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Survey of Talking Cross Shrines in Yucatán and Quintana Roo



Research Year: 2000

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Post Classic

Location: Yucatán, México

Site: Santa Cruz

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Abstract

The "Talking" Cross is stated in the literature as having revealed itself, that is historically first appeared, during the Caste War of Yucatán in the 1850's. What is of primary relevance today, beside the historical importance of the inception of the talking cross cult, is the meaning given these devices in the everyday lives of the "traditional" Yucatec-Maya people. In order to gauge the symbolism of the Maya cross, my ethnographic survey focused on Yucatec Maya villages that participate in what may be pre-Columbian pilgrimage routes (Konrad 1991) and have direct historical connections to the Caste War of 1847 (Bricker 1981).

Resumen

La Cruz "Parlante" se declara en la literatura como habiéndose revelado así misma, esto es como primero apareció históricamente, durante la Guerra de la Casta de Yucatán en los años 1850. Lo que hoy es de mayor relevancia, además de la importancia histórica del principio del culto de la cruz parlante, es el significado dado a estos dispositivos en la vida cotidiana de la gente "tradicional" Yucateca Maya. Para poder calibrar el simbolismo de la cruz Maya, mi estudio etnográfico se enfocó sobre los pueblos Yucatecas Mayas que participaron en lo que puede ser las rutas de perenigración precolombina (Konrad 1991) y tiene conexiones históricas directas a la Guerra de la Casta de 1847 (Bricker 1981).

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The Project

The following preliminary report is a semiotic analysis of communicating crosses and related shrines in the Mexican States of Yucatán and Quintana Roo.¹ My survey was designed to gather ethnographic data with which to better comprehend the function of so-called Mayan talking crosses in the Yucatán peninsula. Support for this research project, conducted during a three-month period, from May 31 to August 31, 2000, was received from the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI), project number 99034. I would like to extend the most sincere gratitude to FAMSI, for my research would not have been possible without this support.

In the following text I will explain the project, the methods used, and my preliminary results. I will conclude with my hypothesis regarding the function and meaning of contemporary and ancient communicating objects, also known as oracles, and why they appear to be so prominent in Maya culture. The goal of this research, to be incorporated into my doctoral thesis, is the collection of data with which better to understand Maya religious change and continuity. Of main focus in these processes is the function of core symbols, such as oracular objects, that apparently retain ancient beliefs even during times of great change.

Project Design and Methods

My research utilizes several methodological approaches: I employ a historical-archaeological foundation and focus on iconographic representations of Maya "crosses"; upon this I add ethnographic research, my own and by other scholars, conducted in Maya villages. Through this interdisciplinary methodology, which I term "Icono-Symbolic Reconstruction," I propose to demonstrate, in my dissertation, that the communicating cross was in fact not a "new" phenomenon, not an "invention," created during the Caste War, but was most probably already present in "traditional" Maya cosmology in vestigial form from pre-Columbian times.

In order to gather data pertinent to my analysis, my survey documented cross use, distribution, function, and meaning through a program of ethnographic data collection analyzing the historical process of reproduction and transformation of socio-religious institutions. Focus was placed on how these processes affirm links to the past and how reconstruction of the past is utilized to sanction contemporary ritual practice, and maintain community and regional integration. Variation in cross shrine attributes were documented at each household and community shrine and focused on four kinds of data: shrine attributes, types of crosses, cross attributes, and the socio-economic status of the households and villages (on a regional scale) which maintain these facilities.

¹ Louanna Furbee (1996) has opted to use the generic term "communicating" in referring to Maya sacred objects which serve as oracular devices. Literature relevant to the Yucatán region refers to Mayan communicating crosses as "talking"; however, not one of my consultants state nor appear to believe that crosses physically talk.

Variables in cross and shrine attributes included: cross form, cross accoutrements/iconography, cross offerings, cross placement, cross use, cross meaning, cross context (house, oratorio, community shrine), spatial position (yard or plaza), type and size of cross shrine space, and ownership (individual or community). I recorded cross attributes (facility, decoration, context) through photographs (if allowed), and drawings, in order to analyze Maya "oracular" ritual throughout the continuum of household and community religious practice. The relationship between cross ideology and village organization was assessed through open ended conversations with shamans and shrine keepers, and also by observant participation in rituals.

Introduction

The "Talking" Cross is stated in the literature as having revealed itself, that is historically first appeared, during the Caste War of Yucatán in the 1850's. What is of primary relevance today, beside the historical importance of the inception of the talking cross cult, is the meaning given these devices in the everyday lives of the "traditional" Yucatec-Maya people. In order to gauge the symbolism of the Maya cross, my ethnographic survey focused on Yucatec Maya villages that participate in what may be pre-Columbian pilgrimage routes (Konrad 1991) and have direct historical connections to the Caste War of 1847 (Bricker 1981).

Though the major communicating cross shrines appear to derive from the Caste War (Dumond 1985; Reed 1964); these same shrines are presently known to be active 150 years after their inception (Aguilera 1998; Burns 1983:20 and 73; Sullivan 1989:200-222). However, the degree to which beliefs and rituals surrounding cross shrine worship today differs from better documented 19th century cross phenomenon (Bricker 1981; Dumond 1985; Reed 1964) is poorly understood.

Based on my ethnographic, archaeological, and iconographic research (Aguilera 1999), communicating cross symbolism reflects historically traditional elements that I consider to have roots in ancient Maya ideology and iconography, for example the Cross Group at the Classic period site of Palenque (Cohodas 1976; Schele 1974), fused with more recent conventions. Scholars have extensively demonstrated that the "axis mundi"/"world tree" and communicating objects/oracles were central to pre-Columbian Maya religion (Baudez 1991; Freidel 1975; Roys 1933; León-Portilla 1968; Newsome 1991; Schele 1976; Taube 1992; Thompson 1970; Tozzer 1957; Vogt 1992), as well as other Mesoamerican religions (Burgoa 1934; Byland and Pohl 1994; Callaway 1990; Caso 1956 and 1969; Ricard 1966). My research supplements these investigations by ethnographically documenting how elements of ancient Maya cosmology have been transformed and/or revitalized by Maya descendants.

In my analysis I combine both a Geertzian and Turnerian approach to the analysis of the communicating crosses and juxtapose this with a brief analysis of the Catholic crucifix in order to better comprehend Maya religious continuity. Geertz (1973) has argued that culture is not locked in people's heads, but rather is embodied in public

symbols through which members of society express their world view, and that such symbols are cultural transmission vehicles. I readily agree and would add that this pertains not only to symbolic action but also to iconic transformations represented in art and history.

Regarding iconic symbols and their associated rituals, Turner (1969:15) stated that the "ritual process" expresses societal values, and that embedded within these rituals are what is most important to a particular culture. He was skeptical of any anthropological research which does not as a preliminary analyze the symbols used by natives. Turner viewed culture as "die hard" with society being a symbolic field of drama and metaphor, and that while on the surface contemporary cultures may have what appears to be no connection to their past, they nevertheless carry "memories" of images and related cumulative experience phenomena (see Hunt 1977:7-9).

The Symbolism of the Christian Crucifix/Cross, The Tree of Life, and The Tree of Knowledge

The Tree of Knowledge, the Tree of Life, and the Crucifix are three distinct Christian symbols that are often confused: the cross was an ancient instrument used for the purpose of execution and as a death tool it went through many structural changes ([Figure 1](#)). Although the mode of its implementation did not vary much (Achteimeier 1985:195), execution through crucifixion is thought to have originated in Persia from where it spread to Greece and eventually to Rome (Hengel 1977). Significantly, the Old Testament does not mention the practice of crucifixion and when mentioned in the New Testament it is invariably linked to the Romans who alone reserved the authority to impose and implement the death sentence through crucifixion (Dahl 1974).

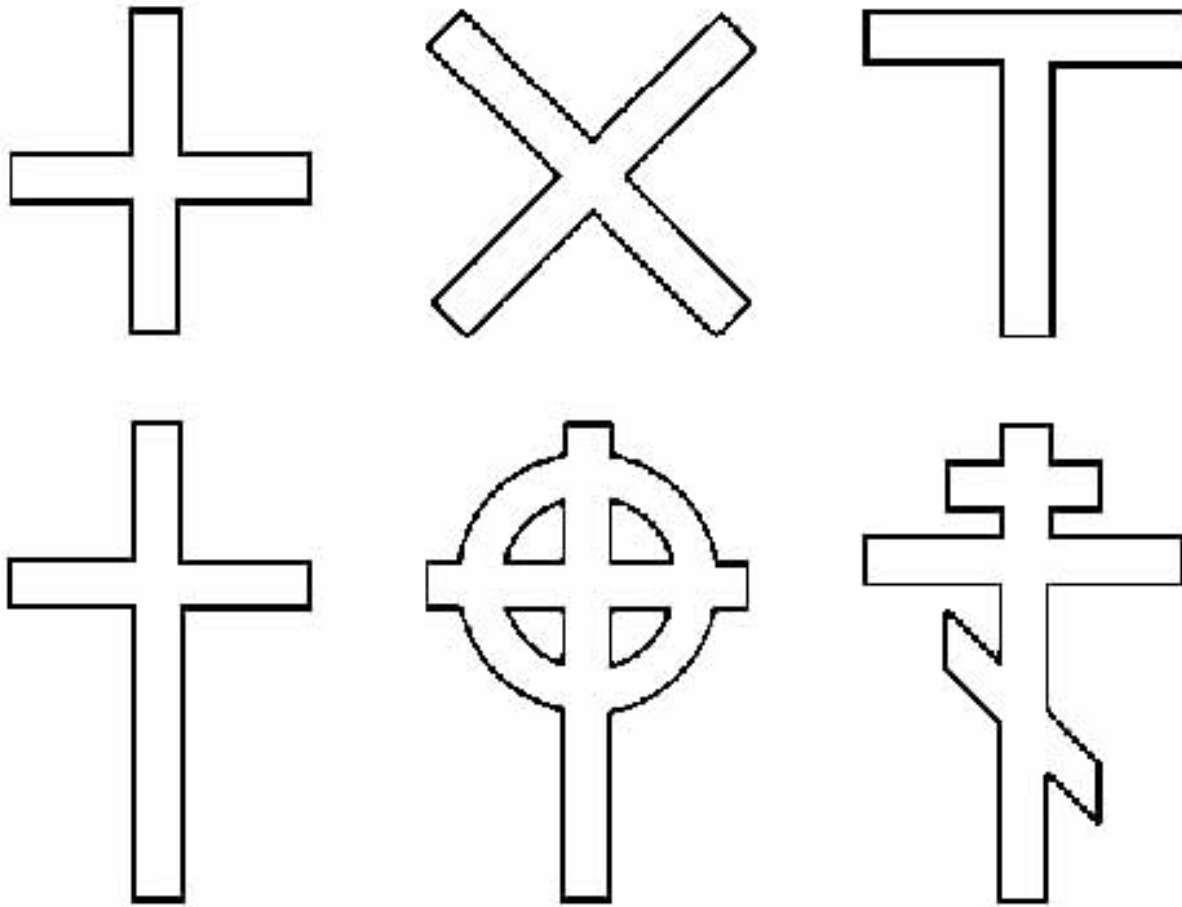


Figure 1.

The Gospels mention that Jesus Christ was crucified for the supposed crime of high treason against the Roman state (Mark 15:19). Upon the execution of Christ, the symbolism of the Crucifix--the figure of Christ upon the cross, begins to transform through the agency and practice of Christ's followers; however, this transformation is mainly attributed to the apostle Paul (Romans, First Corinthians, Second Corinthians). The Son of Man, as Christ referred to himself (Mark 2:10, 8:31, 8:38, 14:62; Matthew 8:20; Luke 12:8; John 3:14, 8:28, 12:34), was executed in the most degrading manner possible. To escape this stigma Paul's theology evolves into the saving action of God through Christ, and the Crucifix as the symbol of salvation through the absolvment of sin through the death of God's son (Beker 1980; Hengel 1977). During this time the Crucifix also becomes a symbol of self-renunciation (Mark 8:34), as comfort to the oppressed, and serves as a behavioral model (Philistines 2:5-11). These polysemic symbolic meanings have remained central to "Christianity" for two millennia; however, the extent to which these symbolic meanings are applied in contemporary traditional

Santa Cruz Maya villages can be debated.² As will be demonstrated, aside to the presence of the Crucifix in Catholic churches, traditional Macehual Maya utilize the cross in a dramatically different symbolic manner and in explicitly non-Catholic ritual settings.

The Tree of Knowledge ([Figure 2](#)), like the Crucifix, has a long "syncretic" heritage. In the Christian Bible the Tree of Knowledge symbolizes the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2, 3), and arrogance (Ezekial 31); however, as a "Tree Of Life" it is not a central theme for as such it appears in scant vague reference being somewhere in the midst of Eden (Genesis 2:9) and reappears only in metaphor (Genesis 3:22; Proverbs 3:18, 11:30, 13:12, and 15:4).

² The term cruzoob has usually been applied to the Macehual rebels who fought in the Caste War and has also been applied to their descendants. Presumably the term originated from the fact that the rebels were "followers of the cruz," the cross; however, given that oob is a "Yucatec" Mayan plural marker, the term cruzoob translates as "crosses." Given that Victor Turner (1969:10-11) stated that terms and meanings not recognized by natives are scientifically invalid and that no Maya I have ever conversed with uses the term cruzoob to either refer to their ancestors, themselves, or anyone else; out of respect for my consultants, so as not to call them "crosses", I choose not to use this term.



Figure 2.

Tree symbolism is apparently conspicuously scarce in the Biblical canon because the tree was a central icon in ancient Israeli and Canaanite rituals which, much like the Celts, focused on nature and was therefore considered pagan (Meyers 1985:1094). For example, trees were venerated in the ancient Middle East for their ability to maintain green foliage throughout summers and droughts (Psalms 1:3; Isaiah 65:22) and for their strength (Ezekiel 31:3; Daniel 4:10-12).

While there are some similarities between trees in the Christian Bible and Maya Crosses, their function and symbolic meaning are not the same. For example, in the Middle East, large tree branches were sometimes quickly put together to create a cross

but only in order to expedite the execution of a criminal (Phyllis Bird 1985:1094). The most significant similarity, between Maya and Christian ideology, appears only twice, in the Bible, where the "Tree of Knowledge" is said to be in the middle of Eden where four rivers divide the garden into quadrants (Genesis 2:9-10, 3:3); however, God explicitly orders Adam and Eve to distance themselves from this tree (Genesis 2:17, 3:3). However, it should be noted that there is an important link between the Trees of Knowledge and Life, in that Eve condemns "man" with her consumption of the forbidden fruit while Mary, the mother of God, offers everlasting life through "the fruit of her womb" (Gary H. Gossen, personal communication, 1999).

The Maya Cross as Axis Mundi

The claim has been made that during the "Caste War of Yucatán" Maya rebels founded a new society and religion dedicated to a Talking Cross (Nelson Reed 1997:63). However, how "new" this religion was is debatable since the cross icon, and other "oracular" objects have been known to be present in the Mesoamerican region since pre-Columbian times (Roys 1972:15), and are thought to have symbolically represented cosmological centrality (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993). Clearly the best known representation of an ancient Maya "cross" is depicted at the ancient city of Palenque on the sarcophagus lid of Lord Pacal ([Figure 3](#)). This quadripartite motif demonstrates how the symbol was conceptualized by the ancient Maya to depict the axis mundi or world tree; the axis is believed to have been traversed by souls of those deceased, and by religious specialists through ritual. Other "cross" representations from the ancient site of Palenque depict the same theme of the world tree ([Figure 4](#)) which is sometimes represented as an anthropomorphic maize plant ([Figure 5](#)).

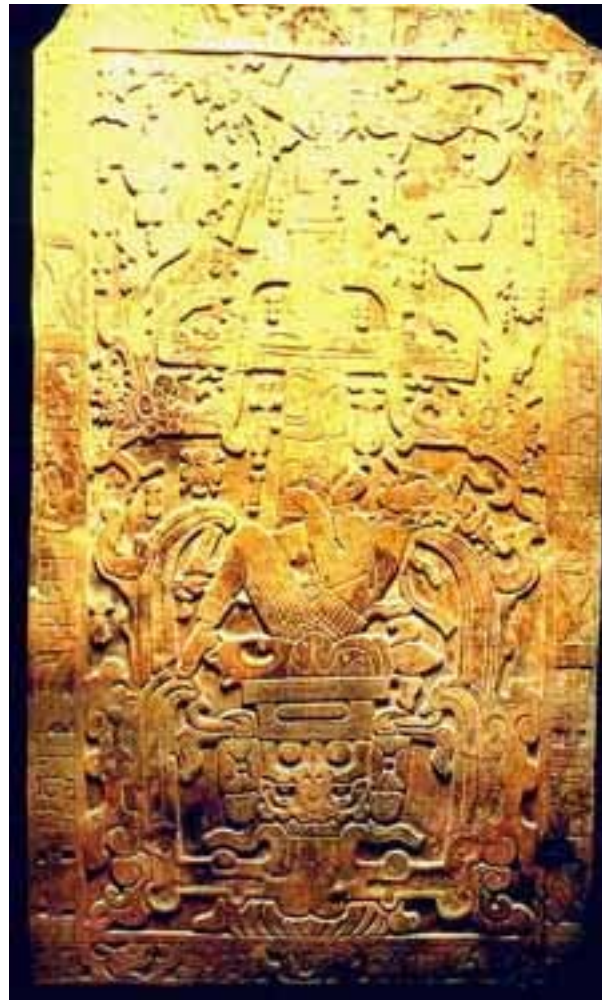


Figure 3.

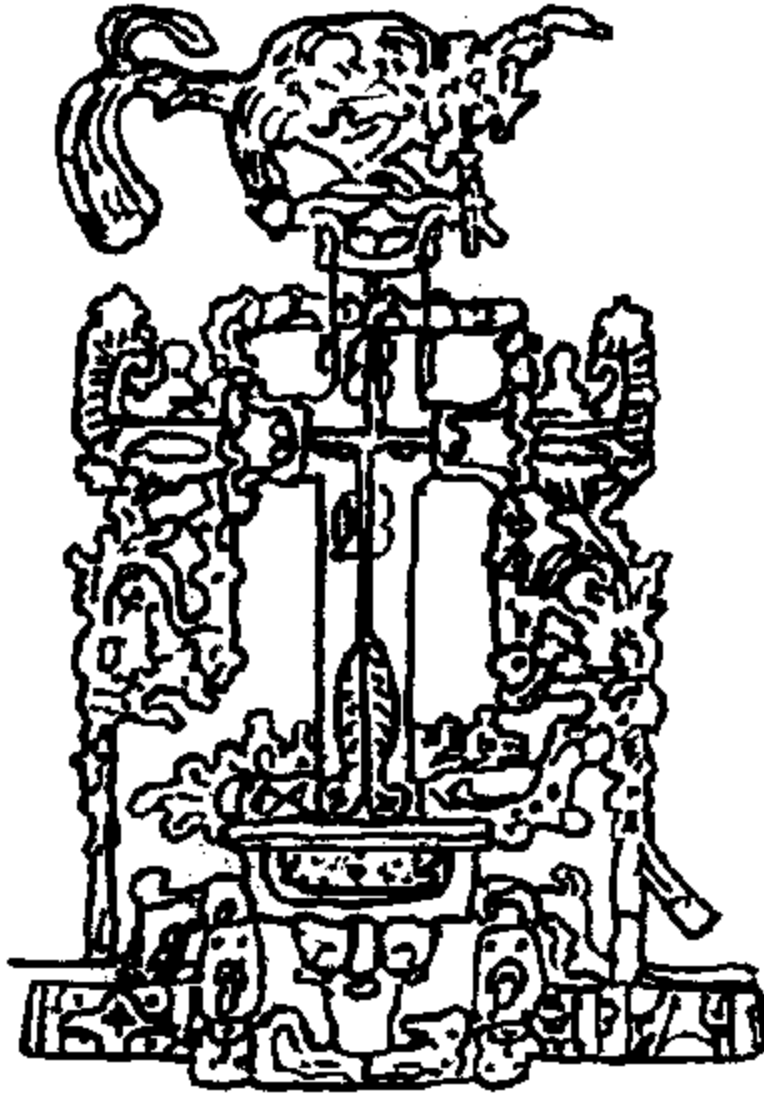


Figure 4.



Figure 5.

According to Holland (1964:14), the Tzotzil-Maya still venerate the ancient Maya axis mundi/sacred world tree which ascends from the center of the earth and connects the upperworld to the earth and the underworld. Not surprisingly, this same idea is expressed by Macehuales in the Yucatán.

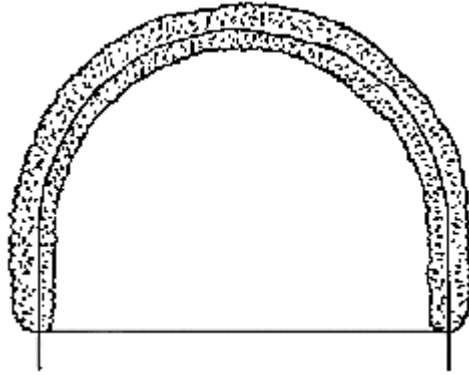


Figure 6.

Other pan-Maya symbolism, expressed at various communicating cross shrines I have surveyed, is that Maya Crosses often have an overhead semi-circle of flowers similar to those documented in Chiapas ([Figure 6](#)) by Vogt (1969:405). Holland (1964:15) has explained the significance of the Tzotzil flower arches as follows, "the sun ascends the thirteen layers of the heavens, which form a path ornamented with flowers. (and) in the afternoon it descends." Indeed, Vogt (1969:601) has documented that in Chiapas this semi-circle of flowers, when placed directly overhead the cross, forms the arch of the sun as it traverses the sky and thus marks this as a point of centrality and the cross as the world tree ([Figure 7](#)) which is used to communicate with ancestral entities. Unfortunately, during my survey, not one of my consultants seemed to fully comprehend the symbolic meaning of the flower arch-it is simply explained as a custom of their grandfathers.

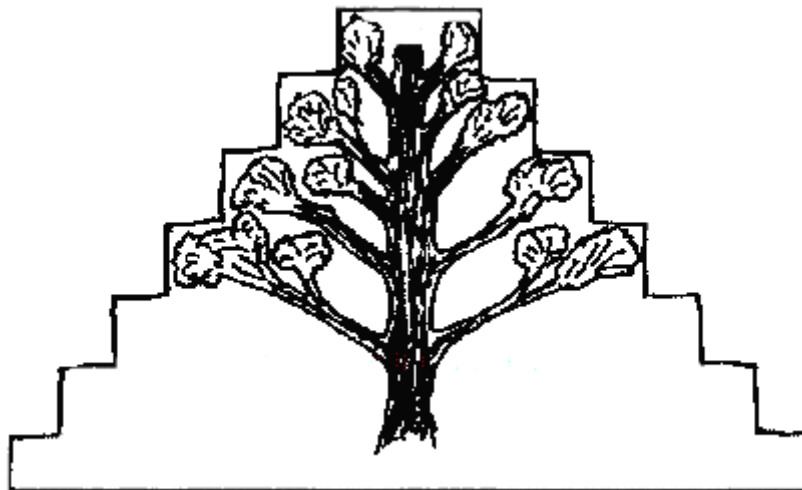


Figure 7.

My survey data indicates that there are two basic cross shapes in Santa Cruz Maya shrines: the common Latin cross form ([Figure 8](#)), and another that is more like a tree branch with two up-tilted arms ([Figure 9](#)) (see Sosa 1989:137). In either case my consultants address both types of crosses as a "santo." Significantly, by "santo," my consultants refer to an 'entity' or 'spirit' rather than a Catholic saint; indeed, saints are usually referred to as "imágenes," images, due to the idol representing an actual person who once lived.

Regardless, both types of Maya crosses are often painted a blue-green hue, which signifies centrality, and are referred to as "ya' as che' "--'green tree'. The crosses are painted blue-green because the Yucatec Maya conceive of the crosses as being "kuxa'an" -alive. Sosa (1989:137) has elaborated on the theme of green crosses as trees, "included in the cross symbol is the meaning of the tree, and the term *sáantoh de che'*, 'cross of wood', refers to these crosses. These meanings of tree and wood are actually inseparable in Maya, since the word *che'* is used for both. (to the) Maya the distinction is not necessary. So the crosses being made of wood also allows them to share the 'tree' meaning."

I therefore hypothesize that the many facets of the cross lend it a polysemic quality which have allowed the Maya, to utilize what on the surface appears to be a completely Christian symbol, for their own purposes throughout the colonial period to the present day. The purpose here is not to disallow Catholic influence, which in of itself is undeniable, but to illuminate how the Maya took a colonial religious symbol which was to supplant their own ideology, consciously integrated the Crucifix with the world tree, and thereby retained a central theme in their ancestors ideology--albeit in a transformed state. In studying these transformations, I emphasize that the cultural agency of my consultants is quite powerful and can be best understood through observant participation. It is therefore my opinion that the agency of cultural brokers is more important than is usually acknowledged in current postmodern oriented anthropological analyses. I suggest that in many ways the postmodern approach does not explore the meaningful personal experience gained by Maya ritual, for in the postmodern world of simulacra all cultural and symbolic meaning attached to the cross would be exterminated. To claim that Maya spirituality is a pastiche of revivalistic construction with no coherent structure undervalues the beliefs of my consultants and overlooks the agency of the Maya.

I conceptualize Maya culture as a historically determined product of both societal structure, individual agency, and the interaction thereof. In my analysis, of the Communicating Cross, I emphasize that conscious human agency and practice is responsible for the survival of Maya culture. The very fact that Maya culture survives, and that their language survives, is key to the argument that the colonial and the living Maya have chosen to keep it alive. I argue that the conservative actions of my consultants and their ancestors are in play with, rather than reduced to cultural logic, political economy, and by-products of colonialism. However, I concede that for some Maya, cross entities may be construed as meaningless and perhaps fake; nevertheless for many of my consultants these supernatural entities appear to be truly spiritual and meaningful.



Figure 8.



Figure 9.

Mayan Communicating Devices

Scholars specializing in colonial period Mesoamerica have noted that the 16th century Spanish brought to the New World the belief in Virgin apparitions (Burkhart 1989). However, the focus of my survey was not the apparitions of Catholic Saints or of the Holy Mother, such as the Virgen de Guadalupe, but of communicating, oracular type, natural objects. Fray Diego de Landa (1941:109, 154) stated in his "relación" that the Maya belief in "speaking idols" was pre-Columbian. Indeed, the proliferation and context of ancient axis mundi representation, including what to westerners may appear as Latin crosses (Figure 10), is interpreted as indicating that ancient Maya priests used the various quadripartite axis' as devices for communication with the supernatural realm (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993). Apparently, not much has changed in this regard: one of my consultants in Quintana Roo has a private "chan iglesia," a small "church," which is sometimes referred to as an oratorio. In this small thatch hut she keeps three

clothed green crosses ([Figure 11](#)). The woman states that these "crosses" called out to her husband while he was working on his "kool" (cornfield), and thereafter the man took the crosses home and built them the oratory. The woman and her sons claim that the objects continued to communicate with her husband through dreams. Since his passing away the crosses now communicate with his widow.

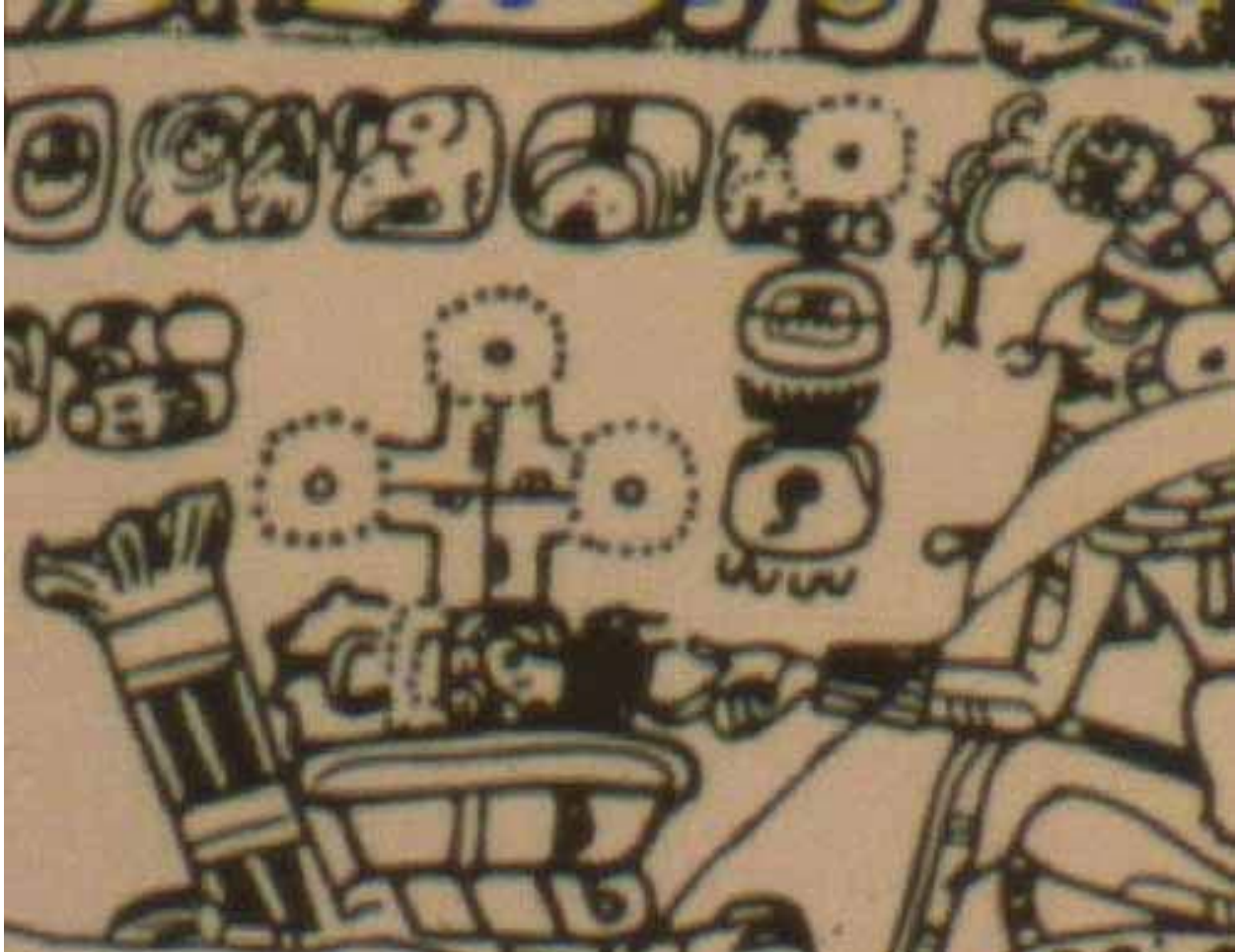


Figure 10.



Figure 11.

Not surprisingly, "crosses" made from tree branches are not rare, my survey revealed that many Santa Cruz Maya shelter, and care for, these type of objects ([Figure 12](#)). Indeed, as my survey progressed, this summer, it became increasingly clear that other Maya families, which I have not gained access to, have similar private oratorios with similar crosses. I therefore suggest that the actual number of Maya villages with shrines that shelter and are dedicated to communicating crosses is presently unknown and more widespread than previously thought. What may appear chaotic, though it has been alluded that the crosses are hierarchically arranged (Dumond 1985:295), is I argue, indicative of vestigial pre-Columbian function and meaning. My shaman consultants state that the proclamations come from the "divine" voice of "hahal ku," the true Maya god of the Macehual. Interestingly, this Maya God, which communicates through the different crosses, is sometimes literally stated as being Itzamná. Also, the fact that many of these crosses are stationed in what have been ancient and colonial era religious centers is no coincidence--these sites were/are part of Maya sacred geography.



Figure 12.

My survey data also indicates, that although each cross has a virtual identical function and meaning, each major communicating cross shrine has a particular importance amongst the Maya. Also of importance to each shrine is that the structures themselves are considered to be alive and may be painted green to designate them as such ([Figure 13](#)). Of particular importance to my survey was the shrine of "Chuumuk Lu'um"--Center Over the Earth. Within this shrine is a stela-like stone communicating cross said to be ancient by the local Maya ([Figure 14](#)). Also of great importance regarding the symbolism of this stone cross is that my consultants regard it as the earthly manifestation of Itzamná and Chaak. They also conceive of the stone slab as being alive and growing from the earth as a plant does; indeed, it is literally regarded as a living holy plant/tree placed at the center of the earth by the Itzá before the Spanish came to their ancestors' land. Also of interest in relation to this cross is that it has surrogate crosses in the Catholic church, in the adjacent village, who lend it vision through mirrors placed around the necks of said surrogate crosses which are said to be the stone cross' secretaries ([Figure 15](#)).



Figure 13.



Figure 14.



Figure 15.

Of related interest to this large stone cross is another stone cross in a nearby village. This other cross is in miniature, about five inches in height, and is said to have come from an "aktun", a cave, and appears to be part of a speliothem that took this odd shape. This miniature cross is considered sacred because it is the mouthpiece to the Chaak'ob and as such is utilized in rain making ceremonies. My data clearly indicates that green crosses are not only related to maize but to the Chaak'ob who bring the fields to life with their precious rain. Indeed, placed in front of some of these green crosses are conch shells with which the crosses trumpet a call to the Chaak'ob to summon them forth from the aktuns in order to bring rain ([Figure 16](#)). After conducting my survey I have no doubt that Green Maya crosses are clearly related to fertility and are rain making sacred objects--the sometimes present Catholic symbols on the crosses notwithstanding. Indeed, my data indicates that the most important symbolism associated with these crosses are ancestors/deities, and corn and trees.



Figure 16.

Huipiles, Sudarios, and Maize

Key symbols, concealed by clothing, on the staffs of some of the crosses are "ixi'im," maize, stalks which combined with the green color of the cross creates a symbolic link with agriculture. One of the better known, still practiced, traditional rituals which exhibits ancient ideology is the agricultural related petition/thanksgiving for rain called the Ch'a Chaak. Having been discussed at length elsewhere (Love 1989; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:138-143; Sosa 1989:140), I will only comment on what has been omitted--the symbolic meaning and function of the communicating cross in the ritual.

The cross is conspicuously placed in the recessed center of the "mesa," table top altar, which is said to represent the earthly plane. The cross, being towards the middle, is therefore at the center point of the mini-cosmos created by the "h-men", shaman-priest, and the four legs of the table along with the arched branches create the four cardinal/directional sides ([Figure 17](#)). During the ritual the cross becomes a functional axis mundi, which the h-men activates, in order to receive the divine forces that enter through the circular portal in the vault. According to some of my shaman consultants the cross is a "secretary", a conduit, for the transmission of petitions to the chaak'oob, rain deities, which are said to be "grasped" and brought "diving" down through the aperture

of the vault. Perhaps relevant to what my shaman consultants describe, the postclassic/contact period Dresden Codex has a depiction of a diving chaak figure holding a ceramic vessel from which emerges a cross-like foliated Axis Mundi ([Figure 18](#)).



Figure 17.



Figure 18.

Another key symbol linking Maya crosses to agricultural regeneration is the clothing with which the object is usually adorned. The clothing has usually been claimed to be a huipil, the "traditional" Maya woman's dress, and therefore the "sex" of the cross has usually been deemed to be female (Bricker 1981:108; Dumond 1985:295; Reed 1964:138; Sullivan 1989:23). However, utilizing what Victor Turner (1969:6-11) and Eva Hunt (1977) termed the "inside view" approach, that is, closely following native exegesis in interpreting their own symbols leads me to a strikingly different conclusion. While the Spanish words for "the cross" have the female marker of "la cruz", the Maya apparently do not literally adhere to Spanish linguistic "gender" markers for objects such as the cross.

My consultants refer to the crosses with Catholic male angels and saints names; such as Bernardino, Pedro, and Pablo, and in fact state that crosses are strictly male. Importantly, not one of my consultants has stated that crosses are female and have been appalled at such a suggestion or question on my part; however, it is my assessment that clothed Maya crosses simultaneously are a symbolic embodiment of

both male and female attributes. The clothing of the cross is not a "huipil" but a special cloth (Konrad 1991:131) called a "sudario," a death shroud--these are two distinct but somewhat similar looking items of clothing (Nancy Forand, personal communication, 1997).³

In the Yucatán peninsula all "huipil'oob," huipiles, have a straight U-shaped collar ([Figure 19](#) -- woman) while the sudario-shrouds have a cleft V-shaped collar ([Figure 19](#) -- crosses). None of the clothed crosses I have seen in the Yucatán has worn a huipil. Every single one of them wore a sudario (sometimes in layers of three); however, there are exceptions--clothed crosses in museum displays ([Figure 20](#))--evidently dressed in a huipiles because the relevant literature claims that this is the garment worn by such crosses. Interestingly, my consultants state that for them to dress a cross in a huipil would risk great retribution due to the offensive nature of such an action. Seemingly contradictory the sudario symbolizes these "crosses" as simultaneously dead and living entities. My consultants exegesis links these crosses to the agricultural cycle and other natural ecological processes which are in a constant mode of life and death through organic regeneration as plants emerge through clefts in the earth. Indeed, some of my consultants have stated, "le kruzó ku nojoch ta te tu sudario yetel te luma," -- "the cross grows from the sudario and the earth;" and as noted previously, all sudarios are marked by having a cleft like aperture from which the cross emerges, and the crosses are often regarded as living beings and as plant-like.

³ Appreciation is given to Nancy Forand who unselfishly gave her assistance while I conducted preliminary interviews and patiently translated my probing personal questions, regarding cross associated beliefs, which I posed to her consultants as I was beginning to learn the Maya language.



Figure 19.



Figure 20.

At this point it should be noted that clefts, which abound in connoting the female sex of the earth, are symbolic of rebirth and renewal in pre-Columbian imagery. I therefore suggest that there is a similar symbolic function of the V-shaped cleft from which Macehual crosses, which as stated are often conceptualized as trees and maize stalks, protrude and the use of the earth plane cleft in pre-Columbian maize cosmological symbolism. Karl Taube (1985, 1993) has identified Maize God imagery in various pre-Columbian rebirth contexts and has alluded that the imagery is a personification of maize as the world tree ([Figure 21](#)). I therefore argue that my data indicates that there is a multi-dimensional symbolic nexus between the maize plant [the cross] and the world tree within rebirth and renewal imagery and ritual. Non-too coincidentally, rebirth and renewal is a core pre-Columbian belief that can be traced through ancient Maya art.

For example, a ceramic vessel depicts what is interpreted as the Maize God dressed in a Nine Knot Death Shroud. He is depicted as a skeleton which regenerates into, not one, but three maize plants/axis mundis ([Figure 22](#)) (Schele and Mathews 1998:122). Due to the triad pattern found in much of pre-Columbian art, I therefore suggest that contemporary triad groupings of crosses ([Figure 23](#)) in the Maya area are subject to debate as to whether this is a totally Christian concept. I suggest that triadic groupings

of crosses also represent a fusion with pre-Columbian ideology. This is highly significant since my consultants neither identify triadic cross groupings with Calvary, nor any Maya cross, other than crucifixes, with Jesus Christ.⁴



Figure 21.

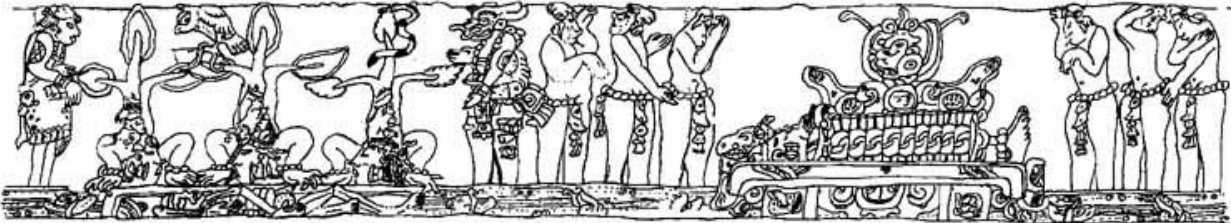


Figure 22.

⁴ Calvary is the Jerusalem hilltop where Jesus Christ, along with two thieves, was crucified (Matthew 27:33; Mark 15:22; John 19:17; Luke 23:33).



Figure 23.

Preliminary Conclusions

The quadripartite/cross form concept was present, at least, from the formative period of Maya Mesoamerica (McAnany 1995). My survey clearly indicates that this icon continues to be a central focus of a portion of traditional Maya culture. The so-called "Talking Cross" is a communicating device which, I believe, existed prior to the Caste War of Yucatán of 1847 and prior to Spanish contact. Caste War history demonstrates that the confiscation and destruction of crosses has not brought about their silence. My preliminary research indicates that not only are communicating crosses still active but that such objects and shrines that shelter them are more widespread than previously thought. The Maya Cross has not ceased to exist because, as I have tried to demonstrate, its symbolic identity is that of supernatural entities, such as Itzamná and Chaak; as well as ancestral entities, trees, corn stalks, and other plants which abound in the Mayaab, the land of the Maya.

The interdisciplinary methodology of this preliminary report provides interpretations concerning not only the ideology behind the communicating crosses; but also the agricultural rationale for their retention within some contemporary Maya communities. I believe that the resulting historically bound symbolic interpretations could not have been possible through a single methodology, be it archaeology or ethnography, focusing on synchronic data. Only time constraints, due to the preliminary stage of my research, inhibits a broader use of this experimental approach which I term Icono-Symbolic Reconstruction: an approach which draws on the assumption that pivotal religious imagery, though transformed, can temporally and spatially retain certain core aspects of their symbolic meaning. My survey has made clear to me that the retention of vestigial ideology is accomplished through the agency of cultural agents as they give meaning to their world--in this case the communicating crosses of the Yucatec-Maya.

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