Ancient and Contemporary Maya Conceptions About Field and Forest

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THE ORDERED WORLD

In ancient Mesoamerica, a most basic and widespread cosmological model was the four-sided world, with the intercardinal corners framing the central and pivotal axis mundi ("world axis"). This model can be readily documented as far back as the Middle Formative period (900-500 B.C.), when maize agriculture became a central component of Mesoamerican subsistence and economy.

In Olmec iconography, the four-sided world is portrayed by the bar-and-four-dots motif (Figure 26.1a), consisting of a central vertical bar with four elements delineating the corners (Reilly 1994:257). A number of incised jade celts portray the Olmec Maize God as the central world tree, and scenes such as these probably constitute early versions of the Mesoamerican conception of the four-sided world as a maize field (Taube 2000:303). In one example, the corner elements are celtiform maize ears (Figure 26.1b). A complex Olmec-style cache from San Isidro, Chiapas, featured jade earspools as well as celts at the four directions (see Taube 2000, Figure 3).

A similar, Early Classic Maya cache discovered within Structure 10L-26 at Copán, Honduras, contained six roughly cut earpool "blanks"—four at the corners and two near the center, with the latter probably alluding to zenith and nadir (Figure 26.2a). The center of this composition contains a jade statuette that portrays the Maize God in contortionist pose, with the legs arching up over his head (Figure 26.2b, cf. Figure 26.2c-d). The contortionist position signifies a growing tree and is found both with depictions of the Maize God as a cacao tree as well as the well-known crocodilian ceiba axis mundi (Figure 26.2e-g). The Copán cache portrays the Maize God as the world tree situated in the center of the four directions.
In Maya thought, the quadrangular milpa is compared to four-sided houses, towns, and other forms of socially constructed human space. Thus, among the Yucatec, “the world, the village and the milpa are thought of as squares with four corners lying in the four cardinal points of the compass and with defined central points” (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:114). Hanks notes that the four-sided plan relates closely to Yucatec conceptions of human space: “In most socially significant spaces, including towns, homesteads, plazas, and traditional cornfields, the four corners plus the center define the space as a whole” (Hanks 1990:299).

The Ch’orti’ perceive the world in the form of four-cornered altars and maize plots (Wisdom 1940:429-30). The Pedrano Tzotzil of Chenalhó also perceive a four-sided earth: “The world, osil balamit, is a square like the house and the fields. The sky rests on four pillars, just like those of a house” (Gutierrez-Holmes 1961:254). The Quichéan Popol Vuh describes the cosmogonic act as the measuring of a four-sided maize field (Tedlock 1996:63-64, 220). Humans are the successful products of this maize field, whose role is to nourish and sustain the gods. A similar concept is present among the contemporary Trixano Cakchiquel of San Andrés Semetabaj, who consider the world as a maize field tended by Jesus, with world destruction constituting the supernatural “harvesting” of people (Warren 1978:33-34).

Whether it be a table, house, town, or even the cosmos, the four-sided plan refers to spatial constructions created by concerted effort, in contrast to the primordial wilderness. The Yucatec term meyul (or “work”) can apply to preparing the milpa, sweeping a house or courtyard, or purifying a space by a shaman, or hmen (Hanks 1990:229). The concept of work, or effort, extends to the vertical plane—not only tables and houses have four raised posts (or trees) at the corners, but also milpas, towns, and the cosmos. For the Ch’orti’, tree boundary markers in the milpa corners are compared to the corner posts of a house, with these same house posts representing four supports of the cosmos (Wisdom 1940:431; Fought 1972:377-379). In the colonial Yucatec Chilam Balam community books of Chumayel, Maní, and Chumayel, a directional world tree raised after the flood is the “house post of the sky,” with the term for raising the cosmic trees being “stood up.”
Although the maize field, house, community, and the created world are four sided, actual communities typically do not adopt this logistically improbable form; instead, they have rounded and organic plans. This is also plainly reflected in ancient fortifications found at El Mirador, Becan, Dos Pilas, and other sites, whose walls commonly delineate circular interiors (e.g., Webster 1979). The idealized four-sided town model defines a human and moral community.

For the Yucatec, Hanks stresses the importance of laying the milpa boundary stones in ordered, straight lines: “The stones are izotil’al ‘counted out (ordered)’ . . . and must be toh toh ‘straight straight’” (Hanks 1990:357). In Yucatec, toh means “straight” as well as “truth” and conditions of moral rectitude. Thus, in early colonial sources, toh is a “just and necessary thing,” toh be (straight road) “virtue,” tohil “justice,” toh etz’al “balance,” toh kah “to confess, tell the truth, declare,” and toh olal “consolation or calmness”—all qualities that clearly relate to the social well-being and harmony of communities (Barrera Vásquez 1980:801).

Cognates of the Yucatec term toh are common in other Mayan languages. Thus, in Mopan, toj signifies “straight, good, correct, well” (Ulrich and Dixon de Ulrich 1976:202). The colonial Morán Dictionary of extinct Ch’olti’ glosses to as “truth” (Morán 1935:67). In related contemporary Ch’ol, toj is “straight, just”; toj’esat’an, “correction of an act or letter (carta)”; and toj’esan, “to straighten, to guide” (Aulie and Aulie 1978:112-113).

For colonial Tzeltal, togh signifies “straight” as well as socially correct states. Thus, while tohob means “to straighten something” and togobon “to make well,” tohol uníc signifies a “virtuous man”; tobeh tez is “to order life”; and tojob tezob h’il otaníl, “the confession” (Humberto Ruz 1986:384-386). In colonial Tzeltal, tojob means “be able to fix, behave with modesty and prudence,” and tojil’osil means “good government” (Laughlin 1988:3:315-316). An especially intriguing term is tojob’tas, which (along with signifying such morally related concepts as confession, obstructing evil, and purging) also refers to activities of human labor and construction, including polishing, leveling, preparing, restoring to former form or beauty, and laying beams (Laughlin 1988:3:315-316). In Tzotil, toj means “straight” and “true”—such as tojol winik “true man”—with tojeb’esman being the term for a maker or repairer (Lenkersdorf 1979:352-354). Implicit in the concept of toh is that making milpa, houses, art, and other efforts of construction are inherently good and ethically correct human acts. On their straight paths defining the town and milpa, the Yucatec b’alamo’ob defend the physical and spiritual well-being of humans and their efforts.
In a seminal discussion of Maya beliefs concerning humans and the surrounding natural world, Stone (1995) notes a frequently sharp contrast between the community and the forest, which she describes as “a model of socially constructed space that cleaves along the lines of two polar spatial categories: the domestic center or community and what might be termed the wilderness, forest, or bush” (Stone 1995:15). The boundaries marking the edges of fields and communities protect humans from the many dangers of the forest wilds.

Also delineating a “fundamental distinction” among the Yucatec between forest and humanly occupied space, Hanks (1990) notes that the forest “is a dangerous place outside of the realm of the guardian spirits posted at the cardinal corners of inhabited and cultivated space” (Hanks 1990:306). Among the tasks of shamans is dispelling evil spirits “deep into the forest” (Hanks 1990:307). Vogt describes the Zincanteco Tzotzil view of forest wilds, or te’iik, as “an undomesticated domain populated by wild plants, animals, wild animals, and demons (pukuhetik)” (Vogt 1976:33). The danger of the forest wilds is also reflected in the Pedrano Tzotzil regard for freshly cut materials for house construction: “They are always dangerous because they come from the forest and the bush, from the wild hills, and therefore they can eat the soul” (Guiteras-Holmes 1961:223).

In Maya thought, the wild forest is related to darkness and the night. According to the Pedrano Tzotzil Manuel Arias Sohom, the social space of the milpa is protected by light, in contrast to the forest region of snakes and demons: “In the cultivated fields there is neither shadow nor darkness, it is open land and we are not afraid; in the forest it is dark and there are snakes, sink holes, caves, the xapakinte’ the ik’al and we are afraid” (cited in Guiteras-Holmes 1961:287).

Similarly, the Ch’orti’ regard gloomy forest regions as the realm of spooks and demons (Wisdom 1940:426). The sun protects one from such evil beings by casting them away to “where the mountains lie, where there are no human beings” (Fought 1972:489-490). Stross (1978) notes that Tzeltal contrast the daylight world of humans with the distant, nocturnal realm of wilderness: “Daytime, the home, and social behavior represent safety, while nighttime, far from home, and asocial behavior represent danger” (Stross 1978:36).

The relation of the forest to evil and darkness is nicely encapsulated in the Yucatec term lob’. In Yucatec, Itzá, and colonial Tzotzil, lob’ signifies such powerfully negative concepts as “bad, evil, perverse, and ruined” (Barrera Vásquez 1980:454-456; Hoffling and Tesucén 1997:416; Laughlin 1988:1:247). But along with being the basic term for pernicious “evil” in Yucatec, lob’ also denotes dense, knotted forest growth—“brambly, full of

underbrush, entangled” (Barrera Vásquez 1980:454-455). In terms of landscape, a lob’b’e’eh is a rough road closed with growth; lob’chahal, the growing of wild plants in the milpa; and lob’k’a’xo, thick and closed forest. In addition, lob’ also can signify darkness (Barrera Vásquez 1980:219). The concept of lob’ as evil and wild entangled undergrowth is diametrically opposed to the Yucatec concept of toh as straightforward and moral rectitude.

As a dense and dark covering laden with thorny vines and biting creatures, the forest is a thick, heavy presence that hangs over the human intruder. Hanks (1990) notes that during the milpa cutting, the initial hol ch’ak’ perimeter is an “open path,” with the farmer then passing “under” to cut the interior bush (Hanks 1990:357). In Yucatec, one is “under the forest” (yanal k’a’x) (Hanks 1990:311), in contrast to being “in” or “at” a town or milpa (Hanks 1990:306). The colonial Chilam Balam of Chumayel mentions the Itzá banished under the forest, “when the Itzá went beneath the trees, beneath the bushes, beneath the vines, to their misfortune” (Roys 1933:136). Hanks (1990) notes that, in Yucatec, “under” has negative connotations in contrast to “over” (e.g., the phrase yoo b’eh), or “over road,” which can signify being on a correct path. This also recalls the ancient sak b’e’ho’ob, or “white roads”—raised masonry causeways that commonly extend in straight lines for many kilometers across the landscape. The term sak b’e’eh neatly contrasts with “black road”—ek’b’eh, the word for a narrow, uneven trail. Not surprisingly, another name for such a treacherous path is lob’ b’e’eh (Barrera Vásquez 1980:150).

The forest wilds are related to concepts of lowness, caves, and the underworld. According to Wisdom (1940), the Ch’orti’ correlate “below” with “the low, dark, and secluded spots where evil deities dwell” (Wisdom 1940:428). Stone (1995) notes that as an alien, amoral place filled with fierce beasts and demons, the forest wilderness is closely related to caves and the underworld (Stone 1995:16-18, 42). In Pedrano Tzotzil belief, “The forest and the bush, the caves and sinkholes are feared by man, because in them he lacks the protective light and warmth of the sun” (Guiteras-Holmes 1961:287). In addition, caves are the antithesis of toh—being winding, natural features with rounded chambers that lack corners and straight, flat walls. In contrast to public ceremonies of the community, much cave ritual concerns curses and pacts with evil beings (e.g., Warren 1978:80).

To the Aztec, the ancestral Chichimec lived in caves in the remote wilderness, as illustrated in the Mapa de Quinatzin and other sources. According to Burkhart (1986), the wandering Chichimeces “symbolized both the past and the periphery of settled space” (Burkhart 1986:11). In a very similar vein, Stone (1995) notes that the Maya relate the remote forest wilds to the ancient, mythological past—a place of demonic beings from before the present creation (Stone 1995:15-16). Thus, among the Chamula Tzotzil, the regions most distant from the town center are most related to ancient, su-
pernacular beings (see Gossem 1974b). In Pedrano Tzotzil belief, the world was originally a forest realm of fierce demons: “They used to rob... They killed the people. That came to pass when the earth was covered by the forest” (Guiteras-Holmes 1961:189). According to the Tzeltal of Teneja, such forest denizens as form changers, demons, and monsters “were more plentiful in the distant past than they are now” (Stross 1978:36). The concept of forest beasts and monsters being of the ancient past is not a modern construct, and is already present in the sixteenth century Popol Vuh. At the first dawning, the supernatural forms of pumas, jaguars, and venomous snakes were turned to stone by the sun, which protects us from these beasts (Tedlock 1996:161).

The wilderness is identified with ancient peoples as well as mythic beings. The Trixano Cakchiquel consider the ancient Maya to have lived in the wilds with animal pelts clothing, which is a concept strikingly similar to Aztec beliefs concerning their Chichimec ancestors (Warren 1978:36,39). Among the Maya, ancient forest ruins are commonly regarded with both fear and deference. In Yucatán, a common belief persists that ancient mounds are inhabited by aluxob’, or mischievous goblinlike beings that must be treated with care and respect (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:119-120; Villas Rojas 1945:103; de Jong 1999:269-270).

The Yucatec Maya regard the great jungle-enshrouded site of Cobá with special awe. Villa Rojas (1945:153) recorded the belief that at night, one can hear the music and cries of ancient Itzá living under the ruins. (While living in the community of San Juan de Dios in 1984, this author was asked whether I was frightened by the great snakes, or noh chano'ob’, that fly out of the lakes of Cobá). Among the contemporary Quiché and Cakchiquel, offerings are made at their respective capitals of Uatlán and Iximché. At Uatlán, there is a deep, man-made cave where diviners can communicate with supernatural beings, including royalty of ancient times (Tedlock 1982:140). The reverence given to these ancient capitals is intensified by the fact that they are in forested areas isolated from daily human life.

Along with being identified with ancient beings, the forest is also a place of native resistance against conversion and Christianity. During the colonial period, many Yucatec escaped into the forest to escape Spanish domination (Farriss 1984:72-79). This strategy is plainly stated in the Chilam Balam of Chumayel: “There is no reason or necessity for you to submit to the archbishop, you can go and hide yourself in the forest” (Royo 1933:123).

Contemporary Maya performances portray characters who avoided the Spanish by fleeing into the forest, including Lacandon characters portrayed during Tzotzil Carnaval (Bricker 1973:48-49; 129-130, 139-140). Whereas the Tzotzil regard the Lacandon beings as amoral foreigners, the Quiché have a forest character that embodies Quichean resistance to colonial rule. Known variously as Marm, K’oxol, or Tzitzimitl, this being is the guardian of wild animals and the initiator of shamans (Tedlock 1982:147-148). According to the Popol Vuh, K’oxol escaped into the forest with the stone animals during the first dawning (Tedlock 1996:161, 308-305). In the historic drama known as the Dance of the Conquest, the brave king Tecum Umam dies and another Quichean king converts, but K’oxol divines the conquest and again escapes into the wilds to give birth to Tecum Umam’s child: “the customs survived the conquest by going into the woods, where the lightning-striking hatchet of the Tzitzimitl continues to awaken the blood of novice diviners and where the child of Tecum still lives” (Tedlock 1996:150). It is this very being that diviners contact in the cave at Utatlán, which also contains a miniature corral of his many animals.

Far from passive and detached from the human world, the Maya forest and its denizens try continuously to invade and battle its fields and towns. Laughlin (2000) notes that among the Zinacantecos Tzotzil, wild plants have emotions, and “get angry” when they are felled, and “laugh” when they overtake a maize field (Laughlin 2000:106). In contrast, cultivated plants that flourish are “happy,” and “industrious” (Laughlin 2000:106). Much like the Yucatec concept of lob’, wild overgrowth has negative moral connotations, “weeds do not have good souls, they are not sensible, responsible...” (Laughlin 2000:105). Wild plants also attack tools left overnight in the forest, causing the worker to be fatigued the following day (Laughlin 2000:105).

In Tzotzil belief, wild animals are allies of the bush: “The creatures of the forest are man’s enemies and seek to destroy his life” (Guiteras-Holmes 1961:287). In Tzotzil tales of Chenalhó and Chamula, Deer and Rabbit magically cause the forest to regrow over the newly cut field of the sun. As punishment, the sun pulled their ears to the length they are today (Guiteras-Holmes 1961:315; Gossem 1974b:307). A sixteenth-century version of this myth appears in the Popol Vuh, when, at night, wild animals restore the forest cut for the Hero Twins’ milpa (Tedlock 1996:109-110). In this episode, the powers of the wilds are restored in the darkness of night.

In contrast to the carefully delineated world of humans, the forest and its inhabitants ignore boundaries. With the forest, there is the constant encroachment of weeds in the field and in the communities, while plants also hide snakes and other pernicious animals. In addition, wild animals appear to wander with little direction. As Burkart (1986) notes, this can be ethically wrong in Mesoamerican thought (Burkart 1986:113); in the Popol Vuh, a major fault of the wooden men was their tendency to wander without aim or thought (see Tedlock 1996:71, 234-235). Burkart (1986) notes that among the sixteenth-century Aztec, children were warned against following the “road of the rabbit and deer”—that is, the same shiftless route of prostitutes (Burkart 1986:113,122). A sixteenth-century Aztec account has the following description of “feral”: “in the grassland, in the wasteland its animal manifest. He wanders about as a rabbit, as a deer. He goes
about insensately, he strays heedlessly” (Maxwell and Hanson 1992:179). Following weak and meandering trails in the dark forest, animals disregard the social and moral laws of humans.

Scenes in pre-Hispanic art reveal that the ancient Maya also regarded the forest as a fearful, dangerous place. At Chichén Itzá, an explicit portrayal of the menacing bush appears in a mural from the Upper Temple of the Jaguars (Figure 26.3). Dating to roughly the tenth century A.D., this scene portrays a figure standing before a house, with the forest behind teeming with fierce beasts, including an apparently roaring puma and two rattlesnakes—one of which is coiled as if to strike.

In Maya lore, snakes are one of the most widely feared creatures of the bush, clearly due to the very real risk they pose to travelers passing through dense growth. One tree has a snake wrapped around the trunk (a convention also appearing in Late Classic Maya art), with the tree trunk marked with the head of the patron of the month, Pax (Figure 26.4b, c, e). This tree often appears in hunting scenes, indicating its forest significance (Figure 26.4c, e). In the case of the Calcehtok Vase, a serpent, deer, and human figures flank the tree (Figure 26.4c). The human figures have their arms sharply bent in the Classic Maya position of “woe.” Houston (2000, personal communica-

FIGURE 26.3. Early Postclassic portrayal of the forest, featuring serpents and wild beasts. Detail of a mural from the Upper Temple of the Jaguars, Chichén Itzá. (Source: Modified from Maudslay 1889-1902, III: Plate 40.)

FIGURE 26.4. The Classic Maya motif of the serpent-wrapped tree as a forest symbol. (a) Detail of mural from the Upper Temple of the Jaguars. (See Figure 26.3.) (b) Pax God tree with probable striking serpent and severed head. (Source: Modified from Taube 1988b, Figure 12.7c.) (c) Pax God tree flanked by serpent, deer, and human figures with bent arms in the Classic Maya loob' position. (Source: Modified from Taube 1988b, Figure 12.7d.) (d) Glyphic compound epigraphically read as loob'. (Source: Modified from Codex Dresden, p. 8a.) (e) Classic period Hero Twin Hun Ajaw shooting iguana in tree with a blowgun. Detail of Late Classic vase. (Source: Modified from Robicsek and Hales 1981, Vessel 110.)

tion) notes that, in the Dresden Codex, this gesture has the phonetic value loob'—here in texts denoting bad or evil auguries (Figure 26.4d). One Late Classic Maya vessel portrays a severed human head with the tree and the serpent, which appears to be striking (Figure 26.4b). It is quite likely that the Classic Maya motif of the serpent-wrapped tree is a condensed symbol of the forest and its hazards.

One of the better-known Classic Maya mythological scenes concerns an episode recorded in the sixteenth-century Popol Vuh of a monster bird shot down by the Hero Twins, Xbalanque and Hunahpu. Along with protecting their milpa from animals, the Hero Twins of the Popol Vuh were monster slayers, including the great bird Vucub Caquix, which they shot out of his favorite fruit tree (Tedlock 1996:77-81). A common scene on Classic Maya
vessels, this episode even appears on Late Preclassic Izapa stelae dating to near the beginning of the Christian era (see Coe 1989:163; Taube 1993:65-66).

Although the meaning of this important episode remains poorly understood, a remarkable Late Classic Maya vase places the vanishing of the monster bird in the broader context of the forest. The vase portrays the Classic Maya period Hero Twins standing with blowguns before the hovering bird, now partly transformed into the powerful and aged Itzamnaaj (see Kerr 1992:413; for detail of bird, see Hellmuth 1987, Figure 719). A series of 11 forest animals present tamales and vessels of drink to the Hero Twins (Figure 26.5). Of the readily identifiable animals, there are two deer, a monkey, an armadillo, a gopher, a puma, a jaguar, a peccary, and a squirrel. The placement of the monkey with a tree determines this is a forest scene. In Maya texts, the pairing of tamale and water signs (i.e., food and drink) denotes a feast (Houston and Stuart 2001:69-70). The shooting of the monster bird from its tree may concern the mastery and domination of the forest, with the animals offering prepared food in tribute to the victorious Hero Twins.

A thematically related Late Classic Maya vessel depicts the partly transformed avian Itzamnaaj and a seated deer before the Hero Twins (Figure 26.6). The deer, the primary game animal of the forest wilds, appears in a secondary position to the Classic Maya form of Xbalanque, who sits upon a mat throne, rather than his brother (known in Classic Maya texts as Hun Ajaw). Xbalanque is the enthroned twin.

Both the Classic Maya period Xbalanque and Hun Ajaw are often referred to as the Headband Twins, owing to the frequent presence of the rulership headband on their brows. Hun Ajaw serves as the personified form of the day glyph Ajaw, meaning “king,” and embodies the office of human kingship. In contrast, his brother corresponds to the jaguar—the major “king” of the forest. Not only does the Quichean name Xbalanque correlate to a widespread Mayan term for jaguar (balam), but the Classic Maya form displays jaguar pelt markings on the face and body. In the Postclassic codices, hunters can display the same jaguar pelt facial markings, as seen in the Codex Paris (p. 10), where the figure is named Wuk (seven) Zip, which is the name of a Maya hunting god (Taube 1992:60-63, Figure 28b-j; for Wuk Zip reading, see Fox and Justeson 1984:39).

The Hero Twins may well denote two realms of authority: (1) Hunahpu, the king of the human community, and (2) Xbalanque, the king of the forest. In West Africa, where there is also a sharp distinction between the bush and human social space, the ruler of the community is often paired with the leopard of the forest. Thus, among the Benin of Nigeria, the first king Osigo was “king of the home,” and the leopard, “king of the bush” (Ben-Amos 1976:244).

Aside from Xbalanque, there was a more specific Classic Maya god of game animals. Yucatec colonial sources mention a being known as Ah Wuk Yol Zip, or “he of seven heart Zip” (Thompson 1970:308). As Thompson noted, the contemporary Yucatec consider Zip to be the protector of deer (Thompson 1970:308; see also Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:117-118; Villa Rojas 1945:103; de Jong 1999:139). Aside from the epigraphic reference to Wuk Zip on Codex Paris page 10, this name also appears on Codex Dresden page 13c (Figure 26.7a). The aged deity illustrated in this scene is clearly the hunting god, who grasps a deer displaying the lob’ gesture of woe. Wuk Zip has an antler, a large lower lip, and the “death collar” found with the Maya god of death. The prominent black body striping found with this being also appears on Classic Maya hunters (see Kerr 1989:74). Along with black spots and hand-print body markings, the striping probably served as camouflage in the mottled light of the forest.

Portrayals of the hunting god are relatively common in Classic Maya epigraphy and art (Figure 26.7b-g). As with the Dresden example, he displays ancient, craggy features, as well as deer ears, antlers, and a frequently extended lower lip—probably alluding to the goatlike manner in which deer pluck vegetation with their mouths. Quite commonly, he displays the spiral eye found with gods of night and darkness (Figure 26.7b, e, f; see Houston and Taube 2000:284-285).
They are the subjects of fearful stories, and ideas about them suggest the uncanniness of the bush. These include animals that are not animals, but witches that have taken animal forms; animals that have exchanged forms with one another, huge animal monsters; and evil things in human form. (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:121)

According to Wisdom (1940:405), the Ch’orti’ conceive of seven demons who live in remote regions and serve as “protectors of wild plants and animals.” For the Pedran Tzotzil, there is Poslob, an evil jaguar being that eats the way (animal souls) of people (Guiteras-Holmes 1961:293).

Quite frequently, forest demons are beings of lust and amoral behavior. In part, this is probably because the woods are a common place for trysts—far from the watchful eyes of neighbors and the community. Among the Tzotzil, there is the h’ik’al (or “black man”), a hypersexual forest demon.
whose massive penis causes women to die in pregnancy (Blaffer 1972:19-54). For Yucatec Maya, the Xtab’ay is the nocturnal forest being most identified with wanton sexuality. She typically appears as a ceiba-dwelling, beautiful woman with long hair who can transform herself into a tree or snake. Men tempted by her charms either lose their souls, die, or become insane (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:122, 207; Villa Rojas 1945:104; Souza Novelo 1970:112). Wisdom (1940:407, n. 57) compares this being to the Ch’orti’ Siguanaba, the protector of fish who appears as “sweetheart” on paths at night and makes the victim insane. Among the Tzotzil, there is the being known as Xpak’inte, a female forest demon who tempts drunks and other hapless victims (Guiteras-Holmes 1961:179; Gossen 1974b:309; Stross 1978:38). Laughlin provides a vivid description of this most unpleasant creature:

She is believed to be able to take the appearance of one’s wife to lure a hapless drunk into a clump of magueyes. The back of her head is hollow. Her hair is made up of poisonous caterpillars. . . . When the drunk touches her sexual parts they turn into excrement. When he strikes her she turns into a tree. (Laughlin 1975:264)

Capable of transforming into trees, both the Xtab’ay and the Xpak’inte are essentially personifications of the amoral and pernicious nature of the forest.

In Classic Maya iconography, the host of beings that best fit a “demon” category are the way spirits (Houston and Stuart 1989; Grube and Nahm 1994). Houston and Stuart (1989:5) note that, in Mayan languages, the term way denotes “to sleep” or “dream,” as well as denoting an animal spirit coexistence or soul—known as chanul or wayikel in Tzotzil, and lab’ or wayikel in Tzeltal (see Pitt-Rivers 1970:186). Although the Classic Maya way spirits refer to this aspect of the human soul, there is another soul or life force pertaining to breath (Houston and Taube 2000:267-270). Whereas the breath spirit relates to flowers and beauty, the Classic Maya way characters are typically hideous, frightening creatures that clutch bowls of bones, eyeballs, severed hands, and other gore as their food. In addition, they are frequently deathly beings, or jaguars and other wild, forest creatures. The long roster of way characters collected by Grube and Nahm (1994) is virtually a bestiary of animal names, including the terms for jaguar, deer, spider monkey, peccary, coati, tapir, rat, bat, snake, centipede, and even leaf-cutter ant. Moreover, a number of Codex Style vessels portray the way spirits with the hunting god emerging from the mouth of a “serpent deer,” or booa (Robicsek and Hales 1981:Vessels 31, 33, 35, 36, 48b). Simply put, the Classic Maya way demons are forest spirits.1

Our understanding of Classic Maya period way spirits is based primarily on Tzotzil ethnography; in Tzotzil lore, the way are explicitly beings of the forest wilds. Vogt (1976) notes that in Zinacanteco thought there are two souls—the innate and impersonal ch’ulel spirit, and the animal soul of the forest, the “unruly, uncontrollable ‘wild’ and impulsive side of their behavior” (Vogt 1976:33). Similarly, the Pedroano Tzotzil conceive of two souls, the indestructible ch’ulel and the vulnerable wayhel animal soul identified with the forest, darkness, and the night (Guiteras-Holmes 1961:296, 270, 288, 296, 299). When the sun sets, the wayhel become wild and attack one another, resulting in illness and death (Guiteras-Holmes 1961:301-302). During Chamula Carnaval, monkey-men impersonators threaten to kill people by taking them to the forest and feeding them their own animal spirit souls, a form of self-inflicted spiritual cannibalism (Bricker 1973:95).

According to the Pedroano Tzotzil, the highly antisocial sentiment of envy causes wayhel souls to do harm (Guiteras-Holmes 1961:158). Similarly, whereas the ritual guides of the Tixtiano Cakchiquel cargo ceremonies operate in public rites of the community, individual sorcerers perform in the isolated forest wilds in rites concerning accidents or illnesses, which are misfortunes believed to be caused by envy (Warren 1978:65-66).2 In Tixtiano belief, wild animals and shadows are sources of disease (Warren 1978:79). According to the Ch’orti’, disease comes from underworld “were-animal” spirits, or nahuall (Fought 1972:331-333). In Yucatec belief, sorcerers summon diseases from the underworld in the form of particular insects and other small creatures (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:178). Stuart (1998, personal communication) notes that a number of Classic Maya way characters, such as Fire Heart Death and Red Bile Death, appear to personify particular diseases. Representing the vulnerable and personal aspect of human souls, the Classic Maya period way spirits were both targets and sources of witchcraft.

In Classic Maya ritual, artificial scaffolds portrayed symbolic forests. One Jaina style figure depicts a figure dressed as a human deer bound atop a scaffold ornamented with leaves (Figure 26.8a). This sculpture portrays human sacrifice in the metaphoric context of the hunt, with the speared victim as a deer (Taube 1988b:332). The leaf-covered scaffold is a symbolic portrayal of the forest where hunts occur. A number of Late Classic Maya scenes depict complex leafy bowerly ornamented not only with leaves, but also with symbols of death and sacrifice, such as crossed bones and severed heads. In addition, leaf-covered structures can appear in scenes depicting jaguars, hunters, and other forest beings (Figure 26.8b-d).

The most elaborate known example of the leafy bower appears in a stucco facade at Tonina (see Yadeun 1993, Figure 23). In this case, way spiri-
Court at Chichén Itzá. Classic Maya ballplayers are frequently portrayed as forest beings, wearing hunter hats or headdresses of deer and other bush animals (Hellmuth 1991). Hellmuth (1991, Figure 11) calls attention to one vessel depicting a ballplayer wearing the headdress of the old hunting god. Among the Classic Maya, ball courts were symbolic entrances to the underworld; as cavernlike places of bloody competition, danger, and death, Classic Maya ball courts may have to be considered as rarefied, potent versions of the forest wilds.

THE WILDERNESS AND THE CLASSIC MAYA POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Among both ancient and contemporary Maya, the forest is a dangerous, uncontrollable place of demons and fierce, biting beasts. Although the Classic Maya may well have closely cared for and managed forests of valued woods, fruit trees, medicines, and other products, the fearsome way spirits suggest a more distant, wilder realm. It is quite likely that forest wilderness was often in buffer zones, or “no-man’s-lands,” between competing polities. Thus, aside from demons and dangerous creatures, the wilderness was probably feared as a frequent place of raids and battles. The colonial Yucatec Chilam Balam of Chumayel describes a battle ending in “the heart of the forest,” and a mural from Chichén Itzá depicts a pitched battle in red, forest-covered hills away from human habitation (Roys 1933:157; Coggins 1984, Figure 17). The hazards of journeying in the wilds is vividly illustrated by a Late Classic Maya vessel that portrays a raiding party attacking a group of unarmed travelers, including women and infants (see Kerr 1997:802). Wearing the broad-brimmed hats of hunters and travelers, two of the attacked men attempt to defend themselves with small stones against the well-armed warriors. Two zoomorphic witz mountains denote the mountain wilderness context of this scene.

With its feared beasts, demons, and the very real threat of raids and capture, the forest surely was a major force for social cohesion during the Classic Maya period, with people preferring the safety of the community rather than the dangers of the wilderness. To be banished and forced into the bush was a situation of terrible consequence that placed one in moral as well as physical peril.

Mention has been made of the fleeing of the Itzá “under” the forest, and this is not the only account of banishment in the Chumayel (see Roys 1933:77, 122, 133). People are described eating food of the wilds, much like animals: “They shall find their food among the trees, they shall find their food among the rocks” (Roys 1933:77). This combination of wood (che’) and stone (tunich) is also the Aztec term for castigation (tetz cuahuitl), such
as is meted out to drunks, adulterers, and other moral deviants (Seler 1902-1923:II:934). In fact, the Chilam Balam of Chumayel mentions the beating of things with “wood and stone” (Roys 1933: 99); and, in the Popol Vuh, the irresponsible and thoughtless wooden men banished to the forest as monkeys were also struck “by things of wood and stone” (Tedlock 1996:72).

The Maya murals of Mulchic may portray a Classic Maya version of this episode. Great Chaak figures stand before a scene of large stones raining upon people in the forest (Figure 26.9). Overcome with panic and virtually nude, they tumble over one another like frightened game. Individuals forced out of communities lose both their moral and geographic center, which are essential qualities that make them human.3

The most elaborate portrayal of forest battle appears in Room 2 of Structure 1 at Bonampak, Chiapas. The background of this scene is a swirling mass of green outlined with parallel red lines. According to Thompson (1955), this motif alludes to “scrublike vegetation such as one sees around a modern Maya village” (Thompson 1955:51)—in other words, secondary growth at the periphery of the community, with dense and twisted foliage recalling the Yucatec lab'. The warrior costumes of Bonampak Room 2 pertain directly to the forest. As in the case of ballplayers, the men wear headdresses of forest beings, such as jaguars, deer, peccary, wild birds, and skeletal demons, along with the brimmed hats of hunters. Aside from the Bonampak scene, such headdresses are common in Classic Maya art, and designate warriors as denizens of the bush.

Along with warriors and hunters, Maya kings had a distinct relation with the forest, as they were capable of passing beyond political and natural boundaries to visit or conquer distant realms. With this unique ability, they were identified with the jaguar (the “king” of the forest)—a concept vividly expressed by royal litters and palaquins topped by jaguar beings. First appearing on Stela 21 of Late Preclassic Izapa, such jaguar vehicles are common in Classic Maya art, including figurines (see Thompson 1939, plate 23; Schele 1997, plate 16).

The most elaborate portrayals of jaguar palaquins appear on wooden lintels from Temples I and IV of Tikal (see Jones and Satterthwaite 1982, Figures 70, 73; see Figure 26.10a-b). In the lintel scenes, the seated rulers are backed by massive supernatural jaguar figures (Figure 26.10a). The accompanying texts describe major Tikal victories against Calakmul and Naranjo (Martin and Grube 2000: 44-45, 78-79).4 The jaguar palaquins reveal that, during the Classic Maya period, Maya kings prowled the landscape as fierce beasts guarding and extending their domain.

FIGURE 26.9. The routing and killing of panicked men in the forest. Note Chaak figures to left, and large stones apparently falling on figures, possibly a Late Classic Maya form of destruction of wooden men. Detail of Late Classic Maya mural, Mulchic. (Source: Modified from Barrera Rubio 1980, Figure 1.)

THE FOREST AND SUPERNATURAL POWER

According to Helms (1992:220-221), the ability of ancient Panamanian chiefs to travel in the forest endowed them with special supernatural powers. Similarly, ancient Maya rulers had the special ability to journey to the forest and distant lands—powers that could have been expressed by particular forest animals, such as the jaguar, as well as rare and exotic goods and materials. Stone (1995) notes that in Mesoamerican thought, caves of the forest wilds are the dwelling places of beings of fantastic wealth, who “control not just water and weather, but the most coveted fruits of nature, including land, game, and agricultural products” (Stone 1995:39).

Maya lore is filled with tales concerning pacts made with forest beings, who, although dangerous, can provide supernatural powers and wealth (e.g., Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:121; Villa Rojas 1945:103-104; Tedlock 1982:149; Stone 1995:39). Although isolated caves or hills are important forest loci for communicating with such forces as gods of rain, wind, and the hunt, aspects of the forest wilderness are also included in the human realms of the fields and community. Thus, among the Yucatec, the largest trees are spared from milpa clearing, thereby providing shade for young, growing maize (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:43). Similarly, a ceiba tree often appears in the center of Yucatec communities as the symbolic central axis, despite the fact that it also can be the nocturnal haunt of the X'tabay demon (see Souza Novelo 1970:108).

Forest imagery and symbolism commonly appears in the monumental art and architecture occupying the center of Classic Maya cities. It has been
change of cargo officials (Bricker 1973:46-67; Vogt 1976:159-178). As with Chamula Carnival, stuffed animals are also carried, although here they represent the blameless and lascivious wives of errant cargo holders.

The forest creatures appearing in the Tzotzil celebrations of Carnival and the Zinacanteco festival of San Sebastián clearly have a number of social functions and meanings. For one, the wild animal and demon impersonators are both entertaining and frightening; in Classic Maya art, animals engaged in drink and dance are frequently depicted with a certain degree of humor (e.g., Taube 1989, Figure 24.1-2). In addition, the forest characters are important sources of social commentary who not only point out the misdeeds of particular individuals in the community, but also by their ridiculous and bestial behavior stress essential moral qualities of humans beings. In a similar manner, Maya beliefs concerning forest demons, such as the Yucatec X'talb'ay tempress, enforce proper modes of conduct. Thus, the seven forest apparitions described by Wisdom (1940:404-405) for the Ch'ortí’ serve as “the enforcers of moral life.” Stross notes that Tzeltal demon tales serve as warnings and lessons for correct human behavior, “rules as it were, for getting along and staying alive” (Stross 1978:37).

Aside from their ritual roles as entertainers and social commentators, the forest beings of ancient and contemporary Maya celebrations express a profound message of human existence. In a telling statement, Vogt notes that a major theme of the festival of San Sebastián is “the reprehensible but inescapable ‘animalism’ in all Zinacantecos” (Vogt 1976:175). Of course, this inherent “animalism” is also expressed by the way animal spirits, which constitute the “wild” forest aspect of humans. Although the precise etymology of the term “Wayeb” remains obscure, it probably alludes to dreams and the night. In Yucatec, wayeb can signify “to see visions as in dreams”, wayak’, to mean “dream”; and way to be a “journey that is done at night” (Barrera Vásquez 1980:916-917).

Although labor and daylight are of the ordered world, other necessary aspects of human existence are dreams and the night, qualities of the forest. In a discussion of the Tz'utujil Maya of Santiago Atitlán, Stanzione (2000) notes, “Without proper rest us humans go crazy and eventually die, without dreams we often find no reason to live” (Stanzione 2000:42). For the Tz’utujil, dreams are important sources of information to shamans and midwives (Stanzione 2000:42). In Zinacantan, during dreams, “the souls of plants interact with man beneath the earth’s surface” (Laughlin 2000:105). From such dreams, shamans, midwives, and bone setters get their powers to cure (Laughlin 2000:105). Aside from providing plant knowledge, dreams also reveal the identity and character of one’s animal soul (Pitt-Rivers 1970:190; Laughlin 1976:5). According to Laughlin, dreaming is an essential part of Zinacanteco existence: “They dream to live a full life. They dream to save their lives” (Laughlin 1976:3). In Maya thought, humans contain the forest in their beings, a force that manifests itself in nocturnal dreams.

Just as the ordered world was made by the gods at creation and is reasserted by humans in their diurnal efforts, constructed order ultimately tires and reverts to natural chaos. The burdens of time and public service to the community are heavy loads that eventually must be laid to rest. Implicit in the creation of the ordered world is the creation of time. Thus, in Classic Maya belief, the creation of the present Long Count cycle concerned the setting of the three hearthstones constituting the center of the four-sided world (see Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993, Chapter 2). In contrast, the dark forest and its beings embody the timelessness beyond and before the creation of the ordered world and time.

According to Ochiai, the term for the Tzotzil Wayeb, ch’ay k’in, could be interpreted as “the period without sun” (Ochiai 1984:217-218) and is a ritual form of an extended night—a return to primordial time when powerful beings from the fringe of creation enter the community. Ochiai (1984:221) notes that during ancient Yucatec Wayeb and Tzotzil Carnival, the invasion of chaos renews and revives the cycle of time. In Maya thought, darkness and the night are often related to supernatural power. Stone (1995) notes that the colonial Quiché kept idols in dark places to conserve their spiritual force, and it is quite likely that ancient Maya temples or “god-houses” functioned similarly (Stone 1995:17). According to Wisdon (1940), darkness protects sacred objects among the contemporary Ch’ortí’, and the favored areas to contact supernaturals are “dark rooms or in dark places in the forest” (Wisdom 1940:431). As a primordial region of darkness, the forest wilds are a continual source of supernatural power. Much as the bush covers and replenishes fallow fields, forest beings restore the spiritual power of the human world during calendrically timed ritual events.

CONCLUSION

Hanks notes that “the forest belongs to the Maya and they to it” (Hanks 1990:389). Along with the maize fields, the forest is in the domain of men, while the household and community belong to the realm of women. Thus, two of the major activities of the forest—hunting and war—are performed by men. The ritual penetration of the static and passive community by aggressive, sexually charged forest beings could well be a symbolic form of conception and regeneration. Although a place of fear and danger, the forest is an essential and necessary part of human existence. Aside from its material benefits of food, medicine, and goods, the forest wilds are a continuous source of inspiration and reflection. A fascinating nest of contradictions, the forest both threatens and reinforces social cohesion, and sharply delineates...


