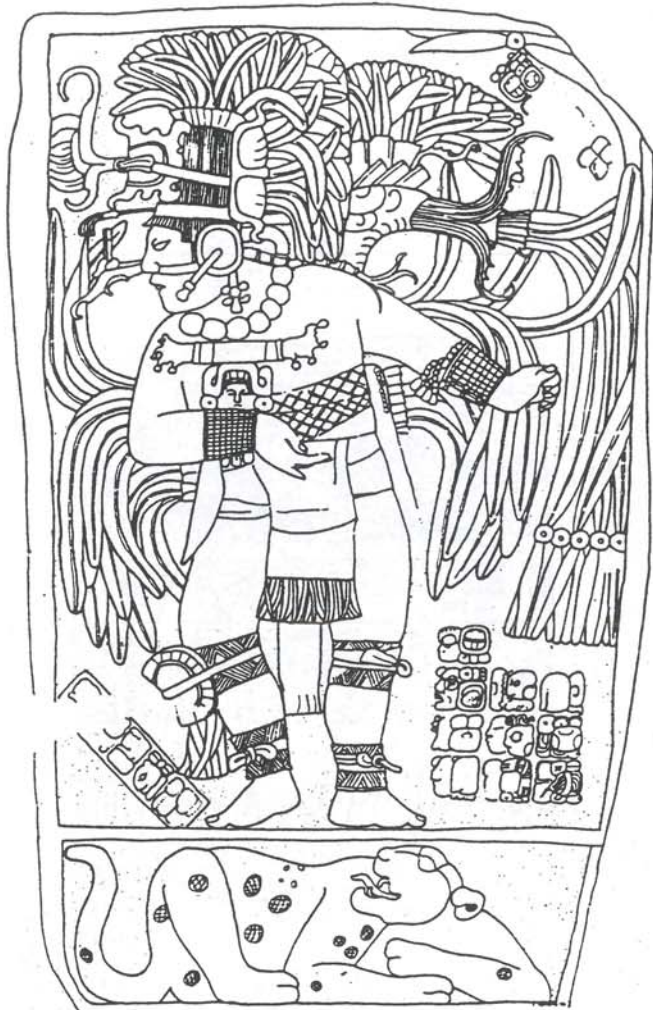
b. Lintel 16

all drawings by Ian Graham

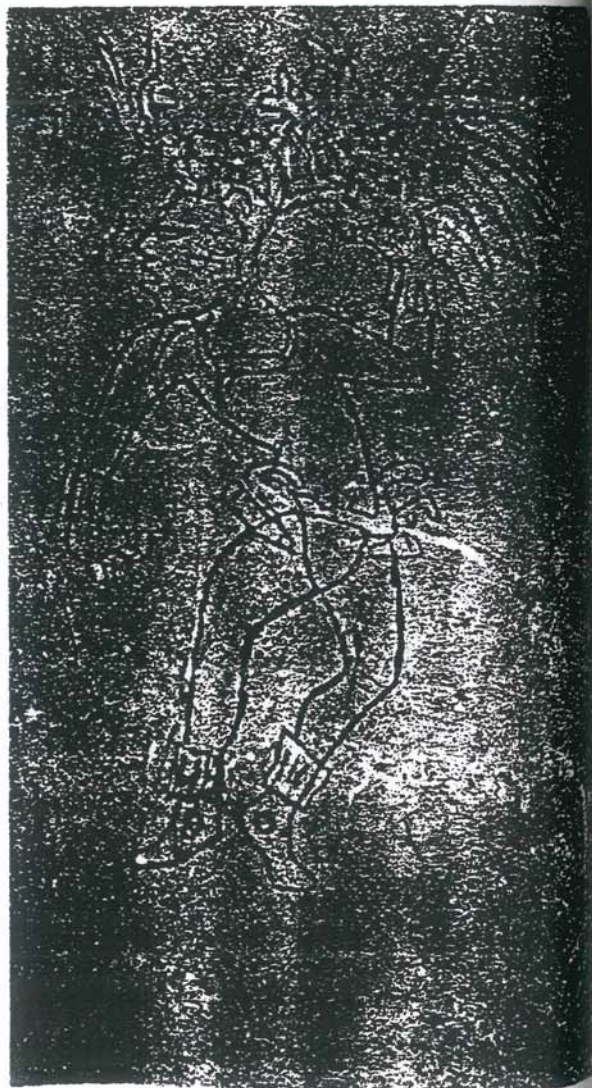
capture of Chac-Cib-Tok

birth of Chel-Te





a. La Amelia Stela 1





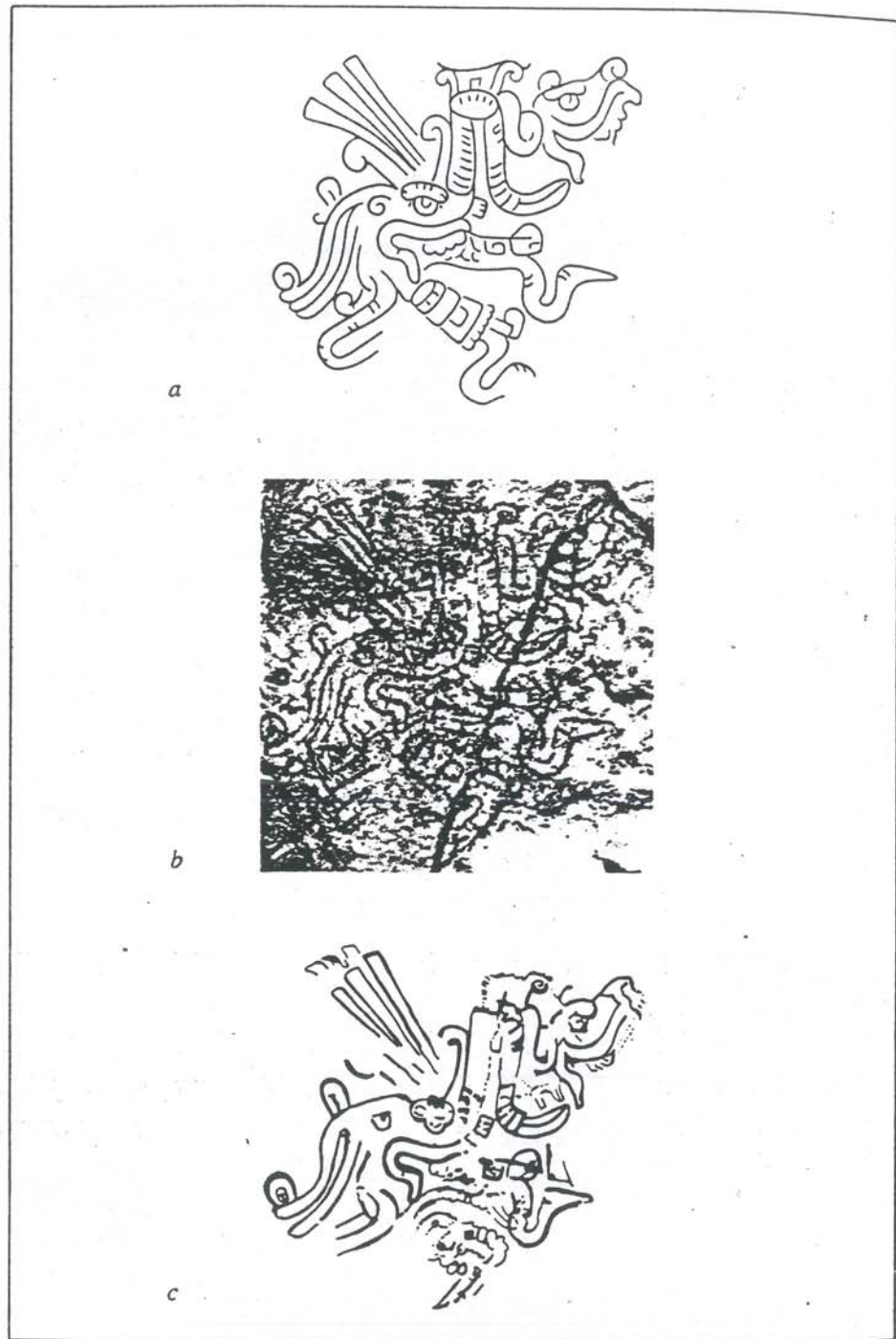
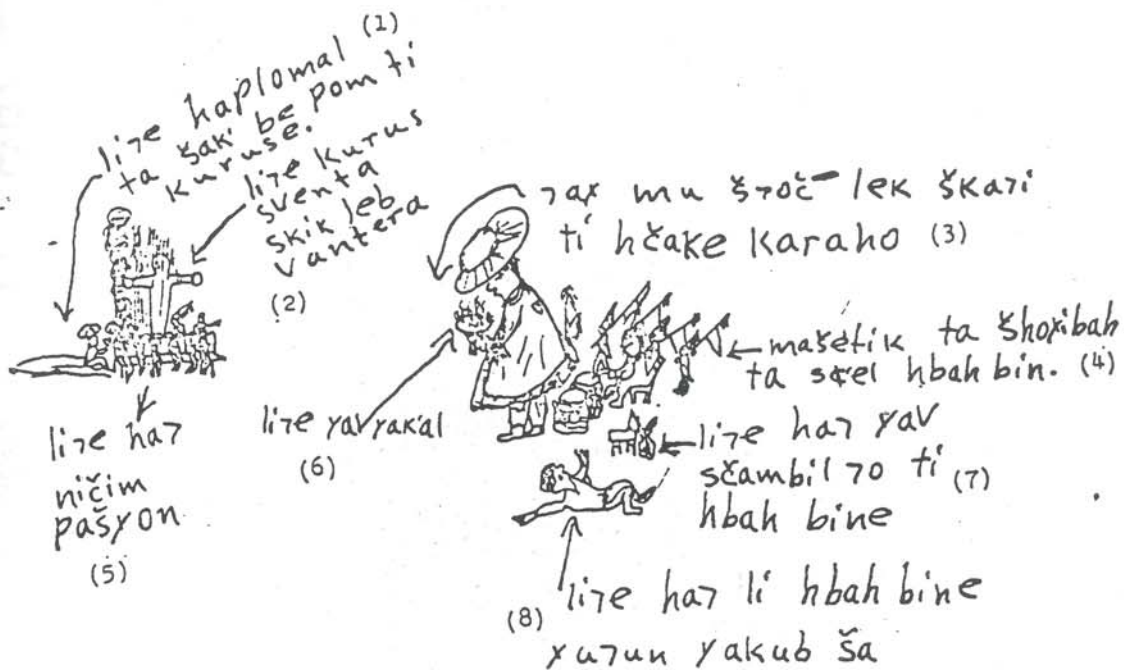


Fig. 4 (a) Maler's glyph; (b) Our glyph (photograph); (c) Roberto Bruce's glyph.



2. Nana María Cocorina participating in Dance of the Warriors. (Drawn by Mariano López Calixto)

(1) Acolyte censes the cross here; (2) cross to which flags are tied; (3) "Damn! I don't think my ass is going to fit!" (4) Monkeys circling the Drummer; (5) Passion's flowers are placed here; (6) Censer; (7) Drummer's rum receptacle; (8) Drummer is lying here because he's drunk.

GARRY H. GOSSEN 1974

(160) Chamulas in the World of the Sun



A Man Encounters San Juan
(See Text 127)

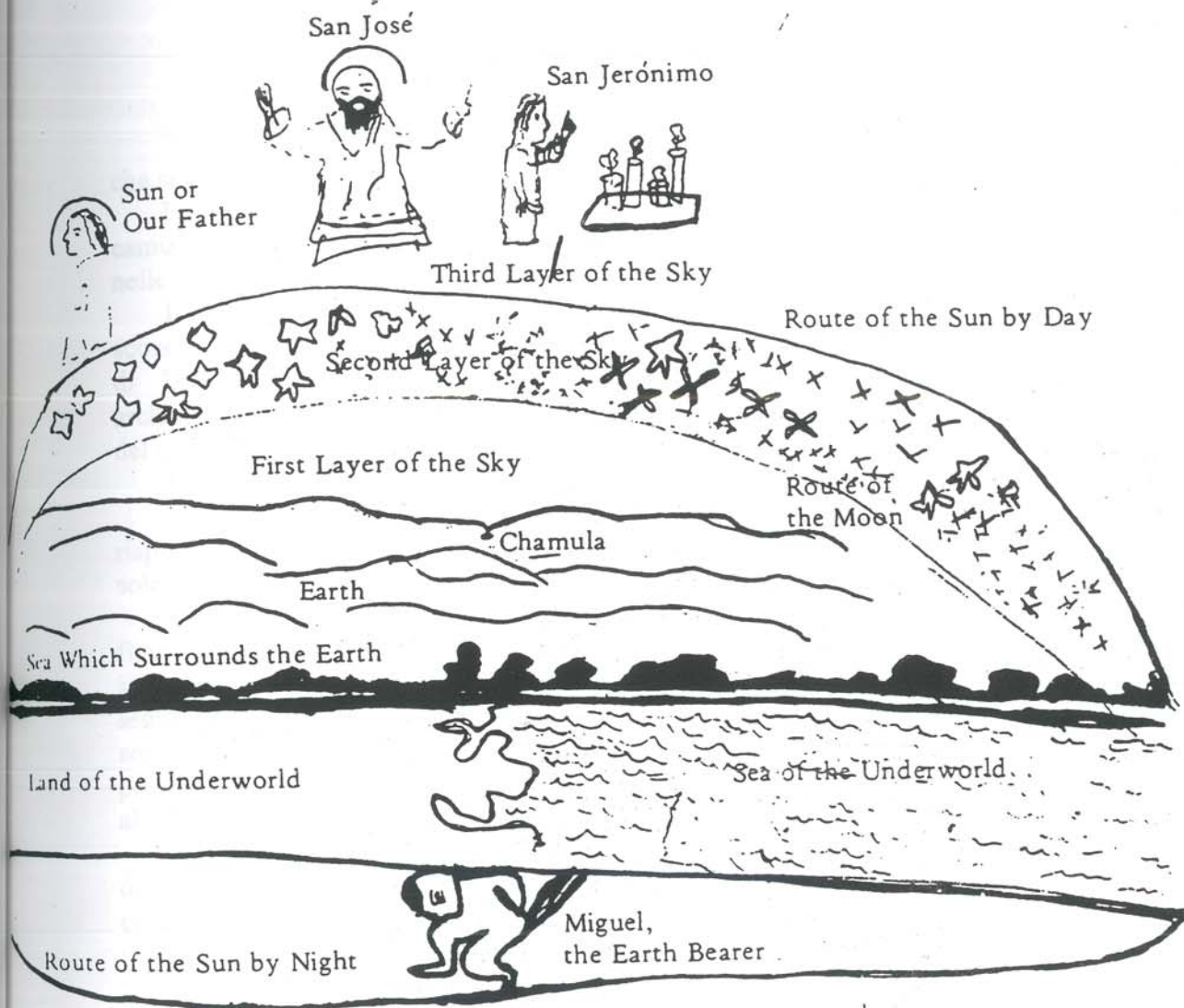


Figure 1. A Chamula Chart of the Universe, By Marian López Calixto

CHAMULAS IN THE WORLD OF THE SUN
 GARY G. GOSSEN 1974

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